



Once Silenced

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Description: FBI Agent Riley Paige faces a calculating serial killer who turns abandoned classrooms into macabre crime scenes, complete with unsolved math problems on the blackboard. As each equation leads closer to long-hidden victims, Riley must confront a past haunted by loss and a future threatened by a murderer's cold logic.

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PROLOGUE

Margaret Whitfield sat in her modest living room with her silver hair neatly tied back. She watched the television screen, but the images and sounds seemed meaningless. From somewhere far off, thunder grumbled, a prelude to the storm brewing in the western Virginia night sky and moving closer to the small mountain town of Slippery Rock.

The clock struck midnight, its chimes resonating through the quiet house, marking the passage of another sleepless hour. Margaret let out a sigh, one that seemed to carry the weight of her sixty-eight years. Her hands, still strong despite their age, rested in her lap, unoccupied. She missed the rhythm of grading, of being immersed in her students' thoughts, the way their ideas would leap from the page in vibrant, earnest scrawl.

She remembered faces illuminated by understanding, moments when mathematical equations gave way to epiphanies. It was more than numbers; it was teaching resilience, showing how every problem had a solution if broken down into pieces. Those were the lessons that mattered, that stayed with her students long after they left her classroom.

Margaret allowed herself a small smile as she remembered the bittersweet pride that swelled in her chest during each graduation ceremony. It was a culmination of not just a year's work, but of a journey shared, of obstacles overcome together.

"Off you go," she would say, more to herself than to anyone else, watching as her flock stepped into the sunlit future awaiting them. It was a cycle renewed with each

departing class, an enduring rhythm of life that echoed within the halls of academia long after the last diploma was claimed.

She was long since widowed, and her children had children of their own. In the solitude of retirement, the absence of laughter and inquiring minds echoed louder than ever before.

With the late-night talk show hosts blathering in the background, Margaret pushed herself up from her armchair, her movements slower than they once were, joints voicing their mild protest. The need to fill the void left by retirement drove her to seek out the familiar – the study where she spent countless hours shaping young minds. The house felt larger around her, emptier, as she made her way through the hallway lined with photos of school events and smiling teenagers, each snapshot a testament to her years of dedication.

She reached for a fat file folder tucked away on a mahogany shelf, its edges frayed from frequent handling. She carried the folder with her into the kitchen, the soft patter of her slippers against the linoleum providing a gentle rhythm to her nocturnal routine. She prepared herself a cup of chamomile tea, the steam curling into the air, and selected a few butter cookies from the tin. They were placed on a china plate. She returned to the living room, settling back into her chair with her small snack at her side.

As she began to sift through the letters she'd received from former students over the years, her eyes traced the loops and tails of familiar handwriting. Each word brought forth a stream of recollections, a flood of happier times that seemed both distant and vivid: the first-day jitters of new students, the satisfaction of seeing an idea take root and grow within a young mind, the mixed emotions of commencement ceremonies.

It was a treasure trove of letters from students who had moved on to become engineers, writers, doctors. Those were more than words of thanks; they were lifelines

to a past that continued to define her. Settling into the chair behind her desk, Margaret unfolded the first letter, her eyes scanning the familiar handwriting.

“Dear Mrs. Whitfield,” it began, “you may not remember me, but...”

Each phrase unlocked memories, vivid and warm, reminding her of the difference she had made.

Another wrote, “to solve or not to solve,” and a faint smile touched her lips at the familiar refrain that she’d turned into a classroom mantra. Her students had been her children, her pride, their successes her own.

The sudden chime of the doorbell cut through the silence. Margaret blinked, the interruption pulling her sharply back to reality. She glanced at the clock – 12:47 AM. Curiosity mingled with confusion, who would come calling at such an hour? Setting aside her tea and the treasured letters, she rose from her chair once more.

“Who is it?” she called out, even as she approached the front door. Silence answered her, punctuated by another rumble of thunder.

Margaret opened the door to emptiness. No one was within the porch light’s sphere of illumination, and beyond it, she could see only shadows.

Stepping out onto the porch, she called into the night, “Hello?”

The call went unanswered, as she strained her eyes to see past the cone of light into the darkness that surrounded her. It was then that Margaret failed to notice a shadow, darker than the surrounding night, edging closer from along the side of her house.

She turned to go back into her house, but a force collided with her from behind,

sending her lurching forward. Suddenly, a cord encircled her neck, yanking back with a merciless tightness that stole her breath and her ability to cry out.

Margaret's hands flew to her throat, her fingers scrabbling against the constricting ligature as she was dragged backward toward the shadows that had concealed her assailant. Her legs flailed in a futile attempt to find purchase, her slippers skittering off into the night, leaving her barefoot and defenseless. Panic surged through her, yet it was quickly overshadowed by a creeping numbness.

As consciousness slipped away, Margaret's mind raced with fragmented images of the students she had nurtured, the lives she had helped shape. Her last thoughts were not of the terror that gripped her, nor of any regrets, but of a life of purpose and meaning—a life that was now at its end.

CHAPTER ONE

Riley Paige stood at the head of the FBI Academy classroom, looking over rows of intent faces. She was recounting the closing hours of a complex investigation.

“Remember, it's the subtleties that often speak volumes,” she said, her gaze sweeping the room. “In this case, it was the placement of a single, out-of-season tulip on each victim's nightstand.”

The students leaned forward, rapt as Riley dissected the psychological underpinnings of the crime, laying bare the inner workings of a mind bent on control and the illusion of affection. She didn't need to say how close to home that case had hit; the shadows around her eyes hinted at the toll such encounters exacted.

As Riley concluded, the air seemed to vibrate with the collective energy of her students. Hands shot up, questions flying like arrows seeking their mark.

“What was the significance of the tulip colors?”

“How did you establish the timeline?”

“Was the perpetrator reliving a lost relationship?”

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Riley's lips curved into a small, proud smile. This was why she had traded the relentless pace of fieldwork for the halls of academia: the sparking of bright minds eager to learn, to understand.

"Special Agent Paige, was there a moment when you felt empathy towards the suspect?" asked a keen-eyed young woman in the front row.

Oh, if you only knew, Riley thought, her smile widening.

For she harbored an uncanny ability to make intuitive leaps into a criminal's mind—an ability she didn't fully understand herself, and that only her close colleagues fully appreciated. But now was not the time or place to get into all that.

"Empathy can be a tool," Riley replied, her voice tinged with the gravity of experience. "One that can help us understand motive, predict behavior. But we must never lose sight of the victims, the lives stolen. Our real empathy is ultimately reserved for them, and for the justice they deserve."

Nodding in satisfaction, the students jotted down her words, their gazes reflecting a shared resolve. The class was soon over, but Riley lingered at the podium, her keen hazel eyes scanning over the sea of departing students, enjoying their youthful energy. She reached for her notes, neatly stacked beside the worn leather briefcase that had traveled with her through countless crime scenes.

Her hands stilled when she noticed one student, Leo Dillard, weaving through the crowd toward her. He stopped just short of the podium, his piercing gaze locking onto hers.

“Agent Paige, that was an incredible lecture,” he began. “It’s just the way you think, the way you deduce things from small details ... It’s inspiring.”

“Thank you, Leo,” she replied. This tall student wasn’t one of her favorites, although she wasn’t sure why. His dark hair was clipped as neatly as any of the others, his bearing more confident than most.

“The way you dissected the mindset of the Gilmore County Strangler,” he continued, leaning forward slightly, invading the invisible boundary she maintained around her. “How you anticipated his next move—it was like watching an artist at work.”

The Gilmore County Strangler? She thought with surprise.

She hadn’t expected one of her students to know about that case, much less bring it up with her. Riley masked her discomfort with a nod. She knew that her reputation preceded her, and that tales of her exploits had even worked their way into the curriculum, spun into cautionary tales and learning examples. But she didn’t think that particular case was widely known.

“Understanding the criminal mind is part art, part science,” she said evenly. “It’s about finding patterns where chaos seems to reign.”

“Of course,” he acknowledged, straightening up but still holding her gaze. “I can only hope to reach that level of insight one day.”

“Insight comes with experience,” she replied quickly, eager to wrap up the conversation. “And experience comes from putting what you learn into practice in the field.”

“Agent Paige,” he pressed, his voice low and insistent, “I’ve been wanting to ask, what does it feel like to pull the trigger? To use deadly force?”

Riley felt another twinge of uneasiness.

“That’s a complex topic, Leo,” she said, injecting authority into her tone. “It’s the subject of entire courses on its own.”

Leo nodded eagerly, as if they had shared something intimate, something secret. “Of course, of course. But maybe we could discuss it privately sometime? You can feel free to talk to me about things you can’t share with other students.”

Riley squared her shoulders and met Leo’s unwavering stare. “I appreciate your enthusiasm, Leo,” she replied, “but I’d prefer not to discuss such topics individually at all. If you have further questions about the curriculum, please bring them up in class or during office hours.”

The flicker of disappointment in his pale blue eyes was swiftly veiled by an expression of contrition.

“Of course, Agent Paige. I didn’t mean to overstep,” he said, his voice smooth.

Riley glanced at the clock on the wall. It was nearing half-past three. She needed to leave soon if she was to make it home in time for April’s celebration. With a subtle shift of her posture, she signaled the end of their interaction.

“Keep studying, Leo,” she advised, her voice carrying the finality of a seasoned agent accustomed to drawing lines. “And remember, the best agents know when to step back and see the bigger picture.”

He nodded slowly, his expression unreadable, before turning away and rejoining the flow of exiting students. Riley gathered her belongings with swift, practiced movements, but as she prepared to leave the lecture hall, she couldn’t shake her sense of unease. Something about Leo’s words, or maybe just his expression, hinted at an

interest beyond academic curiosity.

Leaving the lecture hall, Riley's brisk pace echoed sharply in the quiet corridor. She passed the familiar plaques commemorating past successes of the FBI, each one a testament to justice served. Her footsteps carried her swiftly past the rows of closed classroom doors, behind which future protectors of peace honed their skills. As she pushed through the heavy doors leading outside, the bright glare of the afternoon sun did little to dispel her dark mood.

She left the academy building and crossed to another large beige structure, a building that she had worked out of for many years. The familiar corridors of the Behavioral Analysis Unit headquarters, with its familiar bustle of agents and the hum of activity, brought her back to a sense of belonging. She made her way past the bullpen, where clusters of desks harbored agents poring over case files, and computer screens flickered with information.

When she reached Bill Jeffreys' office, the door was slightly ajar, allowing snippets of conversation to escape. Inside, Bill's large frame dominated the space behind his desk, his presence as always welcome and warm. She and Bill had been working partners for years, and she had always thought of them as something like a matched pair—both were in their forties with touches of gray showing in dark hair. Now their relationship had changed from working partner to lifetime commitment.

Beside him, the young agent Ann Marie Esmer leaned forward, her hands animatedly sketching the air as she recounted the details of their latest pursuit. Ann Marie was a vibrant burst of color in these somber surroundings, her blond hair shimmering under the fluorescent lights and her sparkling blue eyes reflecting an infectious enthusiasm.

"Hey, Riley," Ann Marie called out. "Great to see you! How's life in the classroom treating you?"

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Riley allowed a smile to break through the clouds of her mind. “It keeps me on my toes,” she replied.

The scene before her was a snapshot of the life she had known, each element – the charts on the walls, the markers stained from endless brainstorming sessions, and the camaraderie between agents – a piece of the mosaic that was her career. For a moment, she allowed herself to bask in the comfort of familiarity.

“We just reported on a car theft ring down in Norfolk—turned out to be a couple of teenagers looking for thrills,” Bill recounted, the pride in their work shining in his eyes. “Nothing that’ll make the headlines, but it’s another win for the good guys.”

“Every case matters,” Riley affirmed. The sense of accomplishment that radiated from them was catching.

“See you tomorrow,” Anne Marie said cheerfully, leaving the office to go back to her desk in the bullpen.

Riley watched as the young agent’s graceful figure retreated through the door, her blonde hair catching the light. There was a deliberate precision in Ann Marie’s steps—both the confidence and the eager rhythm of youth.

“Ready to head home?” Riley asked. Bill’s affirmative nod was accompanied by the rustle of papers and the soft click of his briefcase snapping shut.

As they walked through the corridor outside Bill’s office, Riley’s thoughts churned, replaying Leo’s intense gaze, the unwelcome questions. She contemplated sharing her

unease with Bill; his insight had always been invaluable. He knew all about her struggles with her ex-husband and her affair and near-marriage with a neighbor. Now, he was helping her raise her two daughters. Even so, something held her back from complaining about Leo—a reluctance to voice a fear that might prove unfounded, even silly.

Outside, the late afternoon sun painted everything in hues of gold and amber. As she and Bill strolled to the parking lot, she inquired about his work, seeking normalcy in the mundane.

“So, how’s the partnership with Ann Marie working out?” she asked, her curiosity genuine. His chuckle was a deep, comforting sound.

“It’s going well,” he replied, his eyes crinkling at the corners with a smile. “Her enthusiasm took some getting used to, but she’s turning into an excellent agent. Sharp instincts, great with victims.” It was high praise coming from Bill, who valued competence and dedication above all else.

“But?” Riley prodded gently as they approached their vehicle, sensing something unspoken.

Bill sighed, a deep exhalation that seemed to carry the weight of years spent in service of a cause greater than themselves.

“But it’s not going to be a long-term thing,” he explained, leaning against the vehicle. “With you and me both planning to retire within the year, Meredith wants to assign Ann Marie a more permanent partner. He’s got me lined up to ‘break in’ some rookies for my last few months.”

They both got into the car and he started the engine, the familiar purr momentarily displacing the quiet that had settled between them. Then, with a glance that conveyed

years of shared experiences, he asked, “What about you? Missing the field at all?”

Riley considered the question, her mind transporting her back to the rush of active investigations. The thrill of the chase, the mental sparring with enigmatic foes—all of it had once fueled her, driven her to excel in a world where others might falter. Yet now, standing on the precipice of a different life, she discerned a tranquility in teaching that she hadn’t known she wanted.

“Not as much as I thought I would,” she admitted, glancing at him briefly. “I miss our day-to-day partnership more than anything. But now that we’re living together, even that’s easier to handle.”

Her words were acknowledgment of the shift in their relationship, from partners to something not clearly defined yet deeply rooted.

“Anyway,” she added, “I’ve found a new satisfaction in shaping these young minds. And the peace it brings...it’s good for me, for us.”

Bill’s hand found hers, giving it a gentle squeeze, conveying support without the need for words. It was a simple gesture, but in it, Riley found a sense that everything was as it should be.

Yet as he drove them home, along an interstate and then winding through the suburban streets of Fredericksburg, uneasiness crept back into Riley’s thoughts. Leo Dillard’s face hovered in her mind’s eye, his piercing gaze and intense demeanor refusing to be dismissed. The encounter had disturbed her in a way she couldn’t quite articulate. A part of her wanted to confide in Bill, to lay bare the troubling exchange and seek his advice. They had always been each other’s sounding board, after all.

But she hesitated, uncertainty gripping her. It was probably nothing, she told herself. Just an overeager student crossing a line, a misstep borne of youthful

impetuosity rather than malice. Yet she couldn't shake off a troubled feeling about the encounter, and she couldn't put her finger on exactly why.

"Everything okay?" Bill's voice broke through her reverie, sounding worried.

"Fine," Riley answered, a little too quickly, hoping her tone carried more assurance than she felt. She forced a small smile. "Just thinking about April's birthday dinner tonight."

Still, that nagging sensation loomed in the edge of her consciousness. With a subtle shiver, Riley pushed the feeling aside, focusing instead on the evening ahead with her family.

It was nothing, she told herself, just an overeager student trying to cross a line. But if he keeps on being pushy, I'll just have a hard talk with him.

CHAPTER TWO

When Bill parked the car in the lot at their townhouse, Riley stepped out, stretching her legs after the drive. The afternoon sun was dipping towards the horizon, and the air was charged with the latent energy of a brewing August storm.

As Bill joined her and they approached their home, the scent of simmering spices drifted from an open window. It was a surefire indication that April's birthday dinner was well on its way to being an event to remember.

"Smells like Gabriela's outdone herself again," Bill remarked with a grin.

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As they stepped through the front door, jubilant chaos greeted them. Gabriela, with her characteristic efficiency, orchestrated the final movements of their evening's feast, as she sprinkled herbs over simmering dishes.

Riley's gaze swept across the room, catching April's excitement sparking in the air as she flitted between silverware and plates, her laughter lilting above the din. Jilly, not far behind, attempted to mirror her sister's enthusiasm.

"Happy birthday, sweetheart," Riley said. She wrapped her arms around April, pulling the girl into a hug. Riley felt a bittersweet pang as she realized this would be April's last birthday before starting her first year at Jefferson Bell University at the end of this month.

"Seventeen, huh? I remember when that seemed old," Bill said, a twinkle of mirth in his eyes.

April's response—a playful eye-roll followed by a reluctant grin—was a silent acknowledgment of the affectionate banter that had become their unique language.

Gabriela unveiled the feast with the flourish of a seasoned maestra. The aroma of spices filled the room. Pepián, hearty and rich, promised comfort in every spoonful. Chiles rellenos, plump and oozing with cheese and meat, were a symphony of flavors waiting to be savored. And the ensalada de palmito, vibrant and fresh, offered a crisp counterpoint to the complex layers of the other dishes.

April laughed, bright and clear, as Jilly offered her own recap of her day at summer school, laced with a sarcasm that could only be described as endearingly brash. The

younger girl's tough exterior, often manifested in sharp wit, was something Riley had come to appreciate.

Riley scooped up a forkful of Pepián, relishing the rich tapestry of flavors. As the conversation shifted, she told about her afternoon lecture on criminal profiling, painting broad strokes that detailed the complexities of the human psyche without dipping into the darker shades of her day. She didn't mention the encounter with a pushy student that still bothered her.

The hum of conversation around the dinner table took on a different note as April shared her intentions.

"I've decided I want to stay in the dorms," she said, a tremor of both excitement and trepidation in her voice. "I know Jefferson Bell University is close, but I really want the full college experience, you know?"

Riley had seen this coming; it was only natural for a girl like April, so fiercely independent, to crave the freedom that college promised. But before Riley could state her support, Jilly snapped angrily,

"So you're just going to leave us?" Her fork clattered against her plate. "I thought we were finally a real family, but I guess that doesn't matter to you."

"Jilly, that's not fair!" April protested. "Of course, you matter to me. It's just that ..."

But April's justification was left dangling. She just didn't have the words she needed to say what needed to be said.

"Jilly, April is still going to be part of our lives," Riley said. "Staying on campus doesn't mean she's leaving us behind."

“Whatever,” Jilly cried out as she fled upstairs.

Riley exchanged a look with Bill. “I’ve got this,” she murmured, giving his hand a reassuring squeeze. When she went upstairs, Jilly’s bedroom door was closed, and Riley tapped lightly before entering.

The room was a patchwork of tough girl posters flanked by hidden stuffed animals. Jilly lay on her bed, face obscured by the pillow she clung to.

“Hey,” Riley said softly as she perched on the edge of the bed. “Want to talk about it?”

Jilly’s response, muffled by the pillow, was almost indecipherable. “There’s nothing to talk about. April wants to leave. It’s fine.”

Riley let out a sigh. “Honey,” she said, “April moving to the dorms doesn’t mean she’s leaving the family.”

The bed shifted slightly as Jilly turned, her eyes red-rimmed. “But what if she likes it better there? What if she forgets about us?”

Riley knew that tone, the hard shell Jilly had built to protect herself from a world that hadn’t always been kind.

“Sweetheart,” she whispered, her voice a tender murmur meant to soothe the raw edges of Jilly’s world. “April leaving for college won’t change how much she cares about you. She loves you deeply, and nothing can take that away.”

“But I’m not really her sister, am I? I’m just...adopted.” Jilly’s words were muffled, a fragile whisper lost amidst the fortress of pillows and stuffed animals that lay scattered around her. Riley felt a pang of sadness.

I thought we were past this,she thought.

“Listen to me,” Riley said, every word marked with conviction.“Being adopted doesn’t make you any less a part of this family.April loves you, Bill loves you, and I love you.That is what makes a family real, not blood.”She watched as Jilly nodded slowly, the motion hesitant but gaining momentum.

Jilly reached up, her fingers trembling as she wiped away the remnants of tears, and Riley saw a shift in the girl’s demeanor.

“But you know, you really hurt April’s feelings down there.It’s her birthday, and she was excited to share her plans with us.I think you owe her an apology.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jilly admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.“I didn’t mean to ruin her birthday.”

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“Then let’s go fix it,” Riley said, rising from the edge of the bed. She extended a hand to Jilly, an anchor to pull her back into the fold.

As they entered the room, April looked up at them, the hurt etched into her features tempered now by a glimmer of hope.

“I’m sorry,” Jilly’s voice barely rose above a whisper, yet it carried the weight of earnest contrition. “I didn’t mean what I said. I just...I’m going to miss you.”

April, her hazel eyes brimming with tears that mirrored Jilly’s, softened at her sister’s words. She extended her arms, drawing Jilly into an embrace that spoke volumes of their bond.

“You goof,” April managed through a choked laugh, holding her sister tight. “I’m going to miss you too. But I’ll visit all the time, I promise. You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

The act of reconciliation seemed to breathe new life into the celebration, and as they found their way back to the table, Gabriela emerged from the kitchen, the matriarch bearing a tres leches cake that looked like it belonged on the cover of a gourmet magazine. Seventeen candles danced atop the creamy frosting, their flames casting a warm glow on the faces gathered around.

“Las Mañanitas” filled the room, each voice joining in an imperfect but heartfelt rendition of the traditional birthday song. As they shared the cake, April unwrapped gifts.

“For all your stories,” Riley said, as April unwrapped a leather-bound journal, its cover embossed with intricate designs—blank pages inside for a new chapter in her daughter’s life, one she would write herself. The pens wrapped with it were sleek and weighty, promising the smooth flow of ink and thoughts.

“Mom, it’s perfect,” April beamed, brushing her fingers over the journal like she was touching a precious artifact.

Bill’s gift was a new laptop, an emblem of modern potential. “And this is to make sure those stories reach the world,” he chuckled, his affection for the girls evident.

“Thank you, Bill!” April’s gratitude expressed her excitement for the future.

Then Jilly’s turn came. Hers was gift a scrapbook that held their shared life within its pages. As April flipped through it, laughter and tears mingled

“Jilly, this is amazing,” April whispered, tracing the outline of a photo from a beach trip, the sun setting behind them. Jilly shrugged, but her pride was obvious, her tough exterior melting away.

Gabriela’s gift was last, a handknitted blanket rich with the colors of her homeland. “Para que siempre tengas un pedazo de casa contigo—so you’ll always have a piece of home with you.”

“Gracias, Gabriela,” April replied, her Spanish accented but earnest.

As the evening continued, the mood lightened further, laughter and chatter replacing the earlier discord. Riley allowed herself to sink into the domestic warmth, the comfort of having her family around her. It was these moments, she realized, that fortified her for the battles she faced beyond these walls.

Later, she and Bill retreated to the back porch. The night was heavy with the scent of rain, a whisper of the storm that had been brewing. She nestled into the cushioned wicker chair beside him, accepting the glass of wine he offered. Its ruby red contents glimmered in the soft glow of the porch light.

“You handled that beautifully,” Bill said, his voice warm. He watched her over the rim of his own glass, eyes glinting with admiration and something more profound—a shared understanding of life’s complexities. “Both girls are lucky to have you as their mother.”

Riley took a sip of her wine, feeling the tartness swirl around her tongue. She leaned into him, her body instinctively seeking the reassurance of his solid frame.

“And they’re lucky to have you as their stepfather,” she replied, her voice laden with gratitude. “I don’t know how I’d manage all this without you.”

Bill let out a soft chuckle, a sound that rumbled through his chest and vibrated against her cheek. He set his wine glass on the railing, turning to face her fully, seriousness settling over his features.

“Well, I’m grateful for the second chance at family life. It’s...it’s everything I could have hoped for.”

The words hung between them, resonating with unspoken truths and shared experiences. Riley knew all too well the depths of loss that had shaped Bill, just as her own past traumas clung to her like the damp air preceding a storm. Together, they had found something neither had anticipated: a feeling of wholeness amid the fragments of their lives.

In the dimming light, the first faint peals of distant thunder whispered promises of a downpour. Riley felt an odd shiver, sensing the inevitable approach of change, not

only in the weather but within the walls of the home. As the sky rumbled again, louder this time, heralding the tempest's arrival, she had a pang of foreboding regarding dangers that could be lurking in the calm before the storm. Yet here, now, with Bill's hand finding hers in the darkening evening, she dared to hope for continued peace.

They sat together, silent companionship enveloping them as the first fat drops of rain began to fall on the porch roof, punctuating the stillness with their irregular rhythm. Her grip on the wine glass tightened, the fragile stem quivering slightly between her fingers.

"Looks like the storm is here," Bill murmured, his voice low.

"Yes," Riley agreed, her thoughts drifting to unknowns ahead, both personal and professional.

Then, with the sudden clarity of lightning illuminating the dark, the shrill ring of her phone cut through the tranquil evening. Her pulse quickened, a conditioned response to the intrusion, and she fumbled with the device, answering it with a swift motion.

She reached for the device, her heart rate increasing even before she saw the name flashing on the screen—Tracy Bingham. Tracy was an old friend from childhood, who still lived in the little mountain town of Slippery Rock, where Jenna had lived as a child and a teenager.

"Riley?" Tracy's voice was taut, the kind of strained tone that triggered alarm bells. "I'm sorry to call so late, but I have some bad news. Do you remember Mrs. Whitfield, our high school algebra teacher?"

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A cloud passed over Riley's face, darkening her features as memories of Margaret Whitfield filled her thoughts. "Of course. Margaret Whitfield. She was one of my favorites—and yours too. What about her?"

There was a haunting pause before Tracy's next words confirmed Riley's worst fears. "She...she died last night, Riley. And there's a rumor going around that it wasn't natural causes. They're saying she was murdered."

The wine glass slipped from Riley's hand, shattering on the porch as the first drops of rain began to fall.

CHAPTER THREE

The broken wine glass fragments on the porch seemed to reflect the splintered peace of the evening. Riley clutched her phone tighter as if that pressure could wring out more information.

"How did it happen?" Riley said.

"I don't know," Tracy said. "It's what people are saying, that's all."

"Tracy, please," she implored her caller, "there must be something else you can tell me."

"I wish I knew more, Riley," Tracy replied with a sigh from the other end of the line. "It's all over town, but no one knows anything for sure. Just hushed whispers and sideways glances. I just thought you should know what happened."

“Yes, definitely,” Riley assured her.

Both women fell silent for a moment. Riley’s thoughts were punctuated by a distant rumble of thunder.

“Remember how she’d quote Shakespeare during algebra?” Riley’s voice was a husky whisper. “As if solving for x had anything to do with Hamlet.”

Tracy’s laughter crackled through, “To solve or not to solve, that was the question!”

“That one always stayed with me,” Riley said with a sigh. “You know, she always found a way to make learning fun,” she added, her voice trembling slightly as the gravity of the news began to sink in. “Do you remember that time when she turned our math assignment into a treasure hunt?”

A peal of laughter echoed from Tracy’s end of the line. “Oh my goodness, yes! That was ingenious. She had us solving algebra problems that led to coordinates on a map.”

Riley laughed softly, despite the lump forming in her throat. “And Mrs. Whitfield sitting there with that oversized pirate hat on her head. Every time we solved a problem correctly, she’d let us move our little ship closer to the ‘treasure’.”

Their shared laughter provided a fleeting respite amidst the somber news they were grappling with.

“Take care of yourself, okay? We’ll talk soon,” Tracy said, sounding weary.

“Thanks for calling, Tracy. But can you tell me anything at all about why anyone thinks this ... death ... might have been a murder?”

“Just rumors, like I said. Nothing specific. I don’t even know how exactly ...” her

voice trailed off.

“Okay. But if you hear anything more—”

“First call’s to you. Promise.” And with that, the connection clicked off.

“Riley? What’s wrong?” Bill’s voice was concerned, his hand gentle on her shoulder.

“It’s Margaret Whitfield, my high school Algebra teacher. She’s dead, Bill. And Tracy says...she told me it might be murder.”

He looked up, his eyes meeting hers in the half-light. “I’m so sorry, Riley. Do they know what happened?”

“Tracy didn’t have any details. Just rumors that it wasn’t natural causes. God, I wish I knew more. Mrs. Whitfield was special,” Riley murmured, her voice barely rising above the rain that had turned from a gentle patter to a persistent drizzle splashing onto the porch roof. After a few moments, she said, “We’d better get this glass cleaned up.”

Bill went to the kitchen and returned with a broom and dustpan while Riley knelt to gather the shards. Her hand shook a little as she reached for the largest piece of the shattered wine glass. Then they worked in companionable silence, as the rhythmic sweep of bristles against the porch backed up the steady rhythm of falling rain. The last of the glass crunched underfoot as Riley and Bill gave one final sweep over the porch, making sure all the fragments were collected.

With that disposed of, Riley felt a different kind of sharpness—the edge of her trained instincts—as questions sliced through the fog of shock.

Who would want to harm Mrs. Whitfield? She wondered. What could possibly be the

motive?

“Maybe I could just make a few calls,” she mused aloud. “Just to check on the investigation’s progress. For peace of mind.”

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“Riley, I know that look.” Bill said softly. “And you know as well as I do that ‘just a few calls’ wouldn’t be enough.” His tone was gentle, but the words carried the weight of experience. “You’re too good at what you do, too invested. It’s one of the things I love about you, but it’s also why you need to be careful about getting yourself involved.”

“Yes, but ... Mrs. Whitfield was so special,” she murmured, wincing slightly as a sliver of glass pricked her finger. A small bead of blood welled up, bright against her skin. “She was more than just my algebra teacher. She was one of the first teachers who really saw me, you know? She encouraged my curiosity, pushed me to think critically. In a way, she helped set me on the path to the FBI.”

“But this isn’t our jurisdiction,” Bill added gently. “It’s a local case, and you’re not even an active field agent anymore.”

She turned to him, her hazel eyes clouded with conflict. “I know, I know. It’s just...it feels wrong to not do anything. She meant a lot to me, Bill. Mrs. Whitfield used to say that every story has its exceptions. That we shouldn’t be afraid to look into them, because that’s where the truth hides.” She glanced out into the darkened backyard, where a high wooden fence hid the alleyway and other homes beyond.

“Let’s get inside,” he suggested. “Everybody else seems to have returned to their rooms. We should do that too.”

They walked back through the house where few remnants of the party remained. Gabriela had cleaned up the table and returned the leftovers to the kitchen, then had gone to her downstairs quarters for the night. April had apparently taken her

new treasures upstairs to her own room.

When she and Bill went upstairs, Riley saw that both girls had closed themselves up in their rooms, though light under their doorways indicated that they were following up their own interests. She thought that April was likely studying the courses available to her, and Jilly was probably watching her little TV.

She and Bill went to their large bedroom, which like the rest of the house was simple and practical. One corner served as Riley's home office, where she could work if she needed to. They also shared a private bathroom and a large closet.

Together, they slipped beneath the covers, the warmth a striking disparity to the cold, dark world outside. But even as Riley got into bed, the death of her former teacher was still on her mind. As Bill turned off the bedside lamp, darkness enveloped the room, but not the storm of her thoughts.

"You're right. I know you're right," she muttered to him. "But Bill, if it really is murder...don't the local police deserve all the help they can get? Don't we owe it to Mrs. Whitfield to make sure her case is solved properly?"

Bill moved closer, the bed dipping under his weight as he wrapped an arm around her. His embrace was a fortress, a bulwark against her doubts.

"I understand how you feel. But we have to trust the local authorities to do their job. They're professionals too, remember? And for all we know, the killer might already be in custody. It might be open and shut."

Riley leaned into him, absorbing the strength of his steady presence. His words were logical, yet her heart rebelled against the simplicity of his reasoning. The rhythm of the rain against the windows became a backdrop to her whirling mind. She knew Bill was right; she should remain a spectator to this unfolding tragedy, not an actor. But

old habits clung to her.

“Try to get some sleep,” Bill murmured, his voice an anchor in the turmoil.

“Sleep,” she echoed, her tone distant. The idea seemed as unreachable as the answers to the questions haunting her. She closed her eyes, willing her mind to still, but the images of her high school days, of chalkboards and dog-eared books, swirled into focus.

The room blurred as Riley’s eyes grew heavy, the soft patter of rain lulling her into the nebulous space between wakefulness and dreams. There, in the comforting darkness behind her closed eyelids, she saw her former teacher’s face—Margaret Whitfield, with those kind, knowing eyes that had once looked upon her with such faith and encouragement.

As sleep finally began to claim her, Riley couldn’t help but feel that somehow, someday, the truth would find her, pulling her back into the depths of a world she thought she’d left behind. In her dream, the silence was absolute, save for the ghostly whisper of justice. Mrs. Whitfield’s gaze held her, a silent plea that transcended words. It was a call to action she couldn’t ignore.

Riley knew that this case, Margaret Whitfield’s case, was going to find its way to her.

One way or another.

*

The next morning, Riley’s strides echoed through the empty corridor of the FBI Academy, from the classroom where she taught to her nearby office. Her morning lecture had been a blur. It was always a good class, with no students like Leo Dillard to annoy or worry her. But images of Mrs. Whitfield’s kind face had kept forcing

themselves between slides on criminal psychology. What was it about the algebra teacher's death that refused to settle in the recesses of her mind? It wasn't just another case file; this was personal.

She reached her office, a sanctuary of sorts, in the bustling chaos of the Academy. The walls were lined with the shelves holding countless books and reports. She even had a window here, where sunlight filtered through the blinds. Her desk, sturdy and well-worn from years of use, sat in the center of the room. Her own chair behind the desk was also old but comfortable. In front of the desk were several chairs for Academy students who might feel the need to conference with her.

Those students were a special satisfaction to her in this job, handpicked for their exceptional law-keeping abilities demonstrated in previous positions. And strong, because in addition to their courses at the Academy, they spent considerable time training on the firing range and challenging obstacle courses.

She'd found it satisfying to help get them started on their careers, seeing their progress and growth towards becoming agents. She knew she was helping shape the future of this prestigious organization, one recruit at a time. Although few of them would become full-scale profilers, the perspectives she brought them from the BAU division would deepen their abilities. Even a touch of those skills would help them, no matter which FBI career lay ahead of them.

Riley sank into her chair and turned to face her computer. She reached out to her keyboard, but couldn't bring herself to type a single word.

"Focus, Riley," she murmured to herself, glancing at the clock. Her second class would start soon, yet her mind remained tethered to a memory she wished she could unravel. A locked door without a key. Mrs. Whitfield had been more than a teacher; she was a beacon for a young girl adrift in a sea of uncertainty after losing her mother. And now, someone had extinguished that light under mysterious

circumstances.

As if propelled by an unseen force, Riley opened her desk drawer, where she had put her phone. Bill's words from the night before surfaced—warnings laced with protective concern—but they dissipated like mist against the heat of her resolve. Hoke Smith, the chief of police in Slippery Rock, might have the answers she sought. Or at least, a starting point.

Her finger hovered over the call button, the weight of her decision pressing down. Would Hoke Smith understand her need to dig deeper, or would he see it as an intrusion? Back in algebra class, Hoke had sat two desks over, his boyish scrawl a stark contrast to Mrs. Whitfield's meticulous script. They had shared knowing glances when concepts clicked, a silent camaraderie in the face of quadratic challenges.

She pressed the button, and as she'd expected, her call reached a receptionist, but when she identified herself as an FBI agent, it was put through to the police station chief. But all she was getting at first was a series of rings.

"Come on, Hoke," she whispered, almost willing him to pick up, to be the ally she needed. As the rings stretched on, each one tightened the knot in her stomach. Finally, a click signaled connection, and Riley steadied her voice, prepared to navigate the edges of professional courtesy and personal urgency.

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“Chief Smith’s office,” came Hoke’s deep, familiar voice.

“Hoke, it’s Riley Paige. I’m calling about Mrs. Whitfield. I heard what happened and I wanted to—” she began, but the words were cut short by his response. An unexpected surge of relief colored his tone, catching her off guard.

“Thank God, Riley! I was hoping they’d put you on the case!” Hoke’s voice crackled through the line.

Riley struggled to make sense of his words.

Put me on the case? She wondered.

What case? What could he possibly mean?

CHAPTER FOUR

Riley was truly puzzled. Why would her high school friend think she could be assigned to investigate a death in her old hometown?

“Hoke, what do you mean?” Riley asked in surprise. With a touch of embarrassment, she added, “This isn’t an FBI case, is it?”

There was a pause on the other end, and then Hoke asked, “You mean you don’t know? I called for federal assistance yesterday.”

“I had no idea,” Riley admitted.

Of course, she knew she shouldn't be surprised not to be in the loop about a case like this. As a lecturer at the Academy, she was usually the last to find out about active field cases unless they were particularly heinous or complex.

"Look, I just called you to find out more about Mrs. Whitfield's death," Riley explained. "I didn't know anything about an ongoing FBI investigation. Can you tell me why you involved the FBI?"

"One of my officers recognized the killer's M.O.," Hoke replied. "Another person, Garrett Fenn, a math professor at Blenheim College in Roanoke, was killed in the same manner. I had to call in the feds when we saw the similarities."

"Two math professors? Tell me about the M.O.," Riley urged.

Hoke exhaled deeply, and when he spoke again, his voice had lost its usual steadiness.

"It's brutal, Riley. And there's an unsettling precision to it all—"

"Details, Hoke. I need specifics."

He hesitated again, and she knew he was wondering about releasing details to someone not assigned to the case. Then he relented.

"Both victims were widowed and lived alone, and they were apparently taken by surprise in their homes late at night. They were both found sitting at their desks."

"How were they killed?" Riley asked.

"They were both strangled. And...and here's where it gets weird," Hoke continued, his voice crackling with static through the phone line. "Their bodies were found with

sheets of paper pinned to their backs.”

“Sheets of paper?” Riley’s voice echoed back her confusion. The detail seemed bizarre. She waited for Hoke to explain.

“They appeared to be student quizzes for algebra classes,” he said. “Just a numbered list of equations to solve for x . The sort of generic handout any teacher might give students. It was like the killer was mocking the victims, putting signs on their backs labeling them as algebra teachers. Maybe the killer just hates algebra.”

Hoke’s guess made sense. In fact, it was probably the conclusion any FBI field agent might reach—that the sheets were gestures of mockery and nothing more. And yet ...

Quizzes? Algebra? The juxtaposition of mundane academic exercises and two murders sent Riley’s mind reeling. It also brought another memory to mind.

“You remember how she used to hand out those quizzes like candy at Halloween?” Riley’s voice softened.

“Sure do,” Hoke replied. “I swear, I learned more about life in her algebra class than anywhere else. She had a way of making x and y matter beyond the paper.”

“Exactly,” Riley agreed, leaning back against her chair.

A silence fell as both of their minds drifted back to happier days.

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“Mrs. Whitfield...she didn’t just teach us numbers,” Riley said. “She taught us resilience, how to face new problems head-on and solve them piece by piece.”

“She even made me enjoy math for a while there,” Hoke said, and Riley could almost see his rueful grin through the line. “Never thought I’d say that about algebra.”

“Neither did she, judging by your test scores,” Riley quipped, allowing the momentary levity to ease the sting of loss.

Hoke chuckled a little, then said, “Look, I’ll try to keep you in the loop about the case as much as I know. But it’s in the hands of an FBI team, and I’m not likely to know everything that’s going on. But hey—do you think you could get yourself assigned to the case?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Riley said. “I’m an Academy instructor now, not an active field agent.”

“Too bad.”

Yeah, it is, Riley thought unhappily.

“Take care, Hoke,” Riley murmured after a moment.

“You too, Riley.”

With a final click, the call ended, leaving Riley sitting at her desk in silence, gazing at the framed photo of her two daughters. She had chosen mentorship over manhunts,

decided to spend time at home with her family instead of traveling all over the country as she used to do. She knew she had made the right choice.

And yet ...

Did she really have to stay on the bench while this case played out? The murder of her former teacher had happened right here in Virginia. The drive to Slippery Rock was less than four hours ...

Riley made her decision. She strode out of her sanctuary of academia and crossed to the BAU building. When she reached the door to Special Agent in Charge Brent Meredith's office, she knocked firmly, the sound echoing down the quiet hallway.

"Come in," came the gruff reply.

Meredith's office was the very image of minimalism and efficiency. His desk was an expanse of clean lines and order, save for a single framed photograph of a mountain landscape that broke the monotony. The African American man behind the desk matched his surroundings—broad-shouldered and imposing, with a face that rarely betrayed emotion.

Riley suddenly felt a familiar pang of intimidation in the presence of her boss.

"What is it, Agent Paige?" he asked.

"Sir, I was a student of Mrs. Margaret Whitfield, whose murder is now part of an FBI investigation," Riley said, getting right to the point.

Meredith nodded, his expression neutral as he leaned back in his chair. "I'm familiar with the case. In fact, I assigned the team that's investigating it."

Riley swallowed the lump in her throat. “I’d like to be made part of that team, sir,” she said.

For a moment, Meredith’s eyebrows raised slightly, as if the request had managed to surprise even him. But his face quickly settled back into its usual stoic mask.

“Agent Paige, you haven’t worked in a field capacity for months now. You seemed eager to transition to teaching. What’s changed?”

“This is personal, sir,” she admitted.

She told him about Mrs. Whitfield, her high school algebra teacher, and how the woman’s encouragement had steered a rebellious teenager toward a path of purpose. When she finished, the silence was broken only by Meredith’s stern reply.

“What you’ve just told me is precisely why I can’t assign you to this case, Agent Paige. It’s far too personal for you. You’d lack the objectivity necessary to investigate effectively.”

She recognized the possible truth in his words. But she couldn’t let go of her desire to get involved—not yet.

“I understand, sir,” Riley began, steadying her voice. “But could you at least put me in touch with the case’s team head? Maybe I could provide some insight as someone who knew the victim.”

Meredith shook his head, his features immovable as carved stone. “No, Paige. I know from experience that giving you even an inch in a case like this is a bad idea. You’re too good at what you do, and you’d find a way to involve yourself more deeply than you should.”

“But sir ...”

“I’m sorry, Agent Paige, but the answer is no.”

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The refusal stung, but Riley nodded sharply, the soldier in her acknowledging the command, even as the investigator raged against it.

“Understood, sir,” she managed, her voice clipped.

Meredith looked weary as he leaned back in his chair, massaging the bridge of his nose.

“How’s your family, Agent Paige?” Meredith asked, shifting the conversation to a more personal note.

Riley smiled faintly. “The girls are doing well. April’s getting ready for her first year at Jefferson Bell University, and Jilly is doing well in school.”

Meredith nodded approvingly, his stern features softening slightly. “That’s good to hear. And now, if you’ve got nothing else to discuss...”

“Thank you for your time, Agent Meredith,” Riley said as she ended the conversation and turned on her heel, stepping into the cool corridor that felt suddenly oppressive. The conversation with Meredith had gone as she had feared, and her disappointment was strong.

Walking more slowly, Riley made her way back to her own office in the Academy building, where theories and profiles lined the walls, and also relics of cases she and Bill had solved together. But today, those solved cases didn’t offer her their usual feeling of satisfaction. Her connection to Mrs. Whitfield wasn’t just a thread to the past; it was a call to action, a debt of honor she owed to the woman who had once

opened her eyes to the power of logic and numbers.

Briefly, she considered the problems of breaking protocol—accessing the details of the investigation directly. Meredith would disapprove strongly. But her decision was soon made.

With her next class looming, she knew she didn't have much time. Riley turned to her computer, and with a few decisive strokes, she bypassed the layers of digital bureaucracy to access the restricted files.

As the images flickered to life on her screen, a visceral reaction clenched her gut. Mrs. Whitfield's lifeless form sat upright in a chair of her home. Riley's gaze lingered on the familiar features, now marred by the violence of her passing.

She zoomed in on the photographs, her attention drawn to the stark white sheet pinned to Mrs. Whitfield's back. Hoke had been right; the worksheet was there, its equations a jarring contrast to the tragedy depicted.

Next, Riley opened the digital file bearing Professor Fenn's name. The same clinical sterility of crime scene photographs greeted her, but it was one similarity that ensnared her focus—the quiz sheet pinned to the victim's back. It was identical in form to the one on Mrs. Whitfield: a simple white page with a header indicating algebra, blank spaces for the student to write their name and date, and a different numbered list of equations below that.

There were also separate documents, photocopies that fully displayed the two individual sheets. The numbers swam before Riley's eyes, taunting her with their hidden significance. She reached for a notepad, scribbling down the details, her mind already turning over the possibilities.

She leaned closer to her monitor, squinting at the screen as if proximity could grant

her clarity.

“Could you be a message?” she murmured, tracing a finger along the glass that shielded the digital image from her touch.

She tried to work through an equation, her fingers stumbling over the keys as she attempted to coax her rusty math skills back to life, trying to recall the steps involved in solving for x . Her attempts were clumsy, her knowledge rusted from years of disuse, buried under layers of criminal psychology and behavioral analysis. Frustration pricked at her as she realized she was ill-equipped to untangle this aspect of the killer’s puzzle without assistance.

The numbers blurred before her eyes, symbols of a language she once spoke fluently but had since forgotten. They teased her, whispering secrets she couldn’t decipher, holding answers just out of reach.

“Damn it,” she said softly.

She knew that there was every likelihood that these sheets were nothing more than what they appeared to be—generic worksheets with no hidden message at all, pinned to the bodies in a gesture of crude mockery, just as Hoke had supposed. But her gut told her otherwise, and the image of Mrs. Whitfield’s body was seared into her consciousness, daring her to look closer, to find the message hidden within the numbers.

She was sure that answers to those equations must contain clues. The notion was wild, yet there was a connection here, a pattern she needed to uncover. But to do so, she would have to venture beyond her own current limitations. Re-learning basic algebra would take too long. She had to reach out, seek help in a realm she’d abandoned. She found the decision both humbling and oddly exhilarating.

She would find someone who could navigate these numerical waters, someone who could help her translate the killer's cryptic choice of communication.

Closing her eyes briefly, Riley let go of her pride and prepared to delve into her past. Somewhere in the depths of her memory, among lessons learned and paths crossed, lay the key to unlocking the algebraic riddle before her. She would find it, she vowed silently, for Mrs. Whitfield, for Professor Fenn, and for the justice they deserved.

A small smile played on her lips as an idea formed. She knew exactly who had the necessary skills to help her decipher these equations.

CHAPTER FIVE

When Rilfivey opened the door of her townhouse and stepped inside, it was very quiet. Seeing no one in the nearby rooms, she called up the stairwell, "April, Jilly, can you come down here?"

Sounds from upstairs told her the girls were on their way. Then she went into the kitchen to check in with Gabriela, who glanced up from where she stood at the counter.

"I'm fixing some snacks for you girls," she announced in her accented voice, her eyes meeting Riley's with a knowing look.

"Thanks, Gabriela," Riley said, "we'll be working at the dining room table for a little while. I'll have it cleared in time for dinner."

She walked back through the living room into the dining room, where the big wooden table often served as a makeshift command center. She put her bag down and took out printed copies of the quiz sheets that had been left with the murder victims.

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The sound of footsteps clattering down the stairs announced the arrival of April and Jilly, their faces alight with curiosity. “What’s going on, Mom?” April asked, her hazel eyes reflecting the same inquisitive spirit as Riley’s.

“I need your help with a case,” Riley said, watching as a ripple of eager anticipation passed between the girls.

“Awesome!” Jilly exclaimed.

April, who had sometimes expressed interest in joining the FBI herself, looked excited.

They sat down at the table, and Riley slid copies of the quiz sheets across to each of them. “These are part of an ongoing investigation,” she explained. “Can you work through these equations for me?”

Her daughters’ enthusiasm deflated, their expressions souring at the sight of the algebra problems laid out before them.

“It’s just math?” April’s voice quivered with a touch of betrayal.

“Seriously, Mom? This is what you dragged us here for?” Jilly chimed in, her pencil tapping an impatient staccato.

“I know it doesn’t look exciting, girls, but trust me, it’s important,” Riley coaxed. “These equations are part of a real case. I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t serious. And you’ve worked problems like this a lot more recently than I have.”

She didn't want to tell them that this wasn't just about algebra; these numbers were potential clues to the mind of a killer.

Reluctantly, April and Jilly picked up their pencils and began to work through the problems. Riley observed them, noting April's methodical precision and Jilly's quicker, more intuitive approach that led to more erasures.

As the scratching of lead filled the room, Riley's thoughts drifted unbidden to her class earlier that day. She was glad that Leo Dillard hadn't bothered her either before or after class, offering no more than a short stare from across the room—a welcome reprieve.

Gabriela arrived with sliced apples and orange sections arranged on a plate. Peering over their shoulders, she asked. "Esos números deben significar algo, ¿verdad?"

"These numbers must mean something, yes," Riley echoed.

Or at least she hoped so. She couldn't shake her hunch that it was a code of sorts, surely. But what did it unlock?

"Done," April announced, dropping her pencil onto the table with a sense of finality.

Jilly soon mirrored the action, a little less dramatically.

"Your rewards," Gabriela said, setting down the tray of fruit.

"Thank you," they all chimed, and with a pleased smile Gabriela returned to the kitchen.

"Good work, girls," Riley said.

“Mom, this is weird,” Jilly said as she reached for a slice of apple. “All the answers I got are whole numbers...except for one.” She pointed at the paper where ‘ $x = 38.517$ ’ was neatly written. “Why would one of them be so different?”

“Let me see,” Riley murmured, leaning forward to glance at the sheet.

“Same here,” April chimed in, her hazel eyes—so much like Riley’s own—reflecting curiosity. “Except my outlier is a negative: -78.4368 . That’s even stranger.”

Riley took her computer pad out of her bag and stood looking at it for a moment, wondering how to enter those numbers. The odd digits felt familiar somehow, a forgotten language resurfacing from the depths of memory. With a snap of clarity, she remembered a conversation just the night before.

“Remember how Mrs. Whitfield made learning an adventure?” Tracy had laughed. They’d reminisced about an algebra assignment that had turned into a treasure hunt, a series of equations leading them to a physical location and a hidden prize.

“Girls,” Riley said, “I think you’re onto something big here.” She watched April and Jilly lean in, their young faces showing curiosity and anticipation.

“Like what, Mom?” April asked, tilting her head, pencil still poised between her fingers.

“Let me show you,” Riley replied as she tapped on the computer pad, bringing up Google Maps. The app responded instantly, a digital globe spinning to her command, zooming in on a landscape that could hold the key to a mystery far beyond their cozy kitchen.

“Check this out,” she continued, typing in the first set of numbers— 38.517 —into the

latitude field, then entering -78.4368 for longitude.

The map changed, coalescing around a single point in the sprawling greenery of Virginia. The Blue Ridge Wilderness Park materialized on the screen, the coordinates pinpointing an area within its vast expanse.

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“Right here,” Riley murmured, tapping the spot. “That’s what the numbers you found are telling us.”

She knew that park as a place of towering trees and silent trails—a location that was surely not chosen at random.

“Is that...is that somewhere we’re going?” Jilly’s voice broke through the suspense, her eyes wide.

“No,” Riley replied hastily. “But it’s important information. Very important.”

As she looked back at her daughters, she saw reflections of herself—the same relentless drive for answers, the same desire to see justice served. But she also saw innocence, a precious quality she would do anything to protect. And so, she wrapped her arms around them both, holding on to the moment before everything changed again.

“Girls,” she said, “you’ve been a real help. This could be a major break in an FBI case.”

April and Jilly leaned in closer, their bright eyes mirroring the screen’s glow. They were eager for details, but Riley hesitated. She’d always been meticulous about keeping her professional dangers separate from the sanctuary of home. Yet now, the two worlds were colliding, and she wondered how much to reveal to her daughters.

“Mom, what is it?” April pressed, her curiosity growing. “What does this have to do with your work? I thought you were just teaching now.”

“Have we been helping you find clues?”Jilly chimed in.

“Something like that,” Riley managed to say.She was weighing the potential harm of telling them anything further when the front door creaked open, heralding Bill’s unexpected arrival.The girls erupted into a flurry of excited chatter, pulling him into the dining room.

“Mom solved a real mystery with our help!”Jilly exclaimed, tugging at Bill’s sleeve as he took in the scene before him.

“Really?”Bill responded, eyebrows raised in surprise.He glanced at Riley, searching her face for an explanation.

“Easy, girls,” Riley interjected, her tone light but firm.“We just found something interesting, that’s all.”She offered Bill a tight smile, trying to quell the growing excitement and the inevitable questions that were sure to follow.

“Interesting, huh?”Bill said, giving Riley a look that suggested a deeper conversation was needed.

“Girls, why don’t you go finish your snacks in the family room?I need to talk to Bill for a second,” Riley suggested, gently steering them away from the table.

“Mom, you’re not going to tell us more?”April asked, disappointment etching her features.

“Later, honey,” Riley assured her.

Bill sat down, his frame filling the chair across from her.“Riley, what’s going on?”he asked, his voice low and serious.

“I think we’ve stumbled onto something big,” she began, her words tumbling out in a rush. “Big enough that I’m considering talking to Meredith about it.”

Bill just waited for her to continue, so Riley let the barriers fall, her words spilling out. “I called Hoke Smith today,” she confessed, watching as his expression shifted from curiosity to concern. “Mrs. Whitfield’s murder—it’s part of an ongoing FBI case.”

Bill leaned forward, elbows on the table, his attention unwavering. “And?”

“And I tried to get assigned to it. Went straight to Brent Meredith. He said no.”

“Of course, he did,” Bill muttered.

“Then I went back to my office and accessed the official file anyway,” she added, the gravity of her actions sinking in. It was a breach of protocol, a risk to her career, but she couldn’t let it go—not this case, not Mrs. Whitfield.

“Riley, you know the kind of trouble you’re in if this gets out?” There was no judgment in his tone, just a plain statement of fact.

She nodded. “I know. But Bill, the girls—they helped me make a connection. We found something that the team working on the case needs to know.”

“Found what?” His posture straightened, the investigator in him taking over.

“Coordinates,” she answered. Riley fiddled with the edges of the quiz sheets. “These are copies of sheets of paper that were pinned to the victims’ bodies. They’re algebra problems, and I knew it would take me forever to remember how to work them. So I got Jilly and April to do it. They pointed out something ...two anomalies among the answers. Then I remembered the problems that Mrs. Whitfield used to give us, where

the answers were clues to a specific location. That's what these two odd ones were, not just numbers—they're coordinates."

For a moment, Bill's eyes widened. Then, he leaned back in his chair, the creak of the wood breaking the silence that had fallen over the room. Riley watched his eyes, knowing that, like her, he understood the significance of this discovery.

"Coordinates," he finally said, his voice carrying the gravity of the revelation. "And you think this is linked to Mrs. Whitfield's case?"

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“Has to be,” Riley confirmed, her instincts as an investigator flaring up like a beacon. “It’s too precise, too deliberate to be a coincidence. If the numbers were just random, they would have led us anywhere, to any spot on the globe. But the location is specific, a spot in The Blue Ridge Wilderness Park, in the same state as both of the murders. That’s got to be checked out.”

Bill rubbed his chin, then looked directly at Riley. “Last night, Riley, we talked about this. I thought you were going to step back, to let it go.”

She felt a twinge of guilt at his reminder; she hadn’t promised to step back, but she understood she’d probably left him with that impression.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice quiet but firm. “But this...this could be big, Bill. If the team hasn’t pieced this together yet, it could be the break they need.”

“Alright,” he conceded, a sigh escaping him. “But you shouldn’t call it in. We need to do this together.”

“How do you mean?”

“Meredith is probably still at his desk,” Bill said, the edges of his words softened by the quiet sigh that accompanied them. “He’s always grinding away at this hour. We do need to tell him what you and the girls figured out.”

“Do you think I should call him and try to explain?” Riley asked.

“No, I don’t think you should do this alone,” Bill replied. “Meredith will want to hear

about this firsthand, but he's less likely to fire you if we go there together. I'll message him that we're on the way."

"Then let's go," Riley replied, the resolution clear in her voice. It was a tone that spoke not only of the urgency of their discovery but also of her own internal struggle—the constant balancing act between her roles as an agent and a mother. This was the life she had chosen, or perhaps it was the life that had chosen her.

She rose from the table, feeling the familiar surge of adrenaline that came with the prospect of a breakthrough. It coursed through her as she straightened the crumpled quiz sheets that had innocently transformed her dining table into an impromptu war room. The answers her daughters had scribbled down were now potential keys to a killer's mind—and Riley knew all too well how to navigate that kind of psyche.

CHAPTER SIX

After the half-hour drive back to Quantico, Riley and Bill walked into the BAU building together. The corridors inside were alive with the muted energy of ongoing investigations, the low hum of the never-sleeping beast that was the heart of FBI operations.

"Does Meredith know we're coming?" she asked Bill.

"I sent a message that we were on the way to speak with him, but no details,"

Riley took a deep breath; there was no turning back now. She had asked to be part of this investigation, and Meredith had said "no." Defying a direct order hadn't been unheard of back when she was an active agent, but had no place in her recent role as an Academy teacher.

Reaching the familiar threshold, Riley paused.

“Ready?” Bill asked in a low voice. When she nodded, he pushed the door open, revealing Meredith hunched over his desk, the sleeves of his shirt rolled up, his tie hanging loosely—the very image of dedication after ordinary working hours.

“Paige, Jeffreys,” Meredith intoned, looking up with a flash of annoyance. “This had better be important.”

“Agent Paige has worked out some information you need to know,” Bill explained. “We didn’t want to try to explain it by phone.”

“Then sit,” Meredith grumbled, an eyebrow arched in demand for an explanation. “But be quick. As you can see, I’m busy.”

They both took chairs in front of his desk, then Riley leaped into her explanation.

“Sir, this is about that case we talked about yesterday,” she said. “The murders in Slippery Rock and Roanoke.”

Meredith’s expression darkened, and he squinted with displeasure.

“I thought I told you to stay away from that,” he said.

“I know, sir, but ... well, as I told you yesterday, the murder of Margaret Whitfield is a personal issue for me. And I found something I think you and the team investigating that case you need to know.”

“Go on,” Meredith growled.

“Sir, I suppose you know that sheets of equations were pinned to each victim’s body.”

Meredith nodded silently.

“They’re not random class assignments or ordinary quizzes,” Riley explained. “The answers to two of the equations, one from each sheet, are different from the others. When you put those two together, they carry a message. They’re map coordinates, and they correspond to a specific location.”

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She could see skepticism cloud Meredith's eyes as she took out the two copies that her daughters had used to work out the problems. But as she continued, going over the exact numbers and how the two odd ones fitted together, something shifted. A flicker of interest sparked behind Meredith's guarded expression, betraying the gruff exterior that had come to define him.

Riley carefully explained all the details of how the apparently innocuous classroom materials pinned to the victims led straight to the rugged heart of Virginia's wilderness. The Blue Ridge Wilderness Park was an expanse of untamed forest, a place where secrets could easily remain hidden.

Silence fell over the room as Meredith absorbed all of her findings. Riley found herself holding her breath, waiting for the verdict from the man who had once been her team chief. Would he cast aside her findings, or would he recognize the glimmer of truth she presented?

Meredith leaned back in his chair, staring directly at her. Then he looked at Bill, who said firmly, "It all makes sense to me, and I thought this information should come directly from Riley to you right away."

"Before I make any decisions," Meredith finally broke his stillness, "I need to speak with Ivor Putnam." He glanced up at Riley. "He's the team chief for the Whitfield and Fenn murders. Although he hasn't reported this kind of findings, chances are that he's already onto this. If he's not ..."

Riley knew of Putnam by reputation—a sharp mind, but one not easily swayed by others' input, and not an easy agent to get along with. Would he resent information

from outside his own investigation or welcome it?

With a few pressed buttons, Meredith initiated the call, activating the speaker function. The dial tone buzzed.

“Putnam,” Meredith’s voice was firm.

“Go ahead, sir,” came the crisp, self-assured response from Ivor Putnam. His tone reflected his reputation—a brilliant agent whose arrogance often overshadowed his achievements.

“Your progress on the Whitfield and Fenn case?” Meredith asked.

Riley’s gaze lingered on the floor, tracing the pattern of the carpet tiles as she waited for Putnam’s reply. She was grateful for Bill sitting beside her.

“My team’s spread out between Roanoke and Slippery Rock,” Putnam reported, his voice echoing off the walls. “I’m with the team here in Roanoke. We’re chasing down leads, but it’s slow going. This is a substantial city, not as simple to work as the Slippery Rock crime scene.”

Meredith asked bluntly, “And Blue Ridge Wilderness Park, has that come up in your investigation?”

There was a slight pause on the line, one that stretched long enough for Riley to feel her heart thump. She imagined Putnam, miles away, considering Meredith’s query, wondering why, and analyzing every piece of data his sharp mind had cataloged.

“Blue Ridge?” Putnam finally echoed, his voice tinged with an air of bewilderment that seemed out of place for a man of his confidence. “No, that park’s not on our radar,” he continued. “Why should it be?”

Meredith leaned back in his chair, the leather creaking under his shift in weight. “Could be something there.”

“Sir, can you explain what caught your attention?” Putnam asked. “I’ll be glad to follow up.”

“I’m going to ask Special Agent Riley Paige to explain,” Meredith told the agent.

The silence on the phone line was thick, nearly tangible. Then Riley began.

“Special Agent Putnam, I’ve been interested in the equations on the quiz sheets from both victims.”

There was no response, so she continued.

“The answers to two equations, one from each sheet, are map coordinates. Put together, they mark a specific location within the Blue Ridge Wilderness Park.” She thought it wiser not to mention that her young daughters had immediately noticed those two unusual numbers.

A static-filled silence followed her statement. Riley could picture Putnam at the other end, his frown, the cogs turning in his methodical mind. She imagined the way he would be holding his phone, his posture rigid with tension—a mirror of their own.

“Interesting,” came Putnam’s voice finally, so quiet they had to strain to hear it. His surprise was a rare crack in the facade of an agent who had a reputation for being unflappable.

Riley’s eyes met Bill’s. They were onto something that Putnam had missed, and they knew it. Riley felt Meredith’s gaze on her, assessing, calculating.

“Frankly, we considered those sheets to be innocuous,” Putnam conceded after what felt like an eternity. “And separate. Of course my team worked out the problems, but they didn’t put any of the answers from the separate crime scene papers together, not like that.”

“Then consider this your wakeup call,” Meredith’s voice cut through the room, carrying his full authority. “I’m sending Paige out there. You two will link up at the park’s visitor center at noon. Listen to her. Figure out what this is all about.”

“Understood,” Putnam replied, though his tone lacked its former crisp certainty.

Riley exhaled slowly. The wheels were in motion now. A part of her—the part that thrived on the hunt—felt a spark of life flicker.

Meredith ended the call with a decisive click, and Riley sensed the shift in the room. Tomorrow’s rendezvous was not just another appointment; it was a convergence of minds on a path that might lead to clarity or trouble. The once theoretical connection between the case and the serene landscapes of Blue Ridge had morphed into a tangible lead, one she was now called upon to explain to another agent, perhaps to investigate in the real world.

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“You have your orders, Agent Paige,” Meredith said. “Just don’t get in Putnam’s way. And as soon as you figure out this thing about the geographical coordinates, come home. Leave the rest to Putman. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’d like to go with Agent Paige tomorrow,” Bill ventured. “Agent Esmer and I just closed our case this afternoon. My schedule’s cleared up.”

His request was met by a resounding silence, and then Meredith responded, his voice as hard as steel.

“No,” he said flatly. “You’re staying here. I have plans for you, and besides ...”

Bill opened his mouth to protest but was cut off by Meredith’s raised hand. The stern gaze of the Special Agent in Charge brooked no argument.

“The personal connection between you two,” Meredith said, his tone icy as he pointed a finger back and forth between Bill and Riley. “It could compromise the investigation. And let’s not forget that Agent Paige wasn’t even supposed to be involved in this case at all.” His last words were directed at Riley, a stark reminder of her insubordination.

Disappointment marked both their faces, but they held their tongues.

Meredith dismissed them with a curt wave of his hand, signaling an abrupt end to the meeting. “That’s all for tonight,” he said tersely, already turning back to the piles of

paperwork on his desk.

“Thank you for your time, Special Agent Meredith,” Riley said as she stood to leave.

Meredith glowered up at her, his eyes dark and intense.

“Although you breached protocol,” he said, his voice carrying a stern edge, “you were correct to bring what you found to my attention. I’m not even going to ask how you figured this out.” His lips twitched ever so slightly, hinting at an almost smile as he added, “At this point, I don’t know whether to give you a reprimand or congratulations.”

Riley smiled and nodded. She had witnessed this kind of internal conflict in her superiors before, the struggle between enforcing the rules and acknowledging a job well done.

Riley left Meredith’s office with a sense of satisfaction. As she and Bill navigated their way out of the BAU, their steps carried them past familiar faces, each glance an unasked question they weren’t ready to answer. They knew well the rules within these walls—codes of respect and authority. Although both had managed to skirt those rules many times during their long careers, Riley had been much more compliant since she’d held a teaching position.

Stepping outside, the cool night air greeted them. The darkness of the Virginia sky stretched above them, dotted with stars that seemed oblivious to their earthly concerns. It was a clarity that Riley had once longed for, a simplicity that escaped the tangled web of emotions and responsibilities that now lay before her again.

Together, they walked towards their car parked in the lot—a silent journey punctuated only by the sound of their footsteps and the distant chirping of crickets. The reality of what had transpired began to truly sink in with every step; the

investigation that beckoned to Riley, the risks involved, the potential peril that awaited in the Blue Ridge Wilderness Park. All of it loomed over her, a mountain of uncertainty that she would have to tackle without her longtime partner at her side.

As they got into the car and Bill drove them back to Fredericksburg, she continued to contend with feelings she thought she'd left behind when she transitioned to teaching, the risk-taking chapters of her life neatly closed and filed away. But now, as the possibility of reentering that fray loomed before her, for a fleeting moment, she allowed herself to indulge in the anticipation, to feel the energy of potential action pulsating in her blood. In her mind's eye, she saw herself once again piecing together clues, following leads, her instincts and training merging into a singular purpose. That was the world she knew, the world where she had once excelled.

Bill's voice cut through the silence of their car ride, thick with concern. "Riley, you sure about this? Going back into the field...it's not just about chasing leads. It's dangerous. You know that better than anyone."

"I know, Bill," she finally said, her voice steady. "But I can handle it."

She could hear the truth in her own words, even as she acknowledged the validity of his worries. Yet beneath the surface agreement with his misgivings, an undeniable surge of excitement began to build within her. The prospect of fieldwork, the adrenaline of the chase—it called to her with a siren's allure that was hard to resist.

"Anyhow," she told him, "this is just a trip to bring another agent up to date, not really a full assignment to the case. I'll probably be back home the same day."

As they pulled out of the parking lot of their townhouse, Riley felt the familiar thrill of investigation. It was a sensation she had not realized how much she missed—the sharp focus, the puzzle pieces waiting to be assembled into a coherent whole, the chase. She had to admit that she'd even missed the more dangerous challenges. On a

case, no two days would be alike.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The sun was high in the sky as Riley drove a nondescript FBI-issued black sedan along winding roads that cut through the lush Blue Ridge Wilderness Park. The natural beauty was a dramatic change from the Academy classrooms where she had spent recent years. She had picked up the company car at BAU this morning and made the two-hour drive to the park for her noon rendezvous with Special Agent Putnam. A substitute was covering her classes; her students unaware that she had been pulled back into the fray.

The drive from Quantico had given her ample time to reflect on the unexpected turn of events that had brought her back into field work, if only temporarily. Despite the years that had lapsed since she last delved into a case, Riley found herself unexpectedly at ease.

As the visitor center came into view, a rustic building nestled among the trees, Riley's phone vibrated against the console, jarring her from her reverie. She tapped the speaker button, already knowing who would be on the other end.

"Hey, how's it going?" Bill's voice crackled through the line, tinged with an undercurrent of concern that didn't need to be spoken aloud.

Riley laughed lightly. "I just got here, Bill. Haven't even stepped out of the car yet."

"Right, of course," Bill chuckled, and she could almost see him rubbing the back of his neck in that self-conscious way of his. "Just...be careful, okay? And call me if anything happens."

"I will," Riley murmured, her tone softening. "I'll update you as soon as there's

anything to report.”

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She ended the call and stepped out of the car. The atmosphere of the park hummed with life, bird calls echoing amidst the rustle of leaves stirred by a gentle breeze. The visitor's center was a rustic building of dark wood and stone that seemed to rise naturally from the forest floor. Only a few other cars were parked in the lot.

When Riley pushed open the door to the visitor center, the air inside was cool. The walls were covered with maps of trails and framed photos of wildlife, but the displays went unnoticed as Riley made her way across the concrete floor. Two other people studying trail map ignored her, and she followed a narrow hallway lined with doors bearing brass nameplates to one that was marked Superintendent Bern Stewart.

She gave a knock, then entered a utilitarian room with a large metal desk dominating the space. Behind it sat Bern Stewart, his face as rugged as the mountains outside, lines etched by years of squinting into the sun and wind. Special Agent Ivor Putnam stood to the side, his features sharp and eyes calculating, taking her measure as if she were a puzzle to be solved.

Putnam was a strong-looking man in his thirties, with a military-style haircut and dark eyes. He stood rigid, his face impassive, a study in control. Even his suit seemed pressed to defy any hint of disorder, the fabric taut over broad shoulders that appeared unyielding.

Riley presented her badge and introduced herself to the two men.

"Agent Paige," Stewart began, his voice echoing the doubt in his gaze. "I hope you understand my skepticism about this whole situation. Murders in Roanoke and Slippery Rock, and suddenly we're involved way out here Blue Ridge Park? It doesn't

sit right.”

Riley felt the familiar tug of duty clashing with the frustration of bureaucratic obstacles. She met his eyes steadily, knowing the importance of bridging these gaps, of forging trust amid doubt. Her response would set the tone for their cooperation—or lack thereof.

“I appreciate your concerns, superintendent,” she replied. “But we’re here to follow a lead, no matter how unlikely that might seem.”

“Let’s not waste time,” Special Agent Ivor Putnam’s voice interrupted. “We’re here to investigate a potential crime scene, not debate jurisdictions.”

Riley recognized Putnam’s type: all precision and protocol, a man who measured worth in facts alone. Yet beneath his austere exterior, she sensed a drive that matched her own, even if their methods and personalities might diverge. She reminded herself that they shared a common goal. And for that, she could endure his abrasiveness—at least for now.

Stewart sighed and pulled out a detailed map of the park. “These are the coordinates you mentioned: 38.517 latitude and -78.4368 longitude. It’s in a fairly remote area. I’ll lead you there.”

They strode back through the building, and Stewart headed toward his parked truck, a vehicle that appeared rugged and capable against the backdrop of untamed wilderness.

“You’ll have to take care on these roads,” Stewart called back to them, an edge of concern in his voice that matched the creases lining his sun-weathered face.

“My company car rides a little higher than yours,” Riley told Putnam. “You might as

well come with me.”

She didn’t comment that his vehicle also seemed too clean and shiny for a trip along forest roads that weren’t open to the public.

Without comment, Putnam headed for the passenger seat of her car, and she slipped behind the wheel. They followed Stewart to a gravel turnout off the main road that was blocked by a metal bar. Stewart got out and unlocked the barrier, then drove his car on through, and Riley followed with her vehicle. From that point on, the roads were rougher, but each turn revealed stunning vistas.

The car’s tires crunched over the gravel, and dust swirled in their wake as they wound deeper into the park, the dense forest closing in around them. The afternoon sun filtered through the canopy of leaves overhead, dappling the narrow road while squirrels darted across their path and birds swooped low, their calls echoing in the stillness.

Even so, Putnam’s focus seemed to be internal, his eyes fixed on something beyond the landscape—perhaps on the case, or some calculation known only to him.

In an attempt to pierce the bubble of strained silence, Riley cleared her throat gently.

“I’ve heard impressive things about your work, Agent Putnam,” she said, keeping her voice even and non-confrontational.

His response was swift and sharp.

“And you’re something of a BAU legend, Agent Paige,” Putnam said, his voice devoid of warmth.

Before she could form a polite thank-you, he cut her off.

“I didn’t mean that as a compliment.I believe in facts, not legends.”

Riley turned her head slightly, her dark eyes studying the agent beside her.He sat rigid, his posture projecting an authority that seemed to demand respect but offered little in return.

“Facts like the clue on the quiz sheets that led us here?The one your team missed?”Riley asked, allowing herself a small victory as she pointed out the oversight.

Putnam’s jaw tightened, and he turned to face her, his eyes narrowing.

“We didn’t miss it entirely.One of my officers solved the equations.She just...didn’t notice the significance of the answers.They just looked like ordinary worksheets to her.So naturally, the rest of us figured the worksheets were meant as labels, as if to say, ‘Here’s a dead math teacher.’”

Riley heard the frustration beneath Putnam’s defensive exterior and bit back a sharp reply.One thing seemed certain—he wasn’t the type to accept personal responsibility for the lapses in the work of his team members.

Not exactly a “buck-stops-here” type,she mused.

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She decided not to mention that her teen-aged daughters had noticed those two odd answers right away and had helped her figure out their significance.

As the trip continued in silence, the tension between them remained unresolved, much like the case that had brought them together. Putnam's expression retreated into a mask of professional detachment.

Bern Stewart's truck slowed and veered onto an even smaller road, its brake lights flaring red against the rich green backdrop. Riley felt the tension coil tighter in her gut. After a short distance he pulled to a stop in a small clearing, then flagged them into an adjacent space. Riley parked her car with deliberate care before stepping out into the unknown.

As she killed the engine, the silence felt heavy, laden with anticipation. It was a momentary reprieve, a chance to brace for what lay ahead. She opened the car door and drew in a breath, the mountain air crisp and cool.

She got out, the door closing with a soft click behind her, and immediately the sounds of the forest rushed to meet her. Birdsong flitted through the canopy, while the whispering rustle of leaves spoke of hidden movements. The distant murmur of a stream underscored the scene.

Stewart glanced at the two agents, then turned back to the forest without a word. His stride was confident as he led them down a well-trodden path. His cellphone screen glowed in his hand, the GPS signal a modern-day lodestar guiding them through this primeval landscape.

Riley followed, her senses alert. Putnam walked beside her, his earlier abrasiveness replaced by a quiet focus that Riley begrudgingly respected. There was a shared purpose now, a tacit acknowledgment that despite their differences, they were united in the desire to get the job done.

The trail narrowed, and they proceeded in single file until it began to peter out completely. It became clear that the coordinates Stewart was following were charting a course away from the safety of marked paths. With Stewart forging ahead and Putnam following behind her, Riley stepped off the beaten track. She adjusted her pace, her eyes scanning the terrain, seeking signs and patterns amid the chaos of wilderness.

Stewart stopped at the threshold of a forest clearing, the sun's rays lazily drifting through the leaves. The quiet was pervasive, interrupted only by the distant murmur of nature.

"This is it," he said harshly. "See? Nothing here."

Riley stood for a moment at the threshold of the clearing, the sun's rays lazily drifting through the leaves. At first glance, nothing looked out of place. None of this wild growth had been disturbed for a long time. To any hiker, the scene would be a peaceful interlude in the wild expanse of Blue Ridge Wilderness Park. But Riley's eyes, honed by years of dissecting crime scenes, immediately detected an incongruity.

She spotted the tips of a few large rocks, partially obscured by moss and fallen leaves. She thought that the linear arrangement of those stones formed an unnatural line on the forest floor. The placement was too precise, too methodical to be the work of nature's random hand. She stepped forward and studied them more closely. Then she spotted two more, almost shyly revealing themselves beneath a shroud of green moss and foliage.

“Look at this,” she called over her shoulder.

As she carefully swept away the organic detritus, more of the stony configuration came into view—a large rectangular outline that mirrored the dimensions of a grave. When she glanced at Superintendent Bern Stewart, she saw his usual stoic demeanor falter, his face losing color as the reality dawned on him.

“I’ll need to get some of my men out here to dig...whatever this is,” he muttered, his voice betraying a hint of trepidation. But Riley knew the next steps had to be taken with care.

“Stewart, hold off on that,” she spoke with authority, her voice cutting through the stillness of the clearing. She met his gaze with an unwavering stare. “We need a county coroner’s team here first. This is now an active crime scene.” Her words left no room for argument.

Putnam, who had been pacing the perimeter impatiently with hands clasped behind his back, paused and turned towards her. The cockiness that had clung to him moments before seemed to have evaporated, leaving behind a more somber and reflective expression.

“Go ahead and make the call,” Riley told him.

Putnam nodded, pulling his phone from the pocket of his immaculate trousers. His thumb hesitated over the screen as he sifted through contacts, revealing an uncommon flicker of uncertainty in his actions. Then, putting any lingering doubts aside, Putnam dialed the number for the coroner.

The momentary bustle of activity subsided as Putnam moved out of earshot, and Riley found herself alone with her thoughts. She took a slow, deliberate breath, allowing the scent of earth and pine to cleanse the tightness in her chest. The beauty of

Blue Ridge Wilderness Park stretched before her, an expanse of serene greens that concealed the darkness they might soon uncover.

Her mind buzzed with questions. What had they found here? And why had someone, a killer, left them clues to locate this old grave? What could any of this mean for the death of Mrs. Whitfield and the other murdered math teacher, Professor Fenn? Would anything found here bring them justice?

She knelt beside the grave-shaped outline of rocks, touching the cool, moss-covered stones. Each touch was a promise to those who had been silenced too soon. This killer had to be hunted down, to be stopped before he took more innocent lives.

CHAPTER EIGHT

As she paced around the rectangle formed by stones, Riley tried to focus—to let her intuition bridge the gap between the present moment and that past day when someone had been buried here. She visualized the scene, attempted to get a sense of who had been here to hide a body, but the mental images slipped away.

The ability to connect with a killer's mind was her gift, her edge—and yet, it seemed to be failing her today. Maybe the crime scene was too overgrown for her to make that intuitive link. Or maybe the crime itself had happened too long ago.

Or maybe I'm distracted by the people I'm working with, she thought with mild dismay.

She could feel Putnam and Stewart's eyes on her as the two men stood at one side of the clearing, their conversation a low murmur. Their aloofness cast an invisible barrier, and Riley couldn't shake off the sensation of being an outsider.

"Come on, Riley," she muttered under her breath, closing her eyes to sharpen her

concentration.

But nothing came. No flash of insight, no echo of malice, just the emptiness of a crime long cold. Had her ability been unused for too long while she lectured in a safe classroom? Had she lost her touch? Did she even belong in the field anymore?

Then she reminded herself—if it weren't for her and her two daughters, this body might have gone undiscovered.

I've still got some game,she thought.

Riley took a deep breath, shaking off self-doubt.She forced herself to focus, to try again.Closing her eyes, she let her mind drift back to that day when this patch of ground had been violated by violence and death.She imagined the sounds—the rustling leaves, the crunch of footsteps—and allowed herself to be drawn into the scene.

And then...something clicked.

A flicker of insight sparked in her mind's eye.Two figures emerged from the depths of her consciousness—two people carrying a body between them through the wilderness.It was a heavy burden shared, but not equally so.She could sense tension between them—an imbalance in their dynamic.One was dominant, controlling.Not necessarily physically stronger but mentally and emotionally overpowering the other.

The dominant figure was a paradox—a forceful personality with an odd undercurrent of indecisiveness and conflict.This person wanted control but also craved validation or perhaps absolution.They chose this remote location for its obscurity—to ensure that the body would remain hidden from prying eyes, indefinitely lost to time.

Yet there were those stones—carefully arranged in a rectangle around the burial site like breadcrumbs leading back to their secret sin.As if on some level they wanted—or needed—the body to be discovered eventually.

Riley opened her eyes slowly, feeling a rush of relief mixed with apprehension as she looked at the rectangle once more.Her gift hadn't abandoned her—it had just taken

time to awaken from its slumber.

She had tapped into something—a trickle rather than a flood—but it was enough for now. Enough to confirm that she still belonged here, in this field where intuition met investigation head-on; enough to keep pushing forward even amid doubts and unwelcoming glares.

She glanced at the two Park Rangers who had arrived and stood waiting with shovels at the ready. Then the arrival of a van and the crunch of approaching footsteps announced the arrival of the Venard County Coroner, who strode into the clearing. He was tall and wiry, with a mop of unruly peppered hair.

“What have we got here, Stewart?” the coroner asked the park superintendent.

“These are FBI Special Agents Paige and Putnam,” Stewart said. “They pinpointed something at this location. It’s possible that we’ve discovered a buried body.”

The coroner nodded curtly as Riley and Putnam displayed their badges.

“Good afternoon, Paige and Putnam,” he said without warmth. “I’m Fritz Jannings—Dr. Fritz Jannings. And I’m the guy who deals with dead people in this county.”

Then he frowned at the sight before him. “This had better be worth my time. Got a table full of innards back at the morgue.” He pulled on a pair of latex gloves with a snap, his mannerisms broadcasting his impatience to return to his interrupted work.

“See for yourself,” Putnam motioned toward the stone arrangement with a dismissive gesture.

Jannings’ eyes narrowed as he surveyed the crude grave outline. He knelt beside it, his

movements precise as he traced the perimeter without touching anything. A long silence followed before he finally spoke.

“It might be a grave,” he conceded grudgingly.

“Likely it is,” Riley replied.

The coroner sighed, “Then let’s see what we’ve got here.”

Standing up, he signaled to his team to prepare for the excavation.

The little clearing was crowded now, so the two FBI agents and the park superintendent stepped back to give the newcomers room. A ranger, his face set in concentration beneath the brim of his hat, started shoveling dirt aside with methodical urgency. Next to him, a member of Jannings’s team, wearing latex gloves that seemed too delicate for such grim work, joined in the excavation.

The minutes dragged by slowly, then a ranger’s voice sliced through the stillness.

“Got something here!”

“Step back,” Jennings ordered, his voice laced with professional irritation rather than curiosity.

Riley leaned forward, her eyes fixed on the hollow as Jennings crouched down.

“Definitely a body,” Jannings grunted, confirming what they all suspected. “Clear the area,” he snapped. “Let my team do their job.”

As the rangers stepped back, Jannings’s team moved in with brushes and tools in hand, their movements precise and respectful. They worked to gently reveal the

secrets the earth had guarded for so long.

Watching them work, Riley was torn between the presence of live, warm-blooded human beings and the cold void left by death. Each stroke of the brush, each sifted handful of soil, peeled back layers of time, uncovering truths that would soon bridge past and present. And though the diggers' faces were marked by focus, not emotion, Riley knew each of them understood the gravity of their task.

This was more than a crime scene; it was a final resting place, a life stolen and a story waiting to be told. As the body emerged, frail and hidden within the earth, Riley knew her work here was far from done.

"Good work," Jennings muttered to his team. He stood up, dusting off his hands as if to rid himself of the responsibility as quickly as he shed the dirt.

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Riley's gaze fixed on the skeletal remains as the last layers of dirt were carefully brushed away. The bones, frail and bleached by time, told a story that only silence had heard for a long time. A remnant of fabric clung to the form like a whisper from the past, while tarnished jewelry offered a glimpse into the woman who once was.

"Looks like she's been here for a while," Jennings grumbled, his voice devoid of empathy. "As a first estimate, I'd say about twenty years."

Riley was absorbed by the details—the curve of the spine, the position of the arms—as if understanding the dead woman might lead to understanding the person or persons who had buried her here.

"Jannings," she prompted softly, "the jewelry...might there be engravings? Something personalized?"

"Maybe," he replied curtly, already waving his team over. "We'll take a closer look at the morgue." Then he turned to his team. "Alright, let's get her ready to move," he ordered, his tone signaling the end of the on-site investigation.

Riley watched as they prepared to transport the remains with a care that seemed incongruous with the coroner's brusqueness.

"I'll call Sheriff Hagen myself," Jennings announced, his words slicing through the afternoon air. "He needs to know about this."

"Are you able to determine the cause of death?" Putnam asked.

“Too early to tell,” Jennings said. “I suppose it could have been a case of natural causes, and someone simply wanted to bury her in some out-of-the-way place.”

It wasn't that, Riley thought.

She realized she'd gotten one other hint about whoever had buried this body here—that they harbored at least a trace of guilt, and that the stones were, in some sense, a sort of apology to the dead.

She was murdered, all right, Riley thought.

Putnam stepped toward Riley, his arms crossed and his feet apart in a posture that broadcast authority, as if he were marking his territory.

“Thanks for your help, Paige,” Putnam said, his voice jarring in its casual dismissal. “I'll take it from here.”

The words stung, but Riley didn't flinch. Instead, she met Putnam's gaze steadily.

“Of course, Agent Putnam,” she replied, her tone even.

But she didn't feel ready to leave—not with so many questions burning unanswered in her mind.

But have I got any choice? she wondered.

She remembered Meredith's words from yesterday, a directive that had seemed simple then: solve the mystery of the coordinates and come back. Yet, the fact that they'd found a grave that was located by math puzzles that had been pinned to dead bodies only indicated that there was more to uncover.

As the coroner's team lifted the remains from the makeshift grave onto a stretcher and began their solemn procession away from the clearing, Riley dug into her pocket and pulled out her phone. She dialed a familiar number, then pressed the phone tightly to her ear.

"Riley. I'm glad you called!" Bill said, taking the call. "Tell me what's going on."

Every detail spilled out in a rush as she recounted the discovery, the skeletal remains and the conversations that followed.

"Putnam thinks he can close me out, just like that." Riley's words sparked with indignation. "But there's more to this, Bill. I can feel it."

There was a beat of silence on the line before Bill replied. "Riley, you know as well as I do that this is not the time to step back. No one else gets inside a case like you do."

"Exactly," she agreed. "I can't just abandon this now."

"Then don't," Bill urged. "Call Meredith. He'll listen to you."

"Yeah, but will he agree to let me stay here to work on the case?"

"It's up to you to persuade him. Make him see why they still need you on this."

"Thanks for the advice, Bill. I'll do that."

Then she paused before adding, "I wish you were here."

“I wish I was too.”

She thanked Bill again and ended the call, heartened by his support and grateful that he hadn’t reminded her that she was supposed to be a teacher now, and not a field agent. She took a deep breath, summoning up the will to make her case to her boss.

She pressed the call button again, and held the device to her ear, listening as it rang once, twice, before a familiar voice answered.

“Paige?” Meredith’s voice was brisk, the usual undercurrent of authority rippling through.

“Sir,” Riley started, her words tumbling out in a rapid stream. “I’m here at the site.”

“And ...?”

She described the body, the clearing where they’d found it, then plunged ahead.

“Sir, I’m asking—no, I’m telling you—I need to stay on this,” she said. “I’m not finished here. There are obviously connections yet to be made, and I’ve got to help make them.”

There was a pause on the other end, a silence that stretched long enough for Riley to picture Meredith, his stern face set in thought. Then Meredith’s voice cut through again, decisive.

“Get Putnam on the call, Paige.”

Swallowing her apprehension, Riley turned back toward the crime scene where Agent Ivor Putnam stood, arms crossed, talking with the rangers with an impatient scowl. She approached him, phone outstretched.

“Putnam, Meredith wants to speak with you,” she said, activating the speakerphone function. Putnam’s eyes narrowed suspiciously, but he leaned in to listen to the gravelly and firm voice of their superior.

“Putnam, this is Meredith. Agent Paige is staying on the case. She’ll be working with you to examine the crime scene.”

The younger agent’s lips tightened, his stance growing even stiffer.

“With all due respect, sir, Paige isn’t even active in the field anymore.”

“She’s still got credentials for field work, she’s already proven herself valuable to this investigation,” Meredith shot back without missing a beat. “You both have your orders.”

Riley watched the muscles in Putnam’s jaw clench, his displeasure clear. But orders were orders, and despite his reluctance, she knew he would follow them.

“And Putnam,” Meredith’s voice crackled through the speakerphone once more, “after you’ve examined the scene, I want you to head back in Roanoke. Continue your active investigation there and coordinate with your team in Slippery Rock.”

The younger agent’s eyes flashed, a silent protest at being reassigned while the investigation took on new life. Yet his voice, when he responded, betrayed none of this.

“Understood, sir.”

“Good,” Meredith continued. “Agent Paige, you will lead the investigation of this old burial and of the coordinates that located it. Both of you keep me updated on any progress. I want to know how this body ties into the Roanoke and Slippery Rock murders. Work together, share information. We need to see the full picture.”

“Will do,” Riley assured him, while Putnam merely grunted his assent.

“Agent Paige, stay on the line for a moment,” Meredith said, signaling for a private conversation.

Stepping away from Putnam, who looked like he’d swallowed something sour, Riley wandered toward a small stand of trees, out of earshot.

“Sir?” she asked, her voice low and even.

“Agent Paige, I don’t need to tell you how important this is,” Meredith began, his voice taking on a softer edge that only those who knew him well would recognize as concern. “This is a chance to make sense of the new case. Don’t let internal squabbles distract you.”

“Of course not, sir,” Riley replied. “I’m here to get to the bottom of this, whatever it takes.”

“Good. Stay sharp and trust your instincts. You have a rare gift, Riley. Use it. But remember, you’re not alone in this. Touch base with the local authorities. Let them know you’re on this case now.”

“Understood. Thank you, sir.”

“Get some rest tonight. Tomorrow, you dive in headfirst. And, Agent Paige...” Meredith’s voice trailed off for a moment, filled with the unsaid words of

years of shared trials, “...be careful.”

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“Right,” Riley acknowledged, her gaze drifting across the landscape, already cataloging tasks. “I’ll check into a motel for the night ...”

But then she had another thought. “Sir, I’m going to need a partner for this.” She bit her lip, an unspoken hope lingering. In the silence that followed, she could almost hear Bill’s calm reassurances, his steady presence grounding her in ways no one else ever had.

“Someone will be there,” Meredith finally said, and before she could respond, the line went dead, leaving her with the echo of his words.

As the connection ended, Riley stared at the phone in her hand, its screen dark and inscrutable.

“Someone?” she muttered.

She missed Bill already—the way he shared her thoughts without needing them spoken aloud. But there was work to be done, and personal longing had no place in the equation. As she contemplated the unknown variables facing her, she wondered how she would manage in this new situation.

Who was coming to work with her? Would they understand her methods? Could they keep pace? Would whoever it was always have her back?

CHAPTER NINE

Equations snaked down the laptop screen in neat progressions, each one a

masquerade of academic innocence. They were simple enough to be dismissed by any unsuspecting eye as classroom assignments, yet a different purpose lay within their ordered lines.

The man at the computer tapped a steady rhythm on the keyboard. His laptop's glow was the sole light inside the motel room now that the last breath of daylight glimpsed through a gap in the curtains had faded away. He knew that the world outside moved on, oblivious to his efforts. But he had no need for the outside right now. At this moment his work was here, within these four walls.

The room around him was still, except for the intermittent hum of the aging air conditioner. He reveled in the silence, the isolation that allowed his mind to roam unfettered. With every problem solved, every solution found, he felt a sharp thrill. Each equation was a step on the course he'd chosen, a path designed for retribution. He knew the significance of what he was crafting, the meaning of numbers that would soon be pinned to flesh. It was a message only few could decipher, a secret hidden in plain sight.

This ritual was more than preparation; it was an unspoken pact with a ghost of his past. His mother had understood the elegance of numbers, their power to conceal and reveal. Now, as he wove two crucial equations into the mundane arithmetic, he felt her influence guiding him, an invisible hand steadying his own.

He tapped the final key with a sense of ceremony. He had created two quiz sheets with separate problems to solve for x . The answers to all of those problems but two were whole numbers. The other two were 37.12 and -78.52—unremarkable to the unwary, but loaded with intent to those who caught their significance. Those equations, seemingly sterile and impersonal, were built into his vengeful narrative.

At his signal, the printer whirled to life. The first sheet emerged, warm with the heat of creation, springing from a story untold, a narrative written in blood. As the second

worksheet fell into the out-tray, a smile played at the corner of his lips. He imagined the confusion, the frowns as police detectives and FBI agents poured over these clues, the grim realization dawning upon them that these were not mere academic exercises. Calculations and equations, the language of his twisted inheritance, would be theirs to decipher. He wondered if they felt the same thrill that darted through his veins when solving his mother's cryptic challenges.

He paused, leaning back in his chair to consider the fruits of his labor. It was all coming together, a symphony of chaos orchestrated by his own hand. The opening notes had already been played to perfection.

The new quiz sheets lay printed out, their surfaces littered with numbers and symbols. They seemed innocuous, educational even. And that was the beauty of it—the deceptive simplicity that masked a horror. Crisp and white against the dim glow of the motel room, these worksheets were more than mere paper; they were fragments of his mother's legacy, coded messages from a son to the world about the injustices she had suffered.

His gaze traced over the algebraic equations, each one a masterstroke of misdirection. To an untrained eye, they would seem like schoolwork, but to him, they were a challenge to those who dared unravel their message. The game exhilarated him, this test of wits between himself and the investigators hot on his trail. This wasn't merely about vengeance, after all; it was an intellectual crusade, a validation of the dark education imparted by his mother's twisted tutelage.

He rose, stretching limbs stiffened by hours of immobility. As he turned on the lamp on the bedside table, his gaze landed on the framed photograph he'd put there. His mother's eyes were watching, her presence a constant reminder of the oath he'd taken. Her features are fixed in an expression both severe and satisfied—a reflection of her indomitable will.

“I’m keeping my promise,” he whispered into the quiet room. Her stern expression seemed to nod in approval, and with that silent benediction, he turned away. There was work yet to be done, and the night was waiting.

Even so, his mind wandered, unbidden, to a memory—a younger version of himself in the passenger seat of his mother’s car, her hands gripping the wheel. The world outside blurred into green and brown as they drove through the Virginia countryside, transporting a woman’s body to its final resting place.

They had made two such trips back in those days, each time at a place remote and silent. Once the bodies were buried, she’d handed him a map and compass, her eyes glinting with the thrill of sharing her secret craft.

“Find where we are,” she’d challenged. He had not understood then how deeply the roots of her vengeance had burrowed into their family tree, but he had felt pride in deciphering the coordinates she demanded of him. It was more than a game; it was her legacy.

“Latitude and longitude,” she had said, the words cutting through the cabin’s stillness. His young hands had worked nimbly with pencil and paper, tracing invisible lines across the map that intersected at points only they would understand. The figures he calculated were imbedded in his memory, coordinates that marked the gravesites of Patricia Warren and Clive Brown—the beginning of a saga written in soil and blood.

“Your tale will echo through their ranks,” he murmured, almost affectionately. His words were a solemn oath to the woman who had taught him the cruel calculus of retribution. She was more than a memory—she was the catalyst of his every action, the architect of this grand design. He felt her presence envelop him, lending strength to the resolve that coursed through his veins.

The glow from the laptop screen waned as he closed the lid, a task completed. His lips curled into a faint smile—a private triumph over a game well-played.

He knew that by now, Garrett Fenn and Margaret Whitfield's lifeless forms had been found, each with a worksheet pinned to them like a student's homework returned for parental review. The numbers scrawled on those pages pointed to a place in Blue Ridge Wilderness Park where earth and decay had kept Patricia Warren's secrets for two decades.

Outside, evening had crept into night, and soon would come the time for action. That very night, he would pluck another soul from the world, extinguish another life to illuminate his mother's tale. The appropriate worksheets lay ready, those sterile rows of numbers concealing the chaos they represented. The latitude—37.12—was more than a geographic marker; it was a signal that would lead them, perplex and provoke them.

He arranged the printed sheets neatly, a final act of order before chaos was unleashed. He imagined the scene that would unfold: the discovery, the shock, the flurry of activity as authorities swarmed like so many insects to a flame. They would find the worksheet, and with it, the clue to his next act.

Each murder was a tribute, a twisted homage to the woman who sharpened his intellect and bent it to her will. This kill would bring him one step closer—one whisper nearer—to completing the story they shared.

As the night deepened further and the hour drew near, he steadied himself for what lay ahead. His mother's gaze captured in frozen time of photograph watched silently as her son readied himself to step out into night as the instrument of her unyielding spirit.

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With the worksheets secured in a plain manila folder, he surveyed the room with keen eyes, elevated heartbeat syncing with the ticking clock. Each object seemed to pulse with potential energy—the laptop shut down and stowed away, the portable printer now silent, its function fulfilled. Now the night called to him, its darkness ready to hide his deeds. He opened the motel room door and stared outside.

“I’m keeping my promise, Mother,” he whispered again—not this time to his mother’s image, but rather to the darkness which had become an ally. “Your story will be told. And those who wronged you will pay.”

He stood—a figure in half-light—the embodiment of lessons she’d imparted. There was no room for doubt or hesitation, only the clarity of purpose. He straightened his jacket, smoothed back his hair, and allowed himself one last glance back at the portrait.

The woman in the frame watched on, unblinking, as he shouldered the weight of their shared mission. There was no turning back now; the stage was set, the players unknowingly ready for the next act in this macabre drama.

Tonight, he would commit another murder, pinning the worksheet with the latitude—37.12—to his victim’s remains. Tomorrow, he will strike yet again, depositing the longitude—-78.52—with that body. Those coordinates were pointers to a path leading towards his vendetta’s heart.

But of course, he was not just a killer; he was a creator—an architect of chaos, weaving a complex web of clues and coordinates to baffle and intrigue the investigators who try to follow his trail. It was a game, a challenge to the authorities,

and a fulfillment of the dark education his mother began years ago.

And so, with the quiet click of the motel room door closing behind him, he moved into the night. The photograph remained, waiting for his return—her stern yet proud features watching ... waiting.

CHAPTER TEN

Riley let herself into room number seven of the Wayside Motel and flicked on the light switch. She set her bag down, surveying the space. It was a perfectly ordinary motel room, the walls a nondescript beige and the carpet a faded shade of blue. The crisp white sheets of its two queen-size beds were invitingly smooth. The furnishings were functional, with a small wooden desk and a couple of sturdy chairs, a TV, and a small refrigerator. A single framed print depicted a serene landscape.

She had spent nights in many similar places when she'd been traveling all over the country on BAU cases. In her recent months at home, she'd almost forgotten what it felt like to be a stranger in impersonal surroundings.

With a heavy sigh, Riley moved to the window, hesitating before parting the drapes just enough to glimpse a little bit of this town—Glencoe, Virginia. The quiet street outside offered no cheer; instead, it served as a reminder of how far she was from her daughters and from Bill. Closing the curtains, she turned back to the room, letting the reality settle in. This was her base now—the launchpad for the investigation that awaited her, that she had insisted on undertaking.

She slipped off her shoes with reluctant acceptance, feeling the abrasive carpet fibers against her tired feet. Collapsing onto the bed, she lay there motionless as the day's events began to replay in her mind: the dense canopy of Blue Ridge Wilderness Park, the jarring sight of the grave hidden amid nature's tranquility, the way her breath had caught at the sight of the desiccated bones that had been hidden beneath the forest

floor, and finally, the jarring sight of crime scene tape left wrapped around trees.

Each recollection was like a puzzle piece, falling into place yet yielding no complete picture.

She closed her eyes, attempting to will away one tension that lingered—the friction between her and Agent Ivor Putnam. They were professional adversaries, each driven by their own methods, their own determination to bring order to chaos. Although they were both dedicated to their work with the BAU, their attitudes and methods were uncomfortably at odds.

She remembered how she and Putnam had combed through the leaf litter methodically, side by side yet worlds apart. Their hands moved with practiced precision, disturbing the natural bed where secrets might lay buried. Each scoop of dirt, each sifting of debris, was a silent plea for the victim to reveal her story. She could still feel the grit under her nails, the residue of soil and decay that it would take intense scrubbing to get rid of.

The land had been reticent, holding its tongue as they searched for anything that might have been left by whoever had buried the dead woman—a fragment of clothing, a personal item, a strand of hair—that might serve as a clue. And though the friction between Riley and Putnam had been strong, a shared urgency had propelled them forward. Nevertheless, they had found nothing to shed light on the burial deep in the Blue Ridge Wilderness Park.

Of course, she hadn't told anyone at the site about her internal glimpse of two figures—two distinct personalities—burying the body and marking the grave. She was certain that nobody on the scene—especially Detective Putnam—would have approved of her methods, and her brief insight had presented no details that she could offer as solid clues.

She'd felt guiltily relieved when she and Putnam had finished their fruitless search, and they had parted—he to return to Roanoke, she to come here to this motel.

As Riley tried to get her body and mind to relax, her phone vibrated insistently against the nightstand. Sheriff Austin Hagen's name lit up the screen, pulling her back into the immediacy of her duty.

She'd spoken to Hagen earlier over the phone. He'd explained that he was absent from the crime scene because of his involvement with a rash of burglaries plaguing his jurisdiction in the nearby town of Kipford, but had promised to get back to her. Riley reached for the phone, prepared to dive back into the fray.

"Agent Paige," he greeted her, his tone carrying the warmth of southern hospitality that seemed to seep through the phone line. "Any updates on our Jane Doe?"

"Nothing substantial, Sheriff," she responded. "We completed our initial examination of the scene, but didn't turn up any additional evidence." She paused, considering how much to divulge about Ivor Putnam's departure. "Agent Putnam is headed back to Roanoke to continue his investigation there."

"And you?" The sheriff asked with a note of curiosity in his voice.

"I'm staying in Glencoe tonight," she explained, shifting her position on the bed. "Waiting for a BAU partner to arrive. We'll be focusing on identifying our Jane Doe and trying to define the connection to the recent murders, where the map coordinates were found."

Sheriff Hagen's voice was tinged with the weariness that seemed part and parcel of law enforcement in rural towns.

"Good. I've just wrapped up here in Kipford, and I'm on my way back to

Glencoe. Why don't you and your partner come by my office first thing tomorrow morning? We can coordinate our efforts, plan out the next steps. Maybe the coroner will have made an identification by then."

"Sounds like a plan, Sheriff."

"Great. I appreciate this, Agent Paige. Your being on the case, I mean. I'll see you in the morning then."

"Looking forward to it," she assured him, then their call ended with a soft click, silence returning to her motel room.

Riley found herself appreciating Hagen's attitude. His welcoming tone was soothing after the day's less welcoming encounters—with park superintendent Bern Stewart's brusque efficiency, Ivor Putnam's cool detachment, and even coroner Fritz Jannings' clinical indifference. It was refreshing to hear a friendlier voice, possibly an ally, when her world felt full of adversaries. Perhaps here, in these small towns where secrets often lay buried, she might find someone she could work with.

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Resting the phone on the nightstand again, she remained motionless, her gaze fixed on the device as if it might ring again and dispel a fog of uncertainty that troubled her.

Meredith's parting words earlier that day had planted a seed of suspense in her already crowded mind—a mystery partner was en route to join her in Glencoe. The “someone” he'd promised could be anyone, but she knew with a certainty rooted in that day's terse exchanges that Bill was out of the question. If he were on his way to join her, he'd surely have said so.

As Riley contemplated the unknowns, she felt the need for connection, for something grounded and familiar. She reached for her phone again, dialing the number that connected her to home—to normalcy. As the call connected, she pictured the townhouse in Fredericksburg, its rooms filled with laughter and life, so distant from the impersonal confines of her current lodging.

“Mom! Are you coming home tonight?” April's voice filtered through the line.

“Not tonight, sweetheart,” she said. The pang of guilt was sharp, familiar. “I'm staying in Glencoe tonight. How are things at home?”

“Everything's fine,” April assured her, her voice expressing an independence that both comforted and concerned Riley. “Let me get Jilly.”

There was a shuffling sound as April put Jilly on speakerphone. Riley pictured them, a pair of silhouettes against the backdrop of their cozy family room where they often lingered in the evening.

Both girls were curious about the case and started asking probing questions. Riley hesitated, torn between her instincts to protect and the knowledge that her daughters had already weathered storms many adults would never face. April's laughter trickled through the line—a gentle nudge reminding Riley that these were no ordinary girls.

“Come on, Mom,” April chided. “You can’t say anything to shock me. I’ve even been kidnapped, remember? I handled that; I can handle knowing whatever you’re doing.”

Jilly's voice joined the chorus, roughened by a life that had demanded she grow up far too quickly. “Yeah, and you know the kind of stuff I’ve been through. We’re not kids anymore.”

Yes, you are, she almost said. But it was true that they were no ordinary kids.

Riley took a moment, the silence stretching out as she wrestled with the dual forces of her nature—the mother bear and the federal agent. She'd heard in April's voice a mix of maturity and a child reaching out to her mother. But it was Jilly's veneer of toughness, an armor forged from too many battles at too young an age, that convinced Riley to give them more details about her day. They deserved to hear the true story—or at least as much of it as she could give without crossing lines of what had to be limited to agents alone.

“Alright,” she conceded. “But let’s keep it just between us, okay?”

She began carefully, navigating the narrow path between honesty and discretion, sharing the skeleton of the case while leaving the flesh of horrors safely unsaid.

“Those quiz sheets you girls helped me with,” she said, “as you know, they were coded messages, map coordinates. And I was assigned to check out the location they marked.”

“Way out there in the woods,” Jilly said. “Is Bill with you?”

I wish, Riley thought.

“No, he ... well, he didn’t get assigned to work with me,” she said instead.

“Tell me you didn’t go off alone,” April protested.

April’s worried tone cautioned her against being too honest. She figured she could fudge on the truth just a little.

“No, of course not. There was another BAU agent and a park superintendent on the scene with me. Then some park rangers and other officials.”

“OK. What did you find?” Jilly demanded.

Riley paused, feeling the weight of their silence on the other end of the line. “We found human remains, an old grave buried deep in the woods. Don’t know what that means yet.”

“Alright, girls,” Riley’s voice softened after sharing a few more details. “That’s all for tonight. But remember, I’m just a phone call away if you need anything.”

“We will, Mom,” April responded dutifully. “Stay safe out there.”

“And catch that bad guy!” Jilly chimed in, her tone playful yet sincere.

Riley chuckled lightly at her daughter’s enthusiasm. “I’ll do my best,” she promised.

“Love you, Mom,” they both said in unison.

“I love you too, girls. Goodnight,” Riley replied warmly before ending the call.

As the connection clicked off, Riley lay back against the pillows.

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Her mind whirled, replaying the conversation, and she marveled at the young women her daughters were becoming. April, with her hazel eyes so like Riley's own, revealed an intellect and a spirit that outshone the darkness of her past. No longer a victim but a conqueror, April's future was bright with promise as she prepared to enter Jefferson Bell University.

And Jilly—her Jilly—had come such a long way from the angry, frightened, vulnerable girl she had been. Once nearly lost to the streets, now thriving under their roof, her laughter was a daily reminder of life's capacity for joy amid sorrow.

And then there was Bill. He had stepped into the role of father figure so naturally that it seemed he was always meant to fill that space. He offered guidance without expectation, his steady hand on the rudder helping to navigate the unpredictable waters of raising two strong-willed girls.

The way April and Jilly looked up to him, sought his approval—it was more than Riley could have hoped for. They were no longer just survivors; they were a family, knitted together by shared struggles and triumphs.

She closed her eyes, letting the feeling envelop her. In this moment, the weight of the investigation lifted slightly, and she breathed in the solace of her makeshift family's invisible embrace.

What am I doing in the field again? She wondered.

She reminded herself that she'd been spurred back into action by Mrs. Whitfield's murder. Even so, she couldn't help wondering—had insisting on taking a case in the

field been a mistake?She could be at home having a normal evening, just as she had done every night in recent years.

A knock shattered the stillness of the room.Riley's eyes snapped open, her body tensing as years of instinct honed by danger and suspicion surged to the forefront.She rose from the bed, every sense heightened, the warmth of family thoughts receding into the corners of her mind.

She approached the door with her hand hovering over the sidearm still strapped to her shoulder—old habits died hard, even in the rural quiet of Glencoe.

Peering through the peephole, she was surprised by the face that she saw—unexpected but not unwelcome.

Riley unlocked the door and swung it open.There stood a familiar young agent, her bright blue eyes sparkling with enthusiasm, her blonde hair like a halo in the fading light.

“Hi, Agent Paige!”Ann Marie Esmer exclaimed, her smile wide and infectious.“I guess we’re partners!”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

As she stood there at the motel door with her go-bag in her hand, Ann Marie realized that her arrival was a surprise to Agent Paige.Then, mercifully, the senior agent said, “Come in,” and moved aside so she could enter.

“Agent Paige, I’m here to assist in any way I can,” Ann Marie said as she stepped through the door.“I understand this partnership is just for the current situation.Agent Meredith informed me that you’ve stepped away from teaching briefly to focus on this case and ... needed a partner.”

After another slightly awkward moment, Riley added, “Let’s sit down and talk.”

Ann Marie plopped on the corner of one of the beds. She was a bit nervous about this assignment, even though she had worked with Riley Paige once before. On her very first case, Ann Marie had been sent to help chase down a killer who took on the persona of a murderous urban legend called Goatman. But when Agent Paige had switched to teaching, and Ann Marie had started working with her former partner, Bill Jeffreys.

When Riley took a seat on the other bed and nodded, Ann-Marie continued.

“Agent Meredith also mentioned that Bill Jeffreys is transitioning to training duties before his retirement, working with newbies. So it seems I’ll soon be paired with someone new permanently. After this, I mean. Until then, I’m fully committed to this investigation. I’m so excited about working with you again! That other time was a blast, a really great experience for me!”

Then Ann Marie felt a familiar twinge of self-doubt. She was all too aware of her tendency to bubble over with cheer, to fill silences with chatter and optimism.

“Okay Agent Esmer,” Riley responded. “But we’re past formalities, remember? It’s Riley and Ann Marie.”

Ann-Marie felt herself relax.

“Right, Riley,” she replied, tasting the freedom of informality. She hoped this small gesture would pave the way for a smoother partnership, one where she could learn and grow under the guidance of someone she deeply respected.

“We’ve had two recent murders,” Riley started. “One in Roanoke, another in Slippery Rock. I’m sure you’ve seen the preliminary report. Both victims were found with

algebra quiz sheets pinned to their backs—distinctive ones.”

She pulled out a file, laying it open like a map.

“And today,” Riely continued, pointing to a photograph marked with coordinates, “a body was discovered at the exact location these quiz sheets pointed to.”

As Riley continued, Ann Marie leaned forward, her elbows on her knees as anticipation prickled her skin. She felt a rush of adrenaline at the prospect of tomorrow’s work. How could she possibly rest when the dawn promised the next step in their search for a killer?

“Sheriff Hagen will be expecting us in his office tomorrow morning,” Riley said, her voice weary.

“Maybe by then we’ll have an ID on the body,” Ann Marie suggested.

She pictured the dense Virginia woods of Blue Ridge Wilderness Park, the soil disturbed to reveal secrets long buried.

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“You know,” she added, “this could mean we’re looking for more than one killer, considering the time span these murders cover. And there’s no doubt about their obsession with math—with mathematicians even. It’s peculiar, could definitely help us narrow down the suspect base.”

Riley’s gaze was distant, the toll of the day etched in the lines around her eyes.

“Um, Riley,” Ann Marie said cautiously. “I get the feeling that this is no ordinary case for you.”

Riley looked at her with slight surprise.

“That’s very astute of you, Ann Marie,” she said, obviously meaning it. “As a matter of fact, it’s highly personal. You see, Margaret Whitfield was my favorite teacher in high school. She molded me in more ways than I can count. That’s why I insisted on getting assigned to this case. I just couldn’t stay out of it.”

Riley squinted, and her face tightened with suppressed anger.

“We’ve got to find Mrs. Whitfield’s killer, Ann Marie,” she said. “We’ve just got to.”

Ann Marie felt deeply touched at Riley’s show of personal vulnerability.

“And we will, Riley,” she said. “I promise to help you make that happen.”

Riley looked at her again, and this time she smiled.

“Meanwhile, let’s not forget to look after ourselves,” Riley said, the softness in her tone belying the steel within. “We need to eat, regroup. I don’t know about you, but a shower and some sleep wouldn’t go amiss either.”

“Of course, I should go check in to a room,” Ann Marie said.

“You might as well take the extra bed. We can sort that out with the office in the morning.”

“Food then. What are you in the mood for? Pizza, Chinese?”

“Anything’s fine,” Riley replied, standing up and stretching the weariness from her limbs. “A hamburger will do.”

“Got it. Burger it is,” Ann Marie affirmed with a brisk nod, already reaching for her phone to order. She watched as Riley retreated towards the bathroom, an embodiment of strength and investigative brilliance moving to wash away the grime of the day’s work.

As the call connected and Ann Marie placed the order, she felt something akin to camaraderie. Riley Paige, with her personal battles and relentless pursuits, was both enigma and mentor to her. Despite the grim nature of their task, there was comfort in shared purpose. Tonight, they were two agents seeking sustenance, readying themselves for tomorrow.

She selected a local diner with an online reputation for its juicy burgers and efficient delivery—simple and straightforward, just like Riley wanted. With the order confirmed, Ann Marie set the phone down and allowed herself a moment to absorb the silence of the room, punctuated only by the faint hum of the motel’s aging air conditioner.

A night charged with the energy of an impending storm lay ahead, and Ann Marie felt its electricity in the air. There was no denying the rush that came with the chase, the puzzle pieces fitting together one by one, leading them deeper into the mind of a killer obsessed with mathematical precision.

*

Robert Nash leaned back in his chair. The cone of light from the desk lamp cast a warm halo over his work area, illuminating the papers strewn across the desk, each one scrawled with equations and theorem proofs. This room was his haven, a place of ordered thought where the chaos of the outside world couldn't reach.

The walls, lined with shelves heavy with academic journals, seemed to nod in silent approval of his lifelong dedication. Here, among these quiet companions, Robert felt content. It was an unspoken conversation between him and the great mathematical minds that had come before, their theories and conjectures living on in the musty scent of aged paper.

Reading glasses resting on the bridge of his nose, he reached for the next stack of assignments. They were not the work of his own students, but rather those of Cliff Baird, a neighbor and protégé, now a high school teacher who still looked to him for guidance. Robert's red pen moved across the pages, noting critique and approval in equal measure.

To Robert, grading these papers was not simply a favor for a former student; it was a reaffirmation of his identity. Mathematics had been his first true love, and even now, it bound him to the world. The rhythm of his pen was a heartbeat, steady and reassuring in its consistency.

The gentle hum of the television filtered into Robert's awareness, punctuated by bursts of laughter from Louella. She was watching one of those new comedies—the

kind that seemed to bridge generational gaps with ease.

“Robert,” her voice called out, tinged with a warmth that could melt the chill of any evening, “why don’t you join me? This show is hilarious!”

“I’ll be just a little longer, dear,” he replied.

The laughter from the other room was a reminder of the world outside his calculations, the everyday joys he too often set aside for numbers and theories. He looked forward to turning his attention to her in a little while, maintaining a balance between his lifelong passion and the presence of the woman who shared his life—and his heart.

A deep sense of fulfillment settled in his chest, knowing that each red mark on these papers would be guiding Cliff, and all those who had sat in his classroom, toward their own eureka moments. This was his legacy—not in the books that lined his shelves, but in the wisdom imparted to eager learners whose faces now flickered across his memory.

He missed the classroom, the direct impact of shaping keen minds ready to explore the vast landscapes of mathematics.

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Glancing down at his watch, he saw that the time was much later than he had intended. With an affectionate shake of his head, he thought of Cliff, likely eager for the feedback on his work. The crisp rustle of graded assignments accompanied Robert as he placed them into a neat folder. He shrugged on his jacket, the fabric familiar and comforting against his skin.

“Going out for a bit, Lou!” he called towards the TV room, where the sounds of the latest comedy mingled with the muffled din of canned laughter. Louella, immersed in her show, didn’t respond.

As he passed by the warm glow of the TV room, he noted her silhouette, comfortably ensconced in their well-worn sofa. He smiled, unseen, and went on his way, certain in his heart that he’d be back before she even realized he was gone.

He stepped outside, locking the door behind him with a soft click that seemed to resonate in the quiet neighborhood. The street was peaceful, blanketed in the hush of late hours, with only the occasional flicker of a television screen visible through nearby windows.

The papers tucked under his arm felt like a tangible connection to his past, an echo of the mentorship he once provided within the walls of Hindemith College. As he walked, the familiar path ahead was illuminated by sparse streetlights casting their glow on the pavement.

Robert’s steady pace brought him alongside the ancient oaks that marked the boundary between his world and Cliff’s. But as the shadows writhed beneath the oaks, a sudden chill crept down his spine. He halted, his instincts prickling as he strained to

see through the darkness that played tricks on the eye.

“Probably nothing,” he muttered to himself, though the unease refused to ebb away. It wasn’t like him to entertain such imaginative fears; he was a man of logic, numbers, and probabilities. Yet, something about this evening didn’t add up.

A glint caught his attention—perhaps just a reflection off some nocturnal creature’s eyes or maybe a trick of his own mind. Nonetheless, it was enough to stir his heartbeat into a quicker tempo. There was a sense of being watched, of not being alone. With a shake of his head, Robert dismissed the eerie feeling as best he could and hastened his steps, his focus now on reaching the safety and familiarity of Cliff’s front porch.

Then panic surged as an unexpected force collided with him from behind. The stack of papers, once meticulously ordered and graded, took flight, scattering across the pavement. Robert’s body lurched forward, his hands groping the air for balance. A lifetime spent in pursuit of knowledge had not prepared him for this primal struggle.

The attacker was relentless, a silent predator overpowering Robert’s feeble resistance. He felt the strength in his legs wane as he tried to right himself, but the force was too strong, too insistent. His mind screamed for logic to solve this, but there was no rational answer to the chaos that enveloped him.

A cord snapped tight around Robert’s neck, severing the sound that had risen in his throat—a startled cry cut short by the brutal grip of his unseen assailant. Reflexively, he clawed at the unyielding fibers digging into his skin. His pulse throbbed against the constricting loop, each heartbeat a drumbeat of terror.

Silence was the most chilling aspect of it all—the quiet efficiency with which his life was being squeezed away. There was no gloating, no final words exchanged, just the methodical tightening of the cord and the stark realization of his helplessness.

As darkness crept into the edges of his vision, Robert's world began to spin, a carousel of black spots and blurred streetlights. Desperately, he gasped for air that wouldn't come, his lungs burning with the need to survive. This was not how he'd imagined his last moments: not in violence, but in peace, surrounded by his beloved books and the soft laughter of Louella.

With his senses dimming, Robert's thoughts fractured like light through a prism. The image of Louella, absorbed in her television program, flickered in his mind. Her laughter, usually a beacon of warmth in his life, now seemed distant, an echo from another lifetime. It was a cruel twist of fate that she sat just a stone's throw away, blissfully unaware of the brutal theft of time taking place.

He thought of the students he had mentored over the years, the young minds he'd kindled with the love for numbers, the challenges they'd overcome together, all the potential futures that would unfold without his guidance. There were so many lessons left untaught, so many equations unfinished. In those fleeting moments, Robert mourned not for himself but for the stolen opportunities to make even the smallest difference in another's life—a final lament of a teacher to the very end.

The world around Robert Nash narrowed, his existence, reduced to the primal fight for air. As his body slumped, defeated by the silent predator that lurked in the shadows, he slipped into the void. There was no more resistance, no more pain—only resignation. And then, quiet.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The morning sunlight sharpened edges, casting the world in a clarity that Riley often longed for in her cases. She was waiting outside a car rental office where Ann Marie was returning the vehicle she had driven here from Quantico. The day wasn't off to a great start—the coffee from motel breakfast had been bitter and the toast burnt. That hadn't dampened the younger agents' spirits, but Riley was impatient to get on with

the day.

Ann Marie stepped out from the rental office and got into Riley's sedan, her usual vibrant energy unscathed.

"You wouldn't believe it, Riley," she began, her voice bubbling as Riley drove the short journey towards Glencoe's Police Headquarters. "The guy at the counter was so flustered when I mentioned the mileage mismatch on their system. You should have seen his face!" Her laughter filled the car, infectious and bright. "He had to call in his manager. It was like they'd never dealt with a discrepancy before."

As Riley drove, she found herself amused by the way that Ann Marie could find an adventure in even mundane tasks like returning a rental car. Ann Marie definitely functioned on a different vibratory level from herself, and now she felt pretty used to it—even energized by it.

When they pulled into the parking lot of the police headquarters, she felt herself being drawn back into the gravity of their case. As they walked inside, the police station turned out to be a familiar scene, with officers hustling all around, their movements purposeful as the unmistakable aroma of more stale coffee assaulted her senses.

The woman at the front desk directed them to the Sheriff's office, saying that their visit was expected. As they walked through the bullpen and continued along a hallway, Riley noticed the curious glances they were getting. She knew it was unusual for FBI agents to appear to the small town scene. She returned the nods from the officers, her expression neutral.

They reached the door labeled 'Sheriff Austin Hagen,' pausing only for the briefest of moments before stepping into what Riley hoped would be the place where progress was being made.

She extended her hand in greeting, her grip firm but not challenging, as she met the eyes of Sheriff Austin Hagen. His own clasp was like his face—solid and worn from years of service. The lines in his skin told a story of exposure to the harshness of both weather and human nature, while the glint in his eyes spoke of a sharp mind.

“Agents,” he greeted them, his voice resonating with a touch of Southern gravel. He gestured toward the chairs opposite his cluttered desk, a landscape of files and reports that mirrored the busy routine of a sheriff’s life. “Glad you’re here. I’ve got news about our Jane Doe.”

As they sat down, Riley’s mind registered the sparse decoration of the police chief’s office. A few commendations on the wall seemed a testament to the man’s dedication rather than vanity.

Hagen didn’t dally with preambles.

“The body you found yesterday in Blue Ridge Wilderness Park? She’s been identified as Patricia Warren, a math professor from Boutell College right here in Glencoe. She disappeared without a trace 20 years ago. I’d more than half-suspected that beforehand, but didn’t feel ready to say so. It was quite the scandal at the time.”

Riley felt a jolt. Another mathematician! Patricia Warren—a woman who had a life, a history in this very town.

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“And the report states that it wasn’t a natural death,” the police chief continued. “Dr. Jannings found evidence of strangulation. The hyoid bone, a small horseshoe-shaped structure nestled in the neck, was fractured.”

“That’s a sure sign that a lot of force was exerted on it,” Ann Marie said.

Riley had been surprised before by the young agent’s knowledge of such physical details, based on her earlier years of work at her father’s Georgetown mortuary. She was not surprised by the verdict of violent death. She’d been pretty sure the victim had been murdered based on her fleeting sensations at the gravesite. But those intuitions weren’t evidence that she could bring up in this setting.

Wanting the sheriff to reveal more about the victim, she asked, “What made her disappearance scandalous?”

Sheriff Hagen settled back into his chair. There was a twinkle in his eyes, the kind that came from carrying tales that had ripened with time, their details now into local lore.

“Patricia had a famously turbulent marriage with Levon Warren, another math professor at Boutell. Their relationship was like a powder keg, always on the verge of exploding.” He paused, his hands motioning vaguely as if trying to grasp the fragments of the story still floating in his mind.

She could almost hear the crackling tension between the Warrens, the kind of volatile love-hate that left scars invisible to the eye. It was motive, it was background, it was the dark undercurrent of human emotion that often led to tragedy. She listened attentively as the sheriff continued.

“Students used to report Levon storming into Patricia’s classes, criticizing her teaching methods right in front of everyone. From what I’ve been told, those scenes could get pretty wild—and even a bit scary.”

Ann Marie’s eyes lighted up with interest. “Sounds like Levon might have been a prime suspect when she disappeared.”

Hagen’s response came with a grim smile. “You’ve got that right, Agent Esmer. Levon was indeed our main person of interest for a time. And here’s the kicker - he showed absolutely no sadness over her disappearance. Denied any foul play, of course, but his lack of grief was...unsettling.”

“But you couldn’t prove anything?” Riley’s question was both an inquiry and an acknowledgment of the frustrations they all faced in their line of work.

The sheriff’s hands spread in a gesture of defeat. “Not a damn thing. No body, no evidence. But a shadow has hung over Levon’s reputation ever since.”

“Tell us more about their marriage,” Riley said. “What was at the root of all this conflict?”

Sheriff Hagen sighed, a long exhale that seemed to deflate the very air around them. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, deepening the lines age had carved into his skin.

“It was a perfect storm of professional jealousy and personal resentment. Levon was always envious that Patricia had been accepted into the Virginia Educators for Excellence in Mathematics—VEEM for short. It’s a prestigious group, and they’d never even consider Levon for membership.”

Riley nodded, absorbing the information. VEEM—she had heard of it. And she knew

that to be part of such an organization was a mark of distinction; to be rejected by it, a wound that could fester. She pictured Levon Warren, his pride smarting with every accolade bestowed upon his wife, every mention of her name in circles where his was conspicuously absent.

“Professional jealousy can be a powerful motive,” she mused aloud.

“Let me guess.” Ann Marie said. “Patricia didn’t just join VEEM, she excelled there?”

Hagen’s nod carried a hint of admiration. “She became the president of the organization. That’s when Levon’s jealousy turned to open fury.”

“And Patricia? How did she handle Levon’s behavior?” Riley asked.

“She gave as good as she got,” Sheriff Hagen replied. “Patricia was openly contemptuous of the Cipher Society, a group Levon was deeply involved with.”

“A, uh, cipher society?” Ann Marie asked, her voice brimming with interest. “Wow, that sounds mysterious. What’s their main focus?”

“The Cipher Society is...well, it’s a bit of a fringe group. They’re obsessed with mathematical codes, prophecies, that sort of thing. Levon was a proud, active member. And by the time Patricia disappeared, their marriage was at its breaking point. Everyone who knew them was just waiting for something to give.”

A domestic battlefield ... a society that focused on secret codes ... the description of Levon, consumed by his association with this secretive cabal so remote from his wife’s academic triumphs—the puzzle that was Patricia and Levon Warren’s life all caught Riley’s attention. Those old bits of history might well point toward whoever had left math problems pinned to the victims of recent murders. The connection was incomplete, but every variable they uncovered pushed them in the same direction,

toward an answer that Riley feared might be darker than anyone anticipated.

“Where’s Levon Warren now?”she asked.

Hagen leaned forward.“Last I heard, he was still living in the same house he shared with Patricia.And despite everything, he’s managed to keep his position at Boutell College.

The revelation settled heavily on the room.Ann Marie was visibly taken aback by the notion of Levon Warren living unscathed by scandal or suspicion.

“After all that?He must be one hell of a professor.”

“Or have some powerful friends,” Riley added.

“Actually, he’s got an outstanding reputation in the math world,” Hagen said.“Almost a legend.Sort of a mad genius, you might say.”

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Ann Marie nodded. “Well, this certainly puts Levon back at the top of our suspect list. We need to talk to him.”

“Agreed,” Riley said, her tone more cautious, tempering the air of excitement that had begun to take hold. “But we should approach this carefully. We don’t want to tip him off that we’re coming to see him.”

“I’ll see if I can locate him,” Sheriff Hagen said.

He reached for his phone, and with a few brief murmurs into the receiver, he confirmed what they hoped to hear—Levon Warren was not scheduled to teach today and was likely at home. Hagen pushed back from his desk with a decisive motion, the chair’s wheels rolling smoothly across the well-worn floor.

“I’ll drive you there,” he offered, a practical edge to his voice as he stood. His height seemed to underscore the solemnity of the task ahead. “It’s not far, and I know the area well. We can interview him together.”

Riley and Ann Marie followed Hagen through the bustling precinct. They took their seats in his patrol car, Riley in the passenger seat and Ann Marie in back.

The morning sun was climbing higher now, its light filtering through the windshield as Sheriff Hagen’s vehicle coursed through the streets of Glencoe. As Riley watched the landscape roll by, she recognized a comfort in the rhythm of the town, a domestic warmth that belied the coldness of the crime they were investigating.

Hagen’s voice cut through Riley’s introspection as he pointed out various

landmarks—the college campus with its stately buildings, the local diner where students and professors alike debated theories over cups of bitter coffee, and the bookstores and cafés that marked the territory of academia.

“Patricia and Levon were fixtures here,” Hagen said, his tone imbued with the familiarity of decades spent patrolling these streets. “Their brilliance was as much a part of Glencoe as these buildings.”

As they turned down a tree-lined street, Riley let the hum of the engine draw her into a state of heightened awareness. The closer they got to their destination, the more she sensed the presence of ghosts—both personal and professional—that refused to be laid to rest.

Her mind wandered to Mrs. Margaret Whitfield, the algebra teacher whose kindness had been such a help during her tumultuous high school years. The recent murders had snatched away that gentle soul, and now here Riley was, approaching a suspect who might know why—and for all she knew, might somehow be responsible.

“That’s the house,” Hagen said, indicating a two-story structure that spoke of academia and tenure, of chalkboards filled with equations and theories debated over dinner tables.

Riley tapped against her knee, each beat a silent question—was the man who lived within these walls capable of murder?

She took in a deep breath, readying herself. She knew the academic community was tight-knit; whispers of scandal and tragedy never truly faded. They became part of the collective memory, shaping perceptions and casting questions over reputations. That they sometimes came to a boiling point didn’t surprise her.

As the vehicle slowed to a stop in front of Levon Warren’s home, Riley Paige took a

moment to collect her thoughts before stepping out. The house was disarmingly charming, with its white picket fence and rose bushes that seemed to wave a friendly welcome—so at odds with what she knew of the man who still lived there. Levon Warren had been shielded by his intellect and the passing of time. But the truth had a way of surfacing, often when least expected. Riley glanced back at Ann Marie, who returned the look with steely determination.

Looks can be deceiving, Riley reminded herself, touching her firearm in its holster as she got out of the car.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

After Sheriff Hagen knocked on mathematician's door, there was a brief pause, then the door swung open. Riley's eyes swept over the man who stood there, framed against the dim light of the interior. She noted the way his clothes hung loosely on his frame, the hint of defiance in his posture, the guarded look in his eyes.

"Mr. Warren," the police chief explained, "I'm Sheriff Hagen. These are FBI Agents Paige and Esmer. We need to speak with you about a matter of utmost importance."

Warren's eyebrows rose slightly, but he stepped back, gesturing for them to enter. "Of course, come in."

As they moved through the door, Riley kept her eyes on their host. Levon Warren was in his late sixties, and she saw that he had probably once been robust and strong, but time had taken its toll. His shoulders curved inward, and his hands betrayed a slight tremor. She could imagine him having had the strength to take a life in the past, but certainly not in the present.

"Thank you, Mr. Warren," Hagen continued, his tone indicating that the pleasantries were over and the serious business at hand was about to begin. Riley realized that

although this sheriff might not have her ability to slip into the minds of killers, he had an instinct for the ebb and flow of human interaction—a talent that would make him a formidable presence in any investigation.

The interior of Levon Warren's house was a jarring change from its charming exterior. Books and papers were strewn about, covering every available surface, and whiteboards plastered the walls. The air was thick with the musty smell of old paper and neglect.

"Quite the collection," Ann Marie murmured, as she entered behind Riley.

The clutter was not just physical. Complex mathematical equations were scrawled on the whiteboards and every scattered sheet of paper was marked with scribbled lines and numbers intertwining like the roots of an ancient tree. To Riley, it seemed like the work of a mind teetering on the edge between brilliance and madness.

Clearing his throat, Chief Hagen glanced at the two agents before turning to face their host. Hagen had taken a seat as if the disorder around him was the most natural state in the world.

There were no other unoccupied chairs, so the three newcomers remained standing. Riley thought there was something unsettlingly serene about this man. Her instincts told her to be wary.

"Mr. Warren," Hagen began, "I'm afraid we have some difficult news." He paused, the words catching slightly as though reluctant to disturb the quiet madness of the house. "We've discovered human remains in Blue Ridge Wilderness Park. We believe...the coroner has reported that they belong to your wife, Patricia."

Hagen simply nodded blandly.

“I’m not surprised,” he replied, his voice disturbingly even. “I’ve known all along she was dead. It was only a matter of time before the truth came out.”

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Riley's gaze flickered to Ann Marie, registering the same perplexity that mirrored her own. He hadn't even tried to sound like a grieving spouse. The room, with its chaos of academic debris and neglect, seemed a physical manifestation of Levon Warren's unsettling calm.

"Mr. Warren," Riley said, stepping closer to him. "Can you tell us more about what you mean? You seem...prepared for this news."

Warren's eyes ignited with a feverish intensity, the kind that hinted at long nights wrestling with demons both real and imagined.

"Oh, I've been prepared for years," he asserted, his tone that of an instructor. "You see, I warned Patricia. I told her what would happen if she continued to rise in the ranks of VEEM. But she wouldn't listen."

Riley absorbed this revelation, wondering what Patricia Warren might have been involved with that warranted such a dire warning.

"VEEM," Warren spat out the acronym like a curse, distaste marking deep lines into his already weather-worn face. "I suppose you don't know the truth about the so-called Virginia Educators for Excellence in Mathematics. A front for sinister forces that have been pulling strings for decades."

The assertion struck Riley as ludicrous, yet chillingly possible—a blend of conspiracy theory and potential lead. Her mind raced through the profiles of secret societies and covert operations she'd studied over the years.

“Pulling strings?”she echoed.“Mr.Warren, are you suggesting that VEEM had something to do with your wife’s death?”

The laugh that erupted from Warren was devoid of humor, a bitter sound that resonated through the cluttered room.

“Suggesting?”he echoed, a sardonic edge sharpening his tone.“I’m telling you outright.VEEM’s hierarchy eliminated her.”His eyes, sharp and unyielding, met Riley’s with an intensity that bordered on fanaticism.“It’s all part of their grand design, a mathematical equation of power and control that spans centuries.”

Riley exchanged a glance with Ann Marie, whose eyebrows were raised in silent question.If what Warren said held any shred of truth, they were dealing with something far more complex than a simple murder case.But it seemed too far-fetched to even imagine.

Levon Warren launched into an elaborate explanation, speaking of complex mathematical formulas, his voice growing more animated with each sentence.According to him, these equations were keys that unlocked patterns predicting historical events, assassinations, and global conspiracies.

“Look here,” Warren gestured wildly toward a sprawling whiteboard, its surface a chaotic mesh of numbers and symbols.“You see this?This formula predicts the fall of political regimes, the exact dates of market crashes!”

Riley listened with a growing sense of unease.The man’s fervor was strong, his belief in his theories unshakable.Patricia’s murder was not just a random act of violence in his eyes but a carefully calculated move woven into a vast tapestry of conspiracy.Not being a mathematician herself, she felt eerily helpless against this onslaught of irrationality.

“Patricia...she figured out too much,” he continued, his hands trembling. “She was about to expose them, so they silenced her.”

Then Ann Marie spoke up cheerfully, eyes wide with an innocent expression, “Mr. Warren, we understand you once applied to join VEEM yourself. Can you tell us about that?”

Warren’s face darkened.

“Yes, I tried. Once or twice, in hopes of infiltrating their ranks and blowing the whole thing up. But it was futile.” His words were bitter, tinged with the venom of long-held grudges. “They recognized me as a threat, you see. They knew I was onto them, that I could expose their machinations. So they rigged the system against me.”

As Warren continued his diatribe, Riley watched him closely. The feverish light in his eyes grew brighter, igniting with his convictions. She found herself struck by the stark contrast between this man and the brilliant mathematician he must once have been—and perhaps still was. But lost now in a labyrinth of paranoia and delusion, this man was likely a shell of his former self, haunted by specters of betrayal and revenge. She felt a pang of something akin to sorrow for him. How cruelly the mind could turn on itself, warping despair into such consuming madness.

“Mr. Warren,” she said gently, her voice modulating to a tone she reserved for the most delicate of revelations, “I’d like you to tell us about your membership in a different organization. The Cipher Society.”

Levon Warren’s transformation was almost theatrical. The agitation that had been etched into his features smoothed away as if brushed by an invisible hand. His spine straightened, his eyes cleared, and a subtle, dignified pride swelled within him. “Yes,” he began with a newfound steadiness, “I’m a high-ranking ‘constant’ in the Cipher Society.”

Riley observed him with keen interest, her mind meticulously filing away each fluctuation in his mood and mannerisms. She remembered that in math, “constant” referred to a value or number that does not change, regardless of the circumstances.

Warren carried on, his voice laced with a respect that teetered on the edge of worship. “At the very top, we have The Prime,” he began, “Then come us Constants, there are six of us. Following us are the Variables and then the Equations. At the bottom, you’ll find the Null Set.”

As Warren spoke, Riley could almost see this life unraveling, revealing a man once celebrated for his intellect, now buried within layers of secrecy and esoteric beliefs. It was like watching a building in the throes of demolition, the once-proud structure collapsing into rubble.

“We’re the true seekers of knowledge,” Warren asserted, leaning forward in his chair as if sharing the most profound of secrets. His voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper, “The ones who can see through the veil of lies that VEEM and their ilk have draped over the world.”

Riley listened intently, her gaze never wavering from his animated face. She recognized this look—the glint of someone who believed they held the key to unlocking the world’s mysteries. It was a look she’d seen in the eyes of others: the obsessed, the driven, the lost.

Warren’s next words caught her off guard, “And I can help you. I can bring the full force of the Society’s resources to bear on this investigation.” He leaned even closer, his excitement palpable. “We have methods, tools that your FBI could only dream of. Together, we could crack this case wide open.”

Her voice was steady as she addressed Levon Warren, her words weaving through the dense air of the cluttered living room.

“Mr. Warren, while we appreciate your offer, we need to conduct this investigation through official channels. We can’t involve outside organizations, no matter how...resourceful they might be.”

Warren’s reaction came like a thunderclap, shattering the tense stillness that had settled over the room. His face, previously illuminated by a sense of self-importance, now twisted into a snarl of indignation. The air seemed to vibrate with his anger as he bellowed accusations, “Of course! I should have known! You’re not here to solve Patricia’s murder at all, are you? You’re just like the rest of them, puppets of the system!”

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Riley stood rooted to the spot, her pulse quickening in response to the verbal onslaught. She'd seen rage like this before—unhinged and unbound—and it never failed to remind her of the unpredictable nature of human behavior.

Warren's next words were aimed at Hagen, "And I suppose you're about to treat me like the lawmen did 20 years ago—as a suspect in my own wife's murder."

"Mr. Warren," Riley said, her voice calm, "we understand your frustration, but our priority is to uncover the truth."

Beside her, Ann Marie remained uncharacteristically silent, her expression schooled into one of professional concern.

"Please, Mr. Warren, let's keep this civil," Hagen spoke up, his voice the embodiment of reason. "We're not here to accuse, merely to gather information."

But Riley knew that reasoning with someone so ensnared by their own narrative was like trying to grasp smoke. Warren's mind was a fortress, barricaded by years of perceived persecution and betrayal. Logic had no currency in such a place.

Levon Warren's accusations continued with a sharp note of paranoia. His finger jabbed at them with each syllable, as if he could pin their guilt to the walls with his words. "VEEM has gotten to you too, haven't they? Or maybe you're here to silence me, to stop the Cipher Society from exposing the truth!"

Sheriff Hagen, ever-steady, stepped forward, his voice a low, seeking to soothe the inflamed situation.

“Mr. Warren, please. We’re only trying to find out what happened to your wife.”

The plea was met with an icy glare, one that spoke volumes of Warren’s years spent entrenched in mistrust and conspiracy. Riley knew they were losing him, any hope of cooperation unraveling fast.

“Get out! All of you!” Warren’s voice boomed, filling the room with his defiance. “I won’t be a pawn in your game. The Cipher Society won’t be intimidated by your federal thuggery!”

His declaration was a door slamming shut, the finality of it resonating through the cluttered space. Riley exchanged a quick glance with Ann Marie, and then with Hagen. With a subtle nod, she signaled it was time to retreat. There was no sense in fanning the flames of his outrage further. They would get nothing more from the old mathematician right now.

They moved toward the door in a quiet procession, leaving behind the pandemonium of Warren’s making. The sunlight outside was harsh after the dim interior, and Riley blinked away the disorientation.

“Agent Paige?” Ann Marie’s voice was tentative, her eyes still reflecting the turmoil they had left behind.

“Let’s debrief in the car,” Hagen said.

But as they headed toward the sheriff’s vehicle, the persistent vibration of Riley’s cell phone cut through her thoughts. When she pulled out the device, the number on the screen stirred a certain apprehension.

“Paige here,” she answered.

“Paige, this is Meredith,” growled the familiar voice. “We’ve got a situation. There’s been another murder. The same M.O.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“I want Sheriff Hagen and Agent Esmer to hear the details of the new murder with me, sir,” Riley told Meredith. “We’ve been working together on this.” Looking around, she saw that no one else was in sight on the quiet suburban street. “Let me put my phone on speaker.”

Sheriff Hagen and Ann Marie huddled closer, forming a makeshift triangle on the sidewalk. Hagen’s steady gaze and Ann Marie’s earnest blue eyes both reflected a hunger for information.

“Everyone’s listening, Meredith,” Riley announced.

“Last night in Basingstoke,” Meredith began, “Robert Nash, a retired professor from Boutell College, was found murdered, strangled. Apparently, he was on his way to visit a neighbor.”

“A math professor again?” Riley asked.

“Yes, and other details are the same, too. An algebra quiz sheet was pinned to his back.”

“And the neighbor?” Ann Marie asked.

“There are still a lot of uncertainties. But he’s a math teacher in a local high school.”

Riley’s mind churned, the new murder slotting into her mental images. She could feel the pull of the hunt, the need to understand this predator who moved from place to

place unpredictably. All of the victims were in professions related to math, and all so far had been here in Virginia. But anything else that might connect them remained a mystery.

“Has anybody solved the algebra problems?” she asked.

“Locals are working on them,” Meredith replied. “They’re looking for answers that are decimals, not whole numbers. Or anything else that stands out.” Then he asked, “How’s the investigation going in Glencoe?”

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“There was a body buried at the coordinates found on the quiz sheets,” Riley said. “It was a woman who was buried 20 years ago—Patricia Warren was her name. Her husband is on our suspect list, but we’re far from sure that he killed her, and I doubt that he committed the recent murders.”

Hagen leaned forward, his voice a rumble of assurance. “I’ll give you a fuller report on the twenty-year-old case later on, Agent Meredith.”

“Okay, keep me updated, Hagen,” Meredith instructed. “But I’m going to need Paige and Esmer at the new crime scene.”

Hagen glanced at Riley and Ann Marie. Although he looked worried, he assured Meredith, “My team can handle things here in Glencoe for now.”

“Good,” Meredith’s voice was clipped with urgency. “Agents Paige and Esmer, head to 1432 Elm Street in Basingstoke. And hurry,”

“Got it,” Riley replied, her mind already racing ahead to the scene that awaited them. Then Meredith added, “You’ll meet Agent Putnam there. I want both of you on this.”

Riley was glad he couldn’t see the frown that crossed her face at the mention of Putnam. Squaring her shoulders, she accepted the necessity of collaboration, despite her reservations. There was an active killer, and personal conflicts had to take a backseat. Professionalism was essential at a time like this.

“Understood,” she told Meredith.

“Good luck,” he said, the line going silent as the call ended.

“Let’s move,” Riley said to Ann Marie, pocketing her phone. “We need to get back to our car.”

The trio hurried to Hagen’s cruiser. After the sheriff pulled his vehicle away from the curb, he glanced over at Riley. “Your impressions of Levon Warren?” he asked. “Do you think that Levon killed his wife?”

Riley turned her head slightly, considering the layers beneath the surface of his inquiry. In her mind’s eye, she revisited the burial site, the subtly marked grave. While there, she had visualized two people carrying the body, and she doubted whether a solitary figure actually could have managed it alone.

“I don’t think that Patricia Warren’s burial was likely to be the work of a lone individual,” she told him. “It needed coordination, cooperation. And let’s just say I’m having trouble picturing Levon Warren as part of a team—any team.”

It wasn’t just about physical ability; it was about temperament, a willingness to share a load, both literal and figurative.

“Unless he was working with his crazy conspiracy group,” Ann Marie muttered.

But Riley still doubted it, her mind replaying the conversation with Levon. It was true that a name like “Cipher Society” conjured images of shady figures hunched over cryptic puzzles. But could a man who clung to his solitude in an imagined reality be part of something as insidious as murder? Of course, it was possible. But in spite of his angry outbursts, the old mathematician didn’t quite fit the profile that was building like a puzzle in her head.

“Then you don’t think he was involved in the recent murders either?” Hagen probed.

“Too soon to tell,” she finally responded. “So far, I doubt it. But we can’t write him off. Not yet.”

Hagen nodded, accepting her cautionary advice as they continued their drive in contemplative silence. The streets of Glencoe seemed to Riley to be passing by like frames in a slow-motion film. By the time they reached the Sheriff’s headquarters, Riley was feeling the familiar surge of adrenaline that came with the prospect of diving into a new crime scene.

“Keep an eye on Warren,” she instructed Hagen tersely. “He might not be our man, but he could still tell us something valuable.”

“I’ll do that,” Hagen agreed. “You don’t think he’ll run?”

Riley shook her head. “He’s too enigmatic, too confident in his own eccentricities. Flight doesn’t fit his profile.” Then she added, “He may not run, but people like Warren often hide things in plain sight.”

“Alright,” Hagen acquiesced. “I’ll have my men discreetly monitor his movements.”

Riley unlocked the BAU sedan and slid behind the wheel, and Ann Marie took the passenger seat again. She keyed the ignition, and the engine purred to life, a promise of momentum against the stagnation of unsolved cases. As the vehicle rolled out of the parking lot, the reality of their mission settled over them.

“Should be a two-hour drive,” Riley said, glancing at Ann Marie. “Let’s use the time wisely.”

“Of course, Riley,” Ann Marie responded, already reaching for her computer tablet.

“You’re right to be suspicious of the Cipher Society,” Riley said. “Go ahead and

access the FBI records for any intel. We need to know if they have a history that could connect them to these murders.”

“Right away,” Ann Marie responded. She fell silent as she navigated through the secure FBI database, her blue eyes scanning the screen intently.

As the road unfurled before them, and Riley felt the familiar pull between the cold professionalism required of her job and the fascination that field cases stirred in her. Her hands gripped the steering wheel a little tighter, each mile bringing them closer to Basingstoke and another scene that required her mind, her eyes, every bit of her ordinary and extraordinary abilities. She could feel an internal shift, the transition from one role to another, from teacher to hunter.

“Got some info,” Ann Marie announced, pulling Riley back from her thoughts. “Looks like the Cipher Society has been on the radar for minor computer crimes, and some of its members have gotten busted. Mostly for pranks—digital graffiti, hacking billboards. They seem more interested in thumbing their noses at authority than causing real harm.”

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“Pranks can escalate,” Riley mused, her voice low. “Keep digging. There might be a pattern we’re not seeing.” She knew all too well how the seeds of violence could sprout from seemingly innocuous soil.

As she drove, she considered the Cipher Society’s antics as Ann Marie reported them to her.

“One time they hacked into the city’s traffic control system in Richmond,” Ann Marie said, scrolling through a list of offenses. “They turned all the traffic lights green at once. Caused quite a chaos, but no one was seriously injured.”

“Anything else?”

“There was another incident at Hanover University,” she added after a moment. “They replaced all the digital class schedules with cryptic mathematical formulas. It took days for the IT department to correct everything.”

Riley frowned, her mind working over these seemingly juvenile acts. They were disruptive, yes, but there was an undercurrent of intelligence and calculation to them as well. Not unlike a series of murders marked by algebra quizzes.

As they neared Basingstoke, Riley felt a familiar knot forming in her stomach—the anticipation and dread that always accompanied her arrival at a crime scene. She glanced over at Ann Marie, who was now reading aloud from an article about Cipher Society’s most notorious hack—a breach of the Virginia Educators for Excellence in Mathematics website where they’d posted their manifesto decrying mainstream education.

As the road unfurled before them, Ann Marie's voice again broke the rhythm of the tires against the asphalt. "Do you think the Cipher Society could be...evolving? Like, maybe they've moved on from pranks to something more sinister?"

The idea wasn't implausible. People changed, and so did their motives. What started as a game could turn deadly with the right—or wrong—push. Riley knew this from experience, had seen innocence twist into malice under life's relentless pressure. But was the Cipher Society capable of such a transformation? Had their disdain for societal norms ever curdled into a murderous rage?

"Keep an eye out for any behavioral shifts in their past activities," Riley instructed. She needed facts, patterns to piece together, not just hunches. A killer's mind was like a dark room, and she was feeling along the walls for a switch.

When signs welcoming them to Basingstoke loomed ahead, Riley felt her focus shifting in anticipation of the new scene. The college town was stirring to life, students and faculty alike moving through the streets, cheerfully and with purpose.

Riley navigated the vehicle through the heart of the town, noting the quaint charm of the main street. It was almost too picturesque, a veneer of normalcy that she knew was hiding at least one horror lurking behind one of these doors.

"Turn here," Ann Marie said, breaking Riley's reverie. She pointed to a leafy side street that led away from the bustle of the town center.

Following her directions, Riley turned the car onto the quieter residential street. The houses here were well-kept, gardens manicured with care—the type of community that would be untouched by suspicion until now. Riley almost pulled over when she saw a house marked off with police tape.

"That's not it yet," Ann Marie said. "It's a little farther on."

Riley then remembered Meredith telling them that the victim had been walking toward his neighbor's house when he disappeared. The house they had just reached must be where he'd lived. They continued past a row of trees to the address they were actually looking for, the neat numbers affixed to the mailbox outside.

A police car was parked on the street, but Riley didn't see any of the investigators right away. Yellow crime scene tape fluttered across this front yard just like the one they had just passed.

"Here we are," she murmured, killing the engine. Her hands rested momentarily on the wheel, steeling herself. She glanced at Ann Marie, who was already gathering her gear, her youthful face set with determination. Together, they stepped out of the car.

"Agent Paige," came a voice, clipped and precise, pulling her gaze toward the source.

Riley turned to see Agent Putnam standing framed by an open doorway at the front of a garage. His suit, as always, appeared immaculate, the lines sharp enough to cut through the day's tension.

"The crime scene is in there," he announced, motioning to the interior with a jerk of his thumb. Indeed, the sliding door of the garage remained closed, while the side entrance hung open, an unspoken invitation to the new arrivals.

Riley's eyes briefly met Ann Marie's, conveying both anticipation and trepidation.

Riley and her partner walked past him toward the open door of the garage. She had not been present at the previous two murder scenes of this case, and each detail recounted to her had been like assembling a puzzle in the dark. But she was here, now, and maybe—just maybe—the pieces could reveal themselves under her own scrutiny.

The slight scent of oil from the garage mingled with the fragrance of freshly mown

grass from the neighboring yards. It was in this kind of contrast that reality set in; behind the everyday suburban facade, violence had intruded.

As Ann Marie followed Putnam's lead inside, Riley lingered a moment longer, allowing herself to absorb the atmosphere. Here was an opportunity, a chance to tap into that uncanny ability she possessed – to try and feel what the perpetrator might have felt, to think as they had thought.

She knew better than to expect clarity or revelation on command; her 'gift' did not operate like the flick of a switch. And this crime scene was sure to be claustrophobic and full of distractions. Yet, each detail, each visualization combined with ordinary sensory input, was a potential key to unlocking the psyche of a killer.

As she followed Ann Marie's steps toward the darkness of the garage, Riley cleared her mind—hoping for, bracing for, the rush of intuition, the sense of connection with a killer's mind that had made her such a formidable BAU agent.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When Riley walked into the dimly lit garage, she was aware that Putnam was watching her closely. She joined Ann Marie, who stood appraising the crime scene.

A car sat in one bay, innocuous and dusty, as if it had been forgotten there. But it was the adjacent space that drew Riley's focus—the meticulously cordoned-off area where a folding chair stood draped with crime scene tape that fluttered slightly in the breeze from outside.

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“Careful where you step,” Putnam cautioned, his voice flat and practical as always.

Riley nodded, her gaze fixed on the chair. It was an ordinary piece of furniture, but its presence here indicated anything but. She could almost feel the echo of violence in this place, even though she was sure the murder must have been carried out quietly, since it had attracted no immediate attention.

She wanted to understand, to slip inside the mind that made such displays of his victims. But the scene was cluttered with the evidence of police work—markers, tags, and the latent energy of the officers who had scoured the space for answers. And besides, with Agent Putnam following her every move, Riley didn’t feel any insights nudging at her mind. As much as she wanted to forge a connection, to leap into contact with the murderer’s psyche, that wasn’t going to happen right now.

“This was the scene found by the local police,” Putnam said as he opened a file folder and handed over a set of glossy photographs. In each image, the central figure—the victim—was seated unnervingly upright in the chair, head lolled to one side. The pose was identical to the two previous victims—and like the others, a sheet of paper was pinned to his back.

“The man who lives here found Nash just like this,” Putnam told her.

Although the victim’s pose was simple, Riley found the images disturbing. There was something ritualistic in the consistent arrangement. She traced a finger over the sheet of paper pinned to the man’s back in the photograph, a message, but also a signature left by the killer.

“What was the cause of death?” Ann Marie asked.

“Strangulation, just like the others,” Putnam said.

“Margaret Whitfield...Garrett Fenn...” she murmured, half to herself. “And now this one.”

“Exactly,” Putnam confirmed, watching her closely. “It’s definitely a pattern. And it implies more to come.”

Riley’s pulse quickened at the thought, her skin prickling with apprehension. This was a puzzle, a challenge laid out by someone who craved recognition, who wanted their macabre intellect acknowledged. She had to decipher it before another life was reduced to a mere prop in this sinister performance.

“I’d like to keep this set of photos,” she told Putnam. Although he seemed to hesitate briefly, he didn’t argue. Riley handed the file to Ann Marie and then walked gingerly around the perimeter of the space.

“Robert Nash,” Putnam began in a businesslike tone, “was a respected math professor at Hindemith College. Retired. I’m told he wasn’t just an academic, but someone who really enjoyed the pursuit of knowledge.” His eyes flicked to the empty chair. “He lived in the house next door.”

Riley glanced out of the garage toward the home just visible through the line of tall oaks.

Of course, she understood, that’s why that house was taped off too.

She wondered how the residents of other handsome houses on this street were taking the activity and the news today. It was a quiet neighborhood, one that projected

comfort and routine, not the cloak-and-dagger drama of murder.

“The garage belongs to Cliff Baird,” Putnam continued, and Riley turned back to listen to him. “He and his wife live at this address. Baird is a local high school math teacher. A former student of Nash’s.”

“Student and mentor,” Riley mused aloud, piecing together the human connections behind the stark facts.

“Last night,” Putnam continued, “Nash was grading papers for Baird. He left his home to deliver them, and...well, he never made it. Louella, his wife, assumed the two friends had gotten caught up in a long conversation, but late in the night she got worried and called Baird. He told her Nash never arrived with the papers.”

“Which means Nash was intercepted between there and here,” Riley observed, her voice low. There was something profoundly unsettling about the simplicity of the report—a neighborly favor turning into horror.

She thought of Louella Nash, waiting for her husband to return, the slow creep of dread as the clock ticked on without him. The suburban neighborhood suddenly seemed more sinister, with a threat like that lurking behind neat hedges and closed doors.

“From his home to here...it’s a short walk,” Riley muttered, her eyes tracing the likely path Nash would have taken. She visualized the professor stepping through the night, papers in hand, unsuspecting. “He probably would have cut across the lawns, not easily seen from anywhere else. He was vulnerable. Easy prey for someone lying in wait.”

Putnam nodded, his face an unreadable mask. “The wife and Baird ran around looking for him. Baird found him just sitting there...like he was taking a breather.”

“Except he wasn’t breathing at all,” Riley said, her words clipped. The killer had not only slain Nash but staged him, an eerie echo of previous victims. Riley could almost feel the killer’s satisfaction, the twisted sense of accomplishment.

“Exactly,” Putnam’s agreement was cold comfort to Riley. “The killer wanted him to be found like this. Wanted us to see the consistency.”

Ann Marie, her youthful face grave, asked to see the quiz sheet from the crime scene photos. Putnam pulled out his phone, swiped, and handed it to her. Riley leaned over Ann Marie’s shoulder as they scrutinized the image— neat figures of mathematical problems.

“Has anyone worked these out these problems?” Riley asked.

“One of the local cops,” Putnam replied, tapping on his phone. “Came up with a decimal number for just one of the answers: 37.12.”

“Latitude,” Ann Marie murmured, her eyes widening. “It has to be.”

Riley felt a surge of adrenaline. A geographic coordinate was a clue, but it was only half of the puzzle. Without the longitude, they didn’t have enough to go on.

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“Only one half of a location,” she said, voice low. “We need more, or...” She trailed off, meeting Ann Marie’s wide eyes. They both realized that that they would only get another number—the one for the longitude—if they failed to stop the killer from murdering again. In his twisted system, the quiz revealing that number would be found pinned to yet another victim.

Riley turned to Putnam and realized that he must have already figured that out. She met his gaze directly and asked, “Have you found out anything useful from your interviews?”

“Not yet,” he replied, then added a bit proudly. “But my team dug up something you need to know.”

“What is it?”

“Seems our victims weren’t chosen at random,” Putnam continued, scrolling through his phone with efficiency. “At least two of them did have a connection.”

He held up his phone, the screen lit up with blog posts, emails exchanged, a digital trail winding back through the lives of Margaret Whitfield and Garrett Fenn. Putnam handed the phone to Riley, who skimmed the contents. Garrett Fenn, a man whose passion for mathematics echoed in his writings, had once shone a spotlight on Margaret Whitfield’s methods.

“An interview,” Riley muttered, absorbing the words that leaped out at her. “He said how much he admired her.”

“Exactly,” Putnam replied. “They shared more than just a profession—they had a mutual respect, a kinship in their field.”

Riley exhaled slowly, the pieces slotting together in her mind with a clarity that was as sharp as it was unwelcome. Two educators linked by their love of teaching, now bound together by the circumstances of their deaths.

“Good work, Putnam,” she said, handing back the phone. Her respect for the agent’s diligence did not extend to liking him, but she couldn’t deny his effectiveness.

Her gaze met Ann Marie’s, a silent exchange passing between them. Both women were puzzled by the ruthless murders of quiet scholars who did no one any harm. Now it seemed that the very admiration that linked Margaret Whitfield to Garrett Fenn might have also connected their fates.

In addition to that, Riley still felt the sting of personal loss. Margaret Whitfield had been more than just a name in a case file to her. She was grateful that Ann Marie made no mention of Riley’s private history with Mrs. Whitfield. She didn’t need Putnam prying into her motivations or questioning her objectivity. Their partnership was frayed around the edges as it was; no sense in unraveling it further with personal disclosures.

“Another brilliant mind snuffed out,” Riley muttered under her breath—a lament for those lost and a vow to see justice done.

“Can we speak to Professor Nash’s wife?” Riley asked, breaking the hush that had settled over the group. She needed to hear from someone who knew Robert Nash intimately—perhaps there lay a clue yet uncovered.

“Mrs. Nash is currently hospitalized,” Putnam informed them, his voice devoid of warmth. “She suffered a severe shock upon learning what happened to her husband.”

Riley's heart clenched at the thought. She could imagine all too well the trauma Louella Nash must be enduring after discovering a loved one's lifeless body.

"However," Putnam continued, redirecting their attention, "Cliff Baird, the friend who lives here, is available. He's inside being interviewed by one of the local detectives."

"Let's not waste any time then," Riley said, setting aside her thoughts on Louella Nash. As they left the garage, her gaze lingered on the empty space where Robert Nash's life had been brutally cut short. In that brief moment, a shiver coursed through her body. She could almost sense the killer's presence—vengeful yet reverent—as if he were meting out his own twisted form of justice.

Reverence, she thought.

Although a sense of the killer's presence had mostly evaded her on this occasion, that feeling rang clear in her mind. The killer was committing these acts as a homage of sorts—perhaps as retribution for a perceived wrong to someone he deeply respected.

"Riley?" Ann Marie's voice pulled her back from her thoughts.

"Right behind you," she replied, following Putnam toward the front of Cliff Baird's house. But she kept the eerie sensation close; it held a clue about the killer's motivation, an insight into a mind that saw murder as a means to set things right.

The suburban home, with its neatly trimmed hedges and welcoming front porch, seemed incongruous with the horror that had unfolded just outside last night. As they approached, Riley steadied herself, preparing to delve for answers that might be tucked away in the memories of those who knew Nash best.

Inside, the living room was steeped in a somber atmosphere, the air thick with

unspoken grief. Putnam introduced them to Basingstoke Police Detective Archie Prendergast, a man whose stern expression softened upon seeing Riley and Ann Marie.

“Detective Paige, Agent Esmer,” Prendergast greeted them. He gestured toward a man seated on the couch, his hands wrung tight, his eyes red-rimmed with distress. “This is Cliff Baird.”

“Mr. Baird,” Riley began, her voice gentle but firm, “we understand this has been a traumatic experience for you.”

Baird nodded, his gaze hollow. “I can’t believe he’s gone.”

“Do you have any idea who might have meant Professor Nash any harm.”

“I think...maybe I do,” Baird. In fact, I think you may know who did this.”

Riley heard Putnam’s sharp intake of breath. Apparently, this was a new declaration.

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“Please, tell us anything that’s on your mind,” Riley urged. She needed to hear his story, parse his words for truth and deception alike.

Riley studied Cliff Baird as he spoke, his voice barely heard, “Nash had an enemy...Derek Aldrich. He’s an IT guy around here—spewed nothing but venom online about Robert.”

“Hostility like that doesn’t brew in a vacuum,” Ann Marie interjected with her polished tone, blue eyes probing. “Any idea what sparked such animosity?”

“An organization,” Baird replied, his brow creasing with the effort of recollection. “Aldrich is part of a group...they target academics, mathematicians mainly. Dedicated to tarnishing reputations.”

“An organization?” Riley echoed, her mind racing back to their interview with Levon Warren.

Could it be ... ? She asked herself.

Ann Marie asked Baird the question that was on the tip of Riley’s tongue.

“Is the organization that Aldrich belongs to called the Cipher Society?”

Baird nodded with slight surprise at Ann Marie’s guess.

“Yes. That’s what they’re called. The Cipher Society.”

Ciphers,Riley thought, secrets,a code to disguise ... what could that society be hiding?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ann Marie felt a palpable shift, as if the case had suddenly turned in a new direction.

“The Cipher Society,” she murmured quietly to Riley.“Could this be their doing?”

She and Riley held each other’s gaze for a moment.They both knew that the name stood for more than just intellectual elitism; it was a shadow network, capable of insidious influence.

“Aldrich is what they call a “variable” in their hierarchy, a sort of field agent, and typical of their ilk,” Baird continued.“They’ve always been arrogant, ruthless in their methods.And yet ...”

He paused as if trying to absorb the implications of what he was saying.

“I’d never have thought they’d be capable of murder,” he finally said.

“It sounds like maybe they’ve escalated their activities,” Ann Marie commented.

From Riley’s expression, Ann Marie sensed that her mind was churning out possibilities, looking for further connections.And Ann Marie could guess what those connections might be.

There’s another society to consider,she thought.

Sure enough, Riley asked the question that was on Ann Marie’s mind.

“Mr.Baird,” Riley said, “did Professor Nash happen to belong to a group called the Virginia Educators for Excellence in Mathematics?”

“Why, yes,” Baird said.“He was a member of VEEM.In fact, he was once Vice President of that organization.That was many years ago, though.”

Ann Marie had an almost eerie sense that her mind was in sync with Riley’s.She knew that they were both mentally replaying all that they had learned about VEEM back in Glencoe yesterday.

“Do you happen to know who was president of VEEM when Professor Nash was vice president?”Ann Marie asked.

Baird squinted thoughtfully.

“It was a woman,” he said.“Robert talked about her often, but I can’t quite bring her name to mind ...”

“Did it happen to be Patricia Warren?”Ann Marie asked.

“Why, yes, it was,” Baird said.

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Ann Marie felt a jolt of excitement at the connection with the long-ago murder victim. She was sure Riley felt the same way.

Meanwhile, Agent Putnam looked somewhat puzzled. Ann Marie could understand why. Neither she nor Riley had had the opportunity to update Putnam about all that they'd learned in Glencoe. He didn't know the earlier victim's name, let alone that she'd been a high-ranking member of VEEM. In fact, they hadn't had a chance to tell him about the Cipher Society, either.

He has no idea what we're talking about, Ann Marie thought.

Putnam's posture, usually as rigid as the pressed lines of his suit, shifted ever so slightly—a crack in the controlled facade.

“Let's take a breather and regroup,” he suggested sharply. He offered a curt nod towards the bereaved man, handing him a crisp business card. “Should any more memories surface, don't hesitate to reach out.”

With that, Putnam motioned towards the front door, signaling an urgency that wasn't lost on either of the women. They fell into step behind him, their footsteps echoing in sync with his own. Detective Archie Prendergast trailed along behind them.

Once outside, Putnam halted abruptly on the neatly manicured lawn and turned to face them. His sharp features were accentuated by the bright light.

“It sounds like you'd better bring me up to speed,” he said to Ann Marie and Riley, folding his arms across his broad chest as he confronted them head-on.

Riley and Ann Marie almost started to talk at once, but Ann Marie stopped herself and let her senior partner explain things. Riley told Putnam that the victim buried 20 years ago had been identified as Patricia Warren, who had once been president of VEEM. She also told Putnam about Patricia's husband, Levon—his jealousy at her membership in VEEM, and his own membership in the Cipher Society.

Putnam looked off in the distance, a slight frown on his face, as Riley told him all this. He was obviously struggling to take everything in.

“So you're saying that the Cipher Society might be involved with murder?”

“Could be,” Riley confirmed. “They're deeply hostile toward VEEM, and everybody in it. And over the space of two decades, two members of VEEM have been killed.”

Ann Marie watched Riley closely as she put these new pieces of their puzzle together. There was something reassuring in her senior partner's presence and confidence. She remembered how, when she'd been a rookie, she'd thought Riley had some kind of special sixth sense—something that went beyond the usual BAU skills. Her legendary success rate seemed to support that idea.

Putnam crossed his arms, a gesture that seemed defensive. “So this Levon Warren you've been telling me about—do you think he's a suspect in his wife's murder? And maybe the murders of Margaret Whitfield and Garrett Fenn?”

“It isn't likely that he had anything to do with the recent murders—especially this one,” Ann Marie clarified. “His wife's death, though—that's a different story. He hasn't been cleared for that.”

“At least not completely,” Riley added with a note of caution.

“You seem to doubt his guilt, Agent Paige,” Putnam observed.

Riley's chin lifted, a subtle defiance in her posture. "It's not about doubt," she said. "Right now, we don't have enough evidence to tie him to his wife's murder."

As Ann Marie listened to the exchange between Riley and Putnam, she sensed both connection and conflict between her two colleagues. She knew their basic approaches were different, a matter of relying entirely on facts or also giving attention to intuition.

And they don't exactly like each other, she thought.

"Baird said Derek Aldrich was harassing and libeling the most recent victim," Putnam mused. "And we also know that he's a member of the Cipher Society. We need to find him and get some answers."

"Finding him might not be easy," Prendergast told them, stepping into the conversation for the first time since they'd left Cliff Baird's house. "We've been after him for a while now. He's been harassing other local people aside from the victim. There's already a warrant out for his arrest on charges of cyberstalking and libel. But when my team and I went to his home to bring him in, the bird had flown the coop."

"So he's vanished completely?" Putnam asked.

"He's still active online," Prendergast said, frustration lacing his words. "It's as if he's taunting us, staying just out of reach while leaving a trail of breadcrumbs through cyberspace."

Putnam didn't appear discouraged by the news; if anything, it seemed to fuel his resolve further.

"He won't stay hidden for long," he assured them confidently. "Not with the FBI

stepping in. We'll trace those breadcrumbs right to his present whereabouts. I'll get our forensic techs in Quantico on it. They can work miracles with this kind of thing."

Ann Marie observed Putnam, noting his assurance. She also felt confident that, even though the Cipher Society was sure to be shrouded in layers of secrecy and codes, the tenacious minds at Quantico would peel back those layers.

She was surprised when Riley turned to Putnam and asked in a casual voice, "Care to join me and Agent Esmer for lunch before we dive back into work?"

Putnam's lips curled into a sardonic smile. "I'd rather not waste valuable time," he said, his voice scornful. "The Cipher Society won't pause for our meal breaks. But if you feel like you've got time for that sort of thing, go right ahead."

Riley's response was a light chuckle. Something about the way she seemed pleased by his refusal unsettled Ann Marie. It was as though Riley knew some private joke, or perhaps she had foreseen his response.

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As Putnam reached for his phone, presumably to rally the Quantico team, Riley turned to Detective Prendergast and asked, “could you recommend somewhere good to grab a bite around here?”

Prendergast nodded, giving them directions to a local spot known for its quiet ambiance. As they thanked him and made their way to their car, Ann Marie glanced back to see Putnam already absorbed in his call.

Ann Marie slid into the passenger seat of the BAU sedan, her thoughts still churning. She found herself caught between two formidable personalities—Riley, with her enigmatic calm, and Putnam, with his unwavering focus. Both were driven, yet their methods seemed to diverge wildly. In that divergence, Ann Marie sensed an unspoken challenge, a battle of wills in which neither party would easily concede. And she realized, with a growing sense of anticipation, that she was right in the thick of it.

“Riley,” she ventured, “is this really the best time for a break?”

Riley chuckled—a low, knowing sound. “Who said anything about taking a break?” she replied, her eyes sharp as flint. “Quantico’s techs are top-notch, but it might take them hours or even days to track down Aldrich. We don’t have that kind of time.”

“What’s your approach, then?” Ann Marie asked, intrigued by the notion of outpacing the fabled Quantico forensics team.

Riley’s smile was thin and mischievous. “Let’s just say I have ... an old friend.”

Then she added with a chuckle, “And he’s kind of a secret weapon.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ann Marie followed Riley into the quaint lunch spot that Prendergast had recommended. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafted through the air, along with the scent of baked goods. The chairs held plush cushions; the walls were decorated with eclectic art pieces and shelves lined with books, creating a homely and welcoming environment.

What are we doing here? Ann Marie wondered again. Do we really have time for this?

She felt that every second counted if they were going to prevent another tragedy. The Cipher Society loomed in the background, and Derek Aldrich was their current best lead. Of course she knew that Putnam was having the FBI track Aldrich, but she thought that there must be other leads they could follow up in the meantime.

Then, as Riley chose a secluded booth where no other diners would hear them, her directive was clear and concise. “Just order some coffee and maybe a pastry,” she instructed, her tone indicating this was no leisurely detour. “We won’t be here long enough to eat a full meal.”

“Sure,” Ann Marie replied in surprise. She slid into the booth, her gaze following Riley’s every move. The menu in her hands felt like a prop—a distraction from the pressing work at hand. She flagged down a waitress and ordered two coffees with an air of confidence she wasn’t entirely sure she felt, adding a pair of brownies to the request.

“Brownies,” she murmured to herself. “As if sugar could sweeten today’s discoveries.”

Then she saw that Riley had fished out her phone.

“Who are you calling?” she asked.

Riley glanced up, her eyes sharp and calculating. “I’m contacting someone who can get us what we need quickly,” she said, an air of mystery lacing her words. “Sometimes you have to color outside the lines to catch a ghost.”

“Color outside the lines?” Ann Marie echoed.

“His name is Van Roff,” Riley continued, unbothered by the ambiguity of her own explanation. “He’s FBI, but not from our neck of the woods. A technical analyst in the Seattle field office. And he knows every trick in the book—a lot more than our tech guys at Quantico.” Her lips curled into a half-smile that spoke of secrets and shortcuts, of doors opened with unorthodox keys.

“I want you to listen closely,” Riley added. “You might need this kind of help yourself some time. Building up your own trusted contacts is so important.”

Ann Marie watched as Riley entered a number. The café around them hummed with the idle chatter of lunchtime patrons, but at a distance and indistinct. Then Riley’s call connected, and she put the call on speaker. It wasn’t turned up very loud, so they sat with the phone between them as they both leaned over to hear the man’s voice on the other end.

Riley’s voice, so often commanding, warmed considerably. “Van, it’s been too long,” she said.

“Riley Paige, back from academia to grace us mere mortals?” Van Roff’s voice crackled through the phone, his playful jest poking through the speaker. “How goes the teaching life?”

“Teaching’s fine, Van,” Riley replied smoothly. “But at the moment, I’m knee-deep in the field again—for one case only. And I need your expertise.”

“You’ve got it,” he replied.

“Listen, Van,” Riley’s voice dropped to a conspiratorial hush, “I’ve got you on speaker so my current partner can listen. Her name is Ann Marie Esmer.”

“Nice to meet you, Ann Marie Esmer,” Van Roff said.

“Uh, likewise,” Ann Marie replied, still wondering where this conversation was about to lead.

“We’re looking for an IT freelancer named Derek Aldrich,” Riley said. “He’s based in Basingstoke, Virginia—might be tangled up in a murder or two. There’s a local warrant out for his arrest—cyberstalking and libel—but he’s slipped off the grid. This guy is a ghost. We need to find him before he does more damage or disappears for good.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 10:00 am

Ann Marie watched as Riley, with a mischievous smile, laid out the bait for Van. “We’ve got Quantico’s finest trying to track him down, but ...”

“But I’m finer, aren’t I?”

“Well, this is your chance to prove it—by finding Aldrich first.” Her eyes were lit with the thrill of the hunt, a spark that Ann Marie had come to recognize; it was the same look she’d seen when Riley dissected a case down to the bone.

The server arrived with their order and set it down their order, the rich aroma of coffee and the sweet scent of brownies bolstering Ann Marie’s spirits.

“Sounds like you guys are in some kind of an eatery,” Van Roff remarked.

“We’ve stopped for coffee,” Riley told the tech specialist, “and it just arrived, with brownies.”

“Brownies, mmm!” Van said. “Well, sit back and enjoy and let me work my wizardry. If he’s so much as touched a keyboard recently, consider him found. I’ll have his location before you can finish your coffee.”

Then Van’s curiosity shifted gears; his tone softened, almost human now. “Enough about work. Catch me up, Riley—what’s new with you?”

Riley leaned back, allowing herself a momentary reprieve from the case. “April’s gearing up for college. Can you believe it? And Bill...he’s moved in with us.” Her voice held a note of domestic warmth that seemed almost at odds with her usual

razor-sharp focus.

“Bill moved in? Now that’s news,” Van chuckled. “You always were full of surprises, Riley Paige.”

Even as he talked, Van was definitely on the job. Ann Marie could hear the sound of his keystrokes, never missing a beat. She sipped her coffee, observing the interplay between these two, connected by mutual respect and a shared goal. Here was Riley Paige, the relentless hunter, having an ordinary conversation about home life.

“Keep talking,” Van said, “I’m listening.”

Riley obliged, recounting stories of April’s burgeoning independence and Bill’s new place in their family. Each word seemed to pull her further from the grim realities of their pursuit, even as Van worked away, his mind apparently split between domestic anecdotes and the chase at hand. Ann Marie could see the dichotomy of Riley’s life spread out before her: one moment a hardened agent, the next, just another parent navigating life’s ever-shifting currents.

“Almost got him,” Van mumbled. The anticipation tightened the air around them, drawing Ann Marie’s breath into shallow gasps.

“Gotcha!” Van’s voice rang out triumphant, slicing through their background noise of clinking dishes and murmured conversations. “Bingo!”

The word ricocheted in Ann Marie’s mind, a sudden jolt of adrenaline that made her sit up straighter. She leaned forward, eager for the revelation.

“Coordinates are coming through now,” Van announced, the pride in his achievement clear even through the phone’s tinny speaker.

Riley's eyes met Ann Marie's in silent acknowledgment of the moment's gravity. They both listened as Van recited the address, words and digits forming the key to unlocking this stage of their investigation.

"Looks like our guy's holed up in an unoccupied house," Van declared, the finality in his tone matching the click of his keyboard going silent. "He's squatting—probably thinks he's safely off the grid."

"Thank you, Van. You're incredible," Riley said, her voice tinged with both gratitude and urgency. She ended the call, and Ann Marie couldn't stop herself from gasping.

She sat looking at Riley, whose still casual demeanor belied the steel trap of her mind at work. This was a woman who thrived under pressure, who turned the screws tighter when others would balk. Ann Marie respected that—maybe even envied it. It was these glimpses into Riley's world outside of the BAU that painted a fuller picture, one not solely defined by the darkness she chased.

"That was amazing!" she exclaimed, her words echoing the thrill of the hunt and the awe of witnessing expertise in action.

Riley merely nodded. "Now to get things moving," she said. "After all, calling for backup is the proper thing to do."

Ann Marie watched as Riley's fingers moved across the screen of her phone again, a look of devilish satisfaction on her features. The call connected, and Riley's tone was light, almost playful.

"Putnam, have you had any luck tracking down our elusive Mr. Aldrich?" she asked, leaning back in her chair with an air of nonchalance.

On the other end of the line, there was a brief pause before Putnam's voice crackled

through, his words laced with a hint of irritation.

“Are you kidding, Agent Paige? Our guys have just gotten started. You know how these things go. We’ll have it soon.”

But Riley’s grin only widened. “Well, it seems fortune favors the bold—or perhaps just the well-connected. I have an address for you.”

There was a sharp intake of breath from Putnam as he digested this information. Ann Marie could almost picture him, standing rigid in his immaculate suit, his calculating eyes betraying only a slight flicker of surprise.

“He’s in an unoccupied house,” Riley continued, her voice steady with the weight of certainty. “Looks like Derek Aldrich has been squatting there. I’m sending you the address. Prendergast already has a warrant for Aldrich’s arrest. I’m going to call him and ask him to meet us there with a couple of local cops to make an arrest. Let’s not keep him waiting any longer than necessary.”

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The phone went silent as Putnam's surprise turned into a reluctant acknowledgment. With that, Riley ended the call, her expression holding a touch of triumph that was both unsettling and oddly inspiring to Ann Marie.

"Time's up," Riley said, snapping the younger agent out of her reverie. "Let's roll."

"I think maybe you enjoyed that more than you should have," Ann Marie ventured with a chuckle.

Riley let out a laugh, the sound rich and genuine. "Yeah, maybe I did."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

As Riley stepped out of her unmarked car, she spotted the silent, parked vehicle where Detective Prendergast and his men lay in wait. As she walked closer, she saw that Agent Putnam had joined them. With Ann Marie beside her, she knew that they were ready to enter the last known refuge of a man who had eluded the law for too long.

She felt a familiar surge of adrenaline pumping through her veins as she surveyed the house where Van Roff had said their target was hiding. It was a traditional two-story, standing larger and more imposing than most homes in the neighborhood. It occupied the end of the street, solitary at the cul-de-sac, with an expanse of space surrounding it that set it apart from its neighbors.

The yard was slightly unkempt, but it was not the only property in the vicinity that could use some care. The absence of parked cars supported Van's assertion that it was

supposedly vacant. Riley assumed that the man hiding there still had electricity, but if he was careful how he used it so that he could escape notice.

“Prendergast, around back,” she instructed, her voice low and authoritative. “Take one of your men with you. Ann Marie, with me. The rest of you be ready to enter when needed.”

She noted Putnam’s skeptical expression.

“Appreciate your backup,” she told him. “We’re not announcing ourselves. This guy has slipped away too many times. We need to move in quietly and discreetly without tipping off the suspect.”

“If he’s paying attention at all, he’ll know we’re here soon enough,” Putnam muttered.

“Then let’s move,” Riley replied. She and Ann Marie walked up to the front door and tested the doorknob. It was locked.

“You want to do the honors this time?” Riley inquired, her voice barely above a whisper as she gestured towards the lock. “Just keep it quiet,” she added, drawing her Glock.

Ann Marie nodded and crouched down, studying the lock. As Ann Marie skillfully maneuvered her lock picks, Riley’s hand slipped into her jacket, drawing out her Glock, the cool metal a reassuring weight in her grasp.

Her thoughts narrowed to a singular focus: Catch the predator. Prevent the next tragedy.

After a few minutes of work, Ann Marie stood up and nodded. Riley pushed the door

open, revealing an empty foyer. There was no furniture, no personal belongings of any kind in sight, merely a light layer of dust.

Suddenly, an explosive crash from the upper floor cut through the stillness. A brief silence followed, abruptly broken by the unmistakable sound of running footsteps and a door slamming shut somewhere above them.

“FBI!” Riley announced, her voice authoritative and commanding. “Derek Aldrich, you need to come with us.” Her call reverberated off barren walls, but there was no reply and no other sound. Ann Marie also drew her weapon and waited for Riley to make the next move.

Riley signaled Ann Marie with a firm nod, and they moved quickly toward the staircase. No need for silence now; they raced upward.

At the top of the stairs, Riley was met with a corridor of closed doors, each one a barrier to their progress, but also a potential hiding place for Derek Aldrich. With a precise gesture, Riley directed Ann Marie to the left side of the hallway. Trusting her partner’s competence, she turned right, her every sense alert for the faintest sound or movement. She felt the familiar tension coil inside her, ready to spring into action at a moment’s notice.

As Riley moved methodically from room to room. The silence was her ally, an invisible partner in this pursuit, until it was shattered by movement—a faint sound and a fleeting shadow at the far end of the corridor. It was him.

“FBI! Don’t move!”

But Aldrich was a blur of desperation trying to evade capture. He disappeared through a narrow door, and then she heard him clattering down a back stairway.

“He’s heading for the back!”Riley’s voice cut through the stillness, sharp and commanding.

She expected Putnam to have positioned himself perfectly outside in case of this attempt at escape, and she heard Ann Marie’s voice over the radio, relaying their position to Prendergast.They couldn’t let this man get away this time.

As she plunged down the narrow stairway after Aldrich, the sound of her pursuit echoed through the empty house, the sound of law enforcement closing in on its prey.

She reached the back door just in time to see Aldrich vaulting over a fence with agility born from fear.His movements were swift and desperate.

Prendergast and another officer were on the other side of the backyard, investigating a small, dilapidated shed.Then, Putnam emerged from the side yard, moving fast as he followed Aldrich's path over the fence.

Riley, her heart pounding, holstered her weapon before propelling herself across the yard.With a burst of effort, she launched herself over the same obstacle, landing heavily on the other side with a thud that resonated painfully up her legs.

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She heard Ann Marie close behind her reporting, “Prendergast, we’re in pursuit heading west.”

The clash of clattering trash lids and the metallic groans of patio furniture drew Riley’s attention to Derek Aldrich—just a few houses away, bulldozing through backyards in his frantic bid for freedom.

Putnam charged directly after Aldrich, and for a moment Riley ran alongside him. Each obstacle the suspect scattered in his wake was meant to slow them, and one rolling table actually tripped Putnam up. Better at anticipating the fleeing man’s desperate attempts at sabotage, Riley sidestepped the debris.

The chase threaded through decorative fences and gardens, an unwelcome intrusion into private yards. Riley could feel the eyes of families peering through windows, their afternoons interrupted by the pursuit.

As they emerged onto a side street, Riley’s mind raced ahead of her feet, calculating trajectories and possibilities. Up ahead, Aldrich, fueled by primal fear, took a turn and disappeared around another house.

Putnam was nowhere in sight. She thought he must have veered off in a different direction, hoping to cut the runner off somewhere up ahead. Then Ann Marie dashed past Riley and after the fleeing man.

Eyeing a space between two homes off to her right, Riley made a split-second decision. The narrow passage was a shortcut, a risk that could either pay off or cost them precious time. But Riley trusted her instincts, honed by years in the field. With

Ann Marie and Putnam continuing the direct pursuit, Riley darted into the alley.

This was the gamble—the chance to cut off Aldrich’s path and bring an end to the race. As she emerged from the passageway, the world opened up before her, and there, not ten yards away, was Aldrich, his expression one of startled realization. Riley had won this bet, and now the real work would begin.

The sun’s glare off the asphalt seems to mock Riley’s urgency as she positioned herself within striking distance of Aldrich. She drew her weapon again, authority in every line of her stance.

“FBI! Stop right there!” she commanded.

Aldrich hesitated, his silhouette quivering. His eyes darted back and forth, the whites stark against his grimy face. It’s that split second of indecision—the predator caught in headlights—that gave Riley a glimmer of hope. She readied herself for his surrender.

But then, Aldrich pivoted on his heel, his survival instinct propelling him forward once more. Riley’s fingers twitched towards the trigger, but her mind stayed her hand. She holstered her weapon, muscles coiling like a spring. This was no time for hesitation; this was the moment for action.

She launched herself forward, her body remembering the countless drills, the relentless training that had sculpted her over the years and still kept her in shape. Each stride ate up the distance between her and her quarry.

As Aldrich’s foot pounded onto the pavement, Riley closed in. Her tackle was textbook precision—sending them both crashing to the ground in a tangle of limbs and desperation. Aldrich thrashed beneath her, a wild animal ensnared, but Riley was an unyielding force. The concrete bit into her skin, a stinging reminder of reality as

she fought to maintain control over the flailing suspect.

“Got you,” she muttered under her breath, working to restrain his arms. She felt the vibration of his struggles all the way to her core, a chaotic energy that seeks to disrupt her calm. But Riley was nothing if not resilient, her past hardships forging a will of iron.

Her grip was an unyielding vise around the suspect’s flailing limbs, her voice slicing through the tension like a blade. “Stop resisting!” The command was not just a directive; it was a plea for sanity in an insane situation. She could feel the grind of gravel against her knees, the heat of exertion flushing her skin. Riley’s dark hair, streaked with strands of hard-earned gray, clung to her damp forehead as she wrestled with the human tempest beneath her.

The thud of running footsteps approached, and Ann Marie burst into view. In fluid motions, she helped pin Aldrich’s arms behind his back.

With a low growl, Aldrich gave up the battle.

Together, their movements synchronized, Riley and her young partner managed to snap the cold steel of handcuffs around his wrists. The click of the mechanism was a small sound of closure. There was an undeniable sense of satisfaction in sharing this moment.

With Aldrich now subdued, Riley took a moment to glance around the area. The quiet street buzzed with the aftermath of the chase. Neighbors emerged onto their porches, and other curious faces peeked from behind curtains and doors, drawn by the commotion.

Still panting, Riley looked up to see Putnam jogging toward them, his sharp features softened momentarily by what appeared to be respect—a rare sight that didn’t escape

her notice. His suit, usually immaculate, actually bore the signs of the day's exertions.

"Nice work, Paige," Putnam said between labored breaths, his usual skepticism seemingly worn away by the chase. Riley offered only a nod, her chest heaving as she fought to steady her breathing. Her body felt every bit of the struggle, muscles protesting the sudden demand she had placed upon them. It was a familiar discomfort.

As Prendergast and his officers arrived on the scene, Riley forced her weary body upright, extending a hand to Aldrich to help him to his feet. The man's eyes were wild, the fight drained from them but leaving behind a flicker of defiance.

"Derek Aldrich, you're under arrest for cyberstalking and criminal libel," she informed him, her voice firm despite the fatigue. As she recited his Miranda rights, there was a mechanical nature to the words—necessary, practiced, an incantation of the law that bound them all. She felt the weight of Derek's defeat; his body no longer tensed in resistance but slumped, resigned to the handcuffs that bound his wrists.

Riley's grip on Derek Aldrich's arm was firm, a professional restraint that mirrored the calm that had begun to settle over her. The chaos of the chase dissipated as she turned him over to the arriving police officers.

For a moment, Riley allowed herself to be just another person on this street, her senses taking in the suburban scene coming alive with whispers and fleeting glances. Neighbors, drawn by the commotion, still watched from their safe havens behind partially closed drapes, their curiosity piqued by the sight of an arrest unfolding at their doorsteps. There was a rhythmic quality to the scene—the pulsating lights of the police car syncopated with the soft murmurs of the watching crowd—a domestic symphony set against the backdrop of an ordinary neighborhood disrupted.

She observed the faces peering out—their expressions a mix of concern, intrigue, and the undeniable thrill of witnessing the law at close quarters. She knew these faces

would forget all this by tomorrow, their lives resuming the steady beat of the everyday. But for her, the detective, the mother, the teacher—this was the rhythm of a different reality that she hadn't experienced for many months.

As Prendergast and his police team led Aldrich away, the last remnants of Riley's adrenaline ebbed. "I'm too old for this," she muttered.

"Wow, that was quite a chase!" Ann Marie exclaimed, her voice filled with exhilaration. "From the moment we stepped foot in that house, my heart was pounding like a drum. Then, hearing him upstairs and giving chase... I'd never felt so alive! And you, Riley," she continued, her sparkling blue eyes beaming at her partner. "The way you anticipated Aldrich's path, cut through the alley and intercepted him - it was like watching a chess master predict their opponent's moves. Truly impressive!"

But Riley felt certain that they hadn't reached the end of this case. There were more pieces of this puzzle, and they were likely to be darker and more difficult than this one.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Riley's gaze was fixed on the figure seated behind the glass. She thought Derek Aldrich looked younger than when she had been chasing him. She knew he was in his mid-twenties, but bent over the table he looked more like a skinny teenager. His light brown hair was combed neatly, and his dark eyes darted anxiously about the room.

A typical young geek, she thought. He'd been skillful at evading capture or even detection, but his flight on foot had been clumsy.

Aldrich sat flanked by his public defender—a young man with earnest eyes whose name was Jonah Bell—and the city's prosecuting attorney, a sharp-featured woman known for her tenacity, Elise Hammond.

Ann Marie Putnam, and Prendergast all stood outside the interrogation room beside Riley, watching through the glass that was a mirror when seen from the other side.

"Can't hear a damn thing," Ann Marie complained.

It was inconvenient but true. The two lawyers had insisted on keeping the room's mic turned off until they'd finished their consultation.

"Body language says it all," Riley replied. Aldrich's fidgeting hands, the way he leaned forward, then recoiled, spoke volumes of his desperation.

Bell seemed to be doing most of the talking, gesturing emphatically toward the paperwork before them, while Hammond listened, her expression unmoved, the pen

poised in her hand like a sword ready to strike.

Derick Aldrich sat slumped, displaying none of his former bravado, his public defender's hand resting reassuringly on his back. As Riley and her colleagues watched, he shifted uncomfortably in his chair, the stark fluorescent lighting casting pallid shadows across his features. His hands fidgeted, and he swallowed too frequently.

"Looks like our Mr. Aldrich is worried," murmured Ann Marie.

"We've got him dead to rights," Prendergast noted. "And he knows it."

Putnam turned his attention toward Riley. "So, Agent Paige, you still haven't told me—how did you find Aldrich holed up in that old house? It was like you had a map straight to him."

Riley couldn't help but let a small smirk form on her lips. She enjoyed the enigma she presented to Putnam, the seasoned agent who found her methods unorthodox at best and infuriating at worst. She met his gaze squarely, letting silence stretch between them before answering.

"Trade secrets, Putnam," she said with a nonchalant shrug. "But trust me, sometimes it's all about connecting the dots no one else sees."

Putnam snorted, folding his arms across his chest. "You expect me to believe it was just good detective work? There's something you're not telling me."

"Believe what you want," Riley countered, her voice light. She turned back to the glass, watching Aldrich interact with his public defender.

"Whatever helps you sleep at night," Putnam muttered, but there was a grudging

respect in his tone.

Riley heard Ann Marie suppress a chuckle, knowing full well the covert role Van Roff has played in the suspect's capture. Riley was glad Ann Marie was keeping quiet about her "trade secret."

A sharp rap on the glass jarred Riley from her thoughts, snapping her back to the situation at hand. Elise Hammond tapped a staccato rhythm on the one-way mirror.

"Looks like it's showtime," murmured Detective Prendergast, his voice a low rumble beside her.

Riley, with Ann Marie and Putnam in tow, filed into the sterile room, leaving Prendergast to watch and listen from outside now that the mic was turned back on. Jonah Bell, Aldrich's public defender, stood up, his suit ill-fitting and crumpled like a paper bag.

"Mr. Aldrich has made a decision," Jonah Bell announced, his voice betraying a hint of triumph. "He's prepared to plead guilty and provide information crucial to your investigation, in exchange for a reduced sentence."

The prosecuting attorney nodded her iron-gray bob and retreated to a chair away from the table. "Make your case then," she challenged them.

Aldrich's eyes flickered among them, the arrogance that once filled them now diluted with something akin to desperation. A plea deal was his lifeline, but what he offered in return would determine the weight of the anchor he'd have to carry.

"Start talking, Aldrich," Riley commanded. "This had better be useful."

She perched on the edge of the table, deliberately invading his space. Her proximity

was a silent assertion of control, a reminder that she was the gatekeeper between him and the freedom he so desperately sought.

“Look, I didn’t kill those people,” Aldrich began, his voice rough, like gravel underfoot. He leaned back in his chair, trying to reclaim some semblance of the power he had wielded before his capture. “You’ve got the wrong guy if you think I’m behind any murders.”

Riley observed him closely, her every sense tuned to the nuances of his speech, the telltale signs that separated truth from deception. Every BAU agent developed skills of reading the subtext so often woven through words. Combined with Riley’s unusual perceptions, that made lying to her very difficult.

“Let’s hear what you have,” she said.

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As she waited for more, Aldrich shifted uncomfortably under her scrutiny. Whatever game he had been playing, he seemed aware that he was no longer the one making the rules.

“It’s kind of a complicated story,” he muttered. “It goes back more than twenty years.”

“We’re listening.”

“There was a mathematician, a woman,” Aldrich told them, “who was like royalty to the Cipher Society—actually more like a patron saint. A martyr who has never been forgotten.” He drummed a staccato rhythm on the table, betraying a nervous energy. “Maybe you’ve heard that the Cipher Society has a vendetta against the Virginia Educators for Excellence in Mathematics—VEEM. It began with her.”

“And her name was ...?” Riley prompted.

“Martha Lancaster,” Aldrich continued, his gaze distant. “She was brilliant, misunderstood. She was a math professor at Corbin College.”

He seemed to be reciting a legend. “She was a shining light in the Cipher Society, but she also sought validation from VEEM, tried to become a member, and nearly did. But there were people who cut Martha’s ambitions short.” Aldrich drew in a breath, then continued, “The first was Garrett Fenn, an esteemed professor at Blenheim College.”

Riley sensed Ann Marie grow tense beside her, and heard Putnam’s sharp inhale near

her other shoulder. Garrett Fenn's lifeless body had been found several nights prior in Roanoke.

Riley's gaze fixed on Derek Aldrich as he leaned back in his chair. "Go on," she commanded.

"Martha's application to VEEM was solid," he said, "until Fenn exposed what he claimed was plagiarism." The word "plagiarized" rolled off his tongue with scornful emphasis.

"Martha's ideas weren't all hers," he continued. "Not originally, anyhow. They came from a high school teacher in Slippery Rock. Margaret Whitfield was her name."

A jolt of surprise shot through Riley at the mention of her former algebra teacher, Mrs. Whitfield. There had been a rumor, she remembered—a whispered tale of stolen scholarly work. Mrs. Whitfield had never wanted to talk about it. Riley felt a pang of guilt for not recognizing her favorite teacher's pain, for being just another student who was oblivious to the scars left behind on a dedicated teacher's heart.

"What sort of ideas are we talking about?" Riley asked.

"Curriculum ideas. Creative methods to use in a classroom."

Of course, Riley thought, thinking of those moments of inspiration in Mrs. Whitfield's class.

"So Martha's problems began when she was caught copying Whitfield's work," Putnam commented, trying to clarify the story.

"Yes, and her department head, Clive Brown at Corbin College, fired her from her teaching job at Corbin College. Destroyed any chance she had at redemption." He

seemed to be struggling not to smile when he added, “And then there Patricia Warren, then-President of VEEM. She didn’t just deny Martha’s application—she spearheaded the charge against her. Both of those people, Clive Brown and Patricia Warren, disappeared soon after the scandal broke. Vanished off the face of the earth.”

“So you think that Martha Lancaster ...?”

“Oh, I’m certain of it. Martha avenged herself by murdering both of them.

Patricia Warren, Riley thought.

Her body had been the one buried all those years ago in the Blue Ridge Wilderness Park. And now Riley was sure of something else. The latitude that had been found pinned to Robert Nash’s body, the longitude still unknown, pointed to the long-missing Clive Brown’s unknown grave.

“But Martha Lancaster didn’t survive the disgrace,” Aldrich continued. “After both of those people disappeared, she...she took her own life.” He gazed downward pensively for a moment.

Riley’s thoughts were interrupted as Putnam leaned closer, his breath warming her ear. “Kinda ironic, isn’t it? The Cipher Society venerating a plagiarist as their patron saint?”

Glancing at him, Riley saw the disbelief in Putnam’s eyes. He was trying to make sense of it all, just like she was.

“I don’t guess you can understand,” Aldrich said, leaning forward. “The Cipher Society has got some specific ideas about ownership of knowledge. To us, Martha’s story is a cautionary tale—a martyrdom.”

“You’re saying this killer was a martyr?” Putnam snapped.

Aldrich’s public defender glanced at him, tension in his posture.

Aldrich ignored both of them. “Plagiarism,” he replied, the word dripping with mockery, “is a specious notion—a made-up idea meant to benefit people with power. The Cipher Society doesn’t acknowledge its existence. We don’t believe in hoarding knowledge like it’s some kind of precious commodity.” He leaned back, his chair creaking under the shift. “Martha Lancaster was ahead of her time, becoming a symbol for a fundamental truth we uphold—information must be free.”

Riley remained silent, processing what she heard. The Cipher Society had chosen their saint not despite her flaws, but because of them—a symbol of a belief that ran contrary to everything the academic world stood for. It was a twisted form of justice that made her skin crawl. She thought of the hours she’d spent studying case files, teaching eager minds the importance of intellectual property.

“Yes, Martha was ...” Aldrich paused as if to emphasize the word, “a martyr to this foolish conventional belief. There’s no other way to put it.”

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A martyr. The word echoed in Riley's mind. Martha Lancaster, a woman scorned by academia, now sanctified by radicals for her transgressions. Her impulse was to call an end to the discussion, to let Aldrich face a judge unsupported and face the longest sentence that came from his guilt. But her own sense of justice warred with the perverse logic presented; her gut told her there was more she needed to learn from this man, layers beneath layers waiting to be peeled back.

She noticed that Hammond, the steely-eyed prosecutor, appeared equally focused on Aldrich's responses and was taking copious notes.

"Free information doesn't justify murder," Riley said sternly. "Knowing the Cipher Society's creed is one thing, but if you can use it as justification for murder, I see no reason why you yourself should be free in the world. You've made yourself complicit."

"But I'm not the one using it as a reason," he protested. "I've never killed anyone in my whole life. Remember, the murders I'm talking about happened when I was a baby."

"But there have been more since then," Ann Marie said. "Margaret Whitfield has been killed. And Garrett Fenn and Robert Nash."

"So I've heard," Aldrich said.

"They all must be connected," Putnam said.

"Of course they are," Aldrich said softly, then fell silent. When he spoke again, his

voice gaining strength, he sounded angry. “Martha’s suicide wasn’t enough to stop the chain of events that her work and her unjustified fate had set into motion. More people who associated with Martha Lancaster’s downfall and death have been struck down, and I wouldn’t be shocked if more were to follow.”

“What was their involvement?” Riley asked.

“Well, I don’t suppose Margaret Whitfield was guilty of anything,” Aldrich said with a shrug. “But it was her work that instigated the trouble, and somebody decided she should die for it.”

And she did nothing to harm anybody, Riley thought sadly. She was simply very good at math. Riley’s mind reeled, memories flooding back. Mrs. Whitfield’s gentle patience when explaining complex equations. She could still hear the scratch of chalk against blackboard, see the dust motes dancing in shafts of sunlight through the classroom windows.

“What about Garrett Fenn, who was killed several nights ago?” Riley asked.

“And Robert Nash, who was killed just last night?” Ann Marie added.

“Garrett Fenn was a math professor at Blenheim College in Roanoke,” Aldrich said. “He was an admirer and friend of Margaret Whitfield, who knew about her work. He’s the one who reported Martha Lancaster’s plagiarism to VEEM. And back then, Robert Nash was Vice President of VEEM, and he made it his mission to ensure everyone knew of Martha’s so-called plagiarism.”

“That’s what we’re faced with now,” Putnam said. “Somebody has continued the vendetta.”

Riley felt her heart rate pick up, a silent drumroll in her chest. Who had taken up

Martha's mantle? Who saw fit to judge and execute based on the twisted ideals of a society that defied the very foundations of education and law? And who had kept the notion of revenge alive for twenty years?

"You need to tell us a lot more, Aldrich," Riley demanded. "Why do you think we should show you any consideration, even think about lightening your sentence?"

"Because I think maybe I do know who the killer is," Aldrich said, glaring directly at Riley with a spark of something unreadable in his gaze.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Riley stared back at Derek Aldrich, holding his gaze until he turned his dark eyes away.

"If you have information about a killer," she told him. "You'd better just tell us. Withholding could bring you other charges."

"Get it out now," Putnam's voice was hard. "What do you know?"

"Recently, the society has received some anonymous email," Aldrich said. "Messages vowing revenge on those who wronged the society's martyr."

"What did these messages say exactly?" Riley prodded.

Aldrich closed his eyes. He recited from memory, "I vow by the sacred shrine we hold most dear to take the lives of those who destroyed Martha Lancaster."

"Take the lives" was a chilling promise, and Riley felt a shiver despite the warmth of the room. She watched Aldrich closely, attempting to decipher if his response was rehearsed or genuine, but she saw no telltale signs of deceit or evasion.

In her ultra-polite voice, Ann Marie asked, “Please tell us what is meant by ‘the sacred shrine we hold most dear.’”

“The sacred shrine,” Aldrich replied with a somber tone that verged on reverence, “refers to Martha Lancaster’s grave in the Kirkwood Hill Cemetery over in Slychester. CIPHER Society members consider it hallowed ground and sometimes make pilgrimages there. I go there a lot, it’s just a short drive from here. It’s a lovely place, almost worthy of her.”

“But these emails suggest more than a pilgrimage to a gravesite,” Riley said. “They vow to take lives.”

“Indeed,” Aldrich confirmed. “And I believe the sender has already done that.”

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Putnam looked like he might attack the young geek physically, so Riley hurried to speak again. “You’re saying you know who is behind these messages?” she asked calmly.

“Martha had a son,” Aldrich revealed. “Timothy. He was in his late teens when she—when it all happened.”

“Where is Timothy now?” Ann Marie asked, as though this was just a casual conversation. “Have you been in touch with him lately, Derek?”

“He was declared legally dead years ago,” he replied, his shoulders lifting in a shrug. “He disappeared not long after his mother’s death. Nobody heard from him again.”

“And what do you think, Derek?” Ann Marie asked in the same conversational tone as before. “Do you believe that Timothy Lancaster is dead?”

“If you want my personal input,” he replied. “My opinion is no.”

“I do value your opinion,” Ann Marie said with a smile. “So if you’re right and Timothy is still alive, can you tell us who else might be in danger from him?”

Riley saw the suspect’s face relax as he turned to Ann Marie.

She knows what she’s doing, Riley thought. He responds better to her because she’s young and pretty.

“No,” Aldrich replied, “But I don’t claim to understand how his mind works.”

“Thank you, Derek, I know you’re trying to help us. But you didn’t answer my other question. Have you seen him or heard from him yourself?”

He leaned toward Ann Marie when he answered. “No, it was like he vanished into thin air. But rumors persist within the society. Whispers that he’s still out there, somewhere.”

“And you agree, don’t you Derek?” Ann Marie chirped. “What can you tell us about that?”

Derek leaned back in his chair. He was calm, almost eerily so. “I had been piecing together Timothy’s digital footprint. It was like chasing a ghost through the internet—traces of activity under different aliases, sporadic appearances in obscure forums. It’s something I do pretty well. And I thought maybe I was close to something when the stormtroopers interrupted my search.”

“Why are you so certain no current member of the Cipher Society is behind these killings?” Putnam took the opportunity to get in a question.

Derek scoffed, shaking his head with an air of condescension. “That’s not how the society operates, Agent Putnam. That’s not the kind of people we are. We’re thinkers, analysts—not killers. Violence has never been part of our creed.”

Putnam bristled at the response, leaning forward until he was nearly nose-to-nose with Derek. “Or maybe,” he said, his voice rising with anger, “you’re concocting this elaborate story about Timothy Lancaster to shield one of your own. Maybe even yourself.”

Jonah Bell, the defense attorney, broke in smoothly, “My client has been

cooperative. We've agreed to provide all the data from his investigation. It's up to you to determine if it leads anywhere definitive."

"Your story is full of holes, Aldrich," Putnam spat.

Bell rose to his feet. "That's it. We're done here," he declared. He called for the guard to return his client to his cell.

"Let's go," Riley said, getting to her feet.

Without comment, Putnam turned and stormed ahead out into the hallway, his shoulders rigid, a man clearly at odds with the world.

Detective Prendergast, who had been watching through the interrogation room's 2-way mirror and listening to the interview over the intercom, met them in the hallway.

"Let's talk this over," he said, leading them toward a nearby conference room. The door closed with a decisive click behind them, and the three agents gathered around the polished surface of a conference table with the police detective.

Prendergast surveyed the group, his eyes asking the question before his lips formed the words. "Thoughts on what Derek just told us?"

Putnam, hands braced against the cool wood, leaned in. "It's a fable," he said dismissively. "This Timothy Lancaster—he's a ghost, a Cipher Society myth." There was conviction in his voice, the kind that left little room for doubt or debate.

Riley considered the ramifications. Was Derek using a legend to mask his own guilt? Her instincts, honed by years of delving into the psyches of killers, told her otherwise. And if Timothy Lancaster was alive, driven by a twisted sense of filial devotion, they were dealing with a killer molded by two decades of silent fury.

Her mind went back to the garage, where Robert Nash's life had ended. The air there had been thick with the scent of oil and metal, yet it wasn't the disarray of tools or the car parts that had caught her attention; it was the meticulous placement of Nash's body, the ritualistic arrangement that spoke louder than any confession.

It was reverence, she thought.

The killer had been reverent, like a son might be toward a departed parent. That was what she had felt in the cold space—a dark homage to something beyond mere violence.

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She felt sure that each victim had been more than just a target; they were offerings, deliberate and carefully chosen. Her instincts told her that these murders were personal. A killer driven not by random impulse but by a deep-seated need for retribution would fit the part perfectly. A son avenging his mother's ruin, perhaps?

I'm all but sure of it, she thought.

But Riley knew she couldn't talk about her feeling of connection with the killer, with her detection of a residue of reverence at the crime scene. She had to frame her thoughts differently.

But how?

"Your thoughts, Agent Paige?" Prendergast's voice broke through her reverie, his eyes searching for an answer.

The room fell silent, every pair of eyes trained on her.

"It could be Timothy Lancaster," she said. "Martha's son...a person like that fits the profile for this kind of vendetta. In fact, I think he's our most likely suspect."

But what if I'm wrong? She wondered.

A gut feeling, however powerful, was only that—a feeling. She recognized that what she was suggesting had the potential for a breakthrough or a descent into a wild goose chase.

“Our most likely suspect?” Putnam scoffed. “A man who was declared dead years ago? Do you see any reason to believe he’s even alive?”

“If we have no evidence he’s actually dead, then we have to consider him as a strong possibility,” Riley replied.

“Other ideas?” Prendergast asked, turning to the group.

It was Ann Marie who spoke up next.

“We should consider the possibility that the killer might target someone from VEEM next. After all, that organization is at the center of this case. The rejection of Martha Lancaster’s bid to join VEEM was what precipitated her downfall.”

“Right,” Riley put in, nodding at Ann Marie’s suggestion. “And two of the victims were members. We should alert the board members and ensure they’re protected.”

They all agreed that was the way to proceed.

“Okay, we also have Aldrich’s computer from the raid,” Prendergast stated. “It needs to be checked out ASAP.”

“I’ll have it sent to our techs at Quantico right away,” Putnam said. “They can start digging for any trace of Timothy Lancaster.”

“That’s going to take time,” Prendergast said. “If he’s out there, if he still exists, and if he’s our killer, we need to find him before he can strike again.”

Riley watched as the gears of the investigation began to turn faster, each cog setting into motion the next phase of their search. She could feel the energy of the room build, a collective determination settling over the team.

“We need to focus on who his next intended victim might be,” she said, her tone shifting to one of urgency. “That needs to be our main focus right now. If this killer is following a pattern, then we’re on borrowed time. He killed his two most recent victims during the last two nights in a row. He’s accelerating his pace.”

Her colleagues understood the implications. She didn’t have to spell it out; if they were right about the murderer’s schedule, someone else was already marked for death that very night. And while the prospect of catching a killer was what drove them all, this was also about saving a life.

“Let’s get moving,” she urged, her thoughts on the lives that hung in the balance, the unseen face of a killer. A familiar race against the clock had begun.

She cast a sidelong glance at Ann Marie, who met her gaze with an unspoken understanding. Riley knew they were thinking the same thing. They needed to get in touch with Van Roff again. With his knack for bending rules, he could delve into digital depths that others wouldn’t discover. He might be their secret weapon in this hunt.

The conference room felt suddenly claustrophobic, the air charged with urgency. The window to prevent another tragedy was rapidly closing.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Gwen Beck stepped out into the lingering warmth of an August night in Slychester, the air soft and heavy with the scent of blooming jasmine from her garden. The streetlights cast a gentle amber glow, guiding her path to the car parked in the driveway, keys jingling in her hand

As she walked, the memories of Hugh filled her mind. Two years had passed since he left this world, yet his absence still often caught her unawares when she set the table

for one or found an old photograph wedged in a book. Gwen shook her head gently, as if to dispel the thoughts, and focused instead on the evening ahead.

Retirement had been a daunting precipice for Gwen, to find herself teetering on the edge of irrelevance after decades chasing stories for the Slychester Eagle, the local newspaper. But now, as she walked toward her car, her mind buzzed with anticipation, not unlike the old thrill of uncovering a lead. Teaching at Corbin College had sparked something within her—a renewed sense of purpose that filled the void left by giving up her reporter’s badge.

Her lesson plan for tonight’s class was neatly arranged in her mind, the order of information she would offer her students. Gwen imagined their young faces, alight with curiosity, as she taught them the wisdom of ethical journalism, the importance of the written word, and the power of truth. Each night class was a step toward fulfilling this newfound mission—to mold the next generation of vigilant scribes in a world that was rife with half-truths and sensationalism. She smiled to herself, the edges of loss momentarily blunted by enthusiasm for her craft.

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Gwen's fingers closed awkwardly around the bunch of keys, the metal cool and slippery against her skin as she zeroed in on the one that would unlock her faithful old sedan. But then, as her hand reached out to grasp the door handle, something flitted at the edge of her vision—a subtle disturbance in the otherwise tranquil night. Her heart skipped a beat, instincts honed from years of investigative reporting snapping to attention. She wondered if it was just a cat on its nightly prowl or perhaps the rustle of leaves in a breeze.

Her grip on the key tightened reflexively. Decades of chasing shadows that often turned into stories had taught her that there was always more to the picture than what met the eye. The serenity of the evening was pierced by that single, fleeting moment of doubt, leaving Gwen with a lingering sense of unease.

Even so, the sudden impact seemed to come from nowhere. An unseen assailant barreled into her with the force of a freight train, and her body lurched forward from the unexpected blow.

“Help!” she cried out instinctively, hoping someone would hear her plea through the closed windows and drawn curtains of her neighbors' homes.

As she staggered from the initial shock, Gwen's survival instincts—those same impulses that had once driven her to dig deeper when a story didn't add up—propelled her into motion. She twisted her body in a desperate attempt to escape, her shoes scraping against the rough asphalt as she fought to put distance between herself and the threat. She pushed her aging muscles beyond their comfort, spurred by the primal need to survive that knew no age. Despite the terror, Gwen Beck was not going down without a fight.

But then Gwen's breath caught in her chest as the ground rushed up to meet her, the impact driving the air from her lungs in a whoosh that left her gasping. She felt the rough scrape of asphalt against her cheek, a harsh reminder of reality pressing into her skin. Her attacker was on her before she could even think to scream again, his comparative youth evident in the swiftness and strength that pinned her down.

The driveway beneath her felt cold and unyielding. Gwen's mind, still sharp despite her years, scrambled for options, for any advantage she might leverage. But the weight bearing down on her seemed absolute, the hands that held her face to the ground impersonal in their force. A silent curse passed through her thoughts—a lament for the quiet evening that had turned so violently chaotic. She fought to draw breath, to marshal her strength, but her assailant's dominance was clear. In this struggle, experience and determination were pitted against raw vigor.

Gwen clawed at the ground, seeking something—anything—to grasp onto. Her nails caught against small, loose stones, the sting of abrasion a minor distraction from the direness of her situation. But before she could gather a handful of stones, a new terror gripped her.

A thin cord encircled Gwen's neck. It bit into her flesh, a serpent coiling with deadly intent. Her fingers now flew to the tightening cord, scrabbling frantically for a hold that would lessen the crushing pressure. But it was like trying to grasp water—an exercise in futility that only heightened her panic.

Her pulse throbbed violently under the stranglehold, a drumbeat in her ears that drowned out the distant sounds of the suburban night. Hugh's face flashed across her mental vision, a bittersweet memory of safety and love now so far removed from her current peril. Gwen's body convulsed in a primal fight for survival, yet each movement seemed to only hasten the descent of darkness at the edges of her sight.

Breath came in ragged sips, the world around her narrowing to a tunnel of dimming

light. There was a surreal quality to these final conscious moments, a detachment from the violence being wrought upon her as if she were already a ghost observing the scene. As consciousness began to slip away, Gwen's last thoughts were not of fear or anger, but a deep, overwhelming longing for the comforting presence of those she had loved and lost.

*

Timothy's knees pressed hard against the cool grass, dampness seeping through the fabric of his dark jeans. His breath came in short bursts. Gwen Beck, the woman who had once held the power of the pen, now lay motionless beneath him.

Was she dead?

He'd planned for silence, for swift submission, but Gwen's ferocity had rattled him. She had clawed at his wrists, and her scream—a piercing alarm—had shattered the stillness of the night. He hadn't anticipated a struggle. Now, an eerie calm had settled over the scene like an accusation. His hands trembled slightly as he wiped the sweat from his brow, his eyes scanning the shadows for any sign of movement.

In spite of all that had occurred here in Gwen Beck's driveway, the neighboring houses were all silent. Timothy replayed the scream in his head, wondering if it had been loud enough to penetrate the walls of a suburban evening's recreation or slumber. He could not afford witnesses; there was too much at stake.

His mother's name had been dragged through the mud by Gwen's words, her legacy tainted by the stories that Gwen exposed. This final act was meant to be a cleansing fire rather than a beacon drawing prying eyes to that history.

He rose to his feet, his gaze lingering on the outline of Gwen's body in the dim porch light. A sense of urgency gripped him.

Maintain control, he told himself sharply.

Although the potential consequences of discovery were terrible, panic would only lead to mistakes, and Timothy Lancaster was no amateur. He had come this far, had moved like the ghost he was supposed to be, had silenced those who had wronged his mother with meticulous care. Gwen Beck was to be the last one, his final act of retribution. Then he could vanish again.

Drawing a deep breath, he forced his heart rate to slow, schooling his features into an expression of detached calm. The evening air carried the distant hum of a highway, ordinary sounds that underscored the surreal nature of his task. He surveyed the street, the driveways, the curtained windows. No lights flickered on; no doors creaked open. It seemed that Slychester slept on, oblivious.

Timothy allowed himself a thin smile. The night was still his ally. With a final, cautious glance, he prepared to move Gwen. All he needed was to remain unseen, to carry out this last deed without the complication of discovery. And then, finally, his mother's honor would be restored.

Satisfied that he was safe for the moment, Timothy put his fingers against Gwen's neck, seeking the rhythmic thrum of life beneath her skin. When he found it—a steady pulse beating back against his touch—a silent exhale of relief escaped him.

This was good. This was necessary. He did not wish for her to depart just yet, not like Garrett Fenn, whose academic rigor had been silenced without ceremony; or Margaret Whitfield, whose nurturing mind had been so brutally extinguished; or Robert Nash, a pillar of mathematical integrity now crumbled into nothingness.

No, Gwen Beck deserved a different ending. The others had been mere preparations, their lives snuffed out as smoothly as they had lived them—unassuming, methodical, almost forgettable. But Gwen...she was the final note in his symphony of vengeance,

and Timothy intended to conduct her ending with the precision of a maestro savoring each drawn-out pause before the coda.

With the assurance that Gwen's life force still flowed, Timothy steeled himself for the task at hand. He bent down, sliding his arm beneath her knees and another securing her shoulders. The weight of her body was a tangible reminder of the burden he carried—the weight of his mother's tarnished legacy resting upon his own shoulders.

He lifted Gwen, her limp form a stark contrast to the fierce spirit she'd shown only moments ago. Through the darkness, he maneuvered around the outside of her house, every step taken with a predator's grace.

His car waited patiently in the alley that ran behind these sleepy homes. He carried her unconscious body to the vehicle and settled her into the trunk. Then, he allowed himself a moment to savor the satisfaction of his completed work.

Timothy shut the lid of the truck, walked to the driver's side of the car, and slid behind the wheel. In this familiar space, he was in control; every decision, every turn was his to command. As he drove through Slychester's slumbering streets, his thoughts fixated on the moment Gwen would awaken. The expectation of her eyes opening wide with realization and fear gave him a perverse sense of satisfaction. She would find herself held in an unfamiliar place, promising finality rather than release.

Timothy would make sure that the harm she had inflicted upon his mother—the public disgrace of Martha Lancaster—would be the last thought to run through Gwen's mind. He imagined her regret. It would be wonderful poetic justice.

That was why he wanted Gwen Beck alive, but for only a short time more.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

“Any luck?” Ann Marie asked Riley, who sat hunched over her tablet, tapping rhythmically against the screen.

With just Riley and Ann Marie still in the conference room, it felt like a cavernous space. Their colleagues had gone to Officer Prendergast’s office with the goal of alerting the board of VEEM of the danger they might be in, and also ensure that they’d be protected.

Riley looked up, the dark circles under her eyes pronounced, betraying her weariness. “Not yet,” she replied.

Ann Marie nodded, understanding all too well the frustration that came with hitting dead ends.

“I’m going to call our man in Seattle,” she said, dialing the number Riley had given her for Van Roff. When his voice crackled through the speaker, she explained their urgent need to locate Timothy Lancaster.

There was a brief silence, then Van echoed on the other end of the line, “Timothy Lancaster?”

“That’s right. He’s the son of —”

“I know who he is, or is supposed to be,” Van’s voice crackled over the speakerphone. “That name carries a lot of ... gravitas.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Timothy Lancaster is like a ghost in the machine, Ann Marie. He’s a myth in the geek community—always one step ahead, leaving digital clues that lead to dead ends or loop back on themselves.”

Ann Marie felt her heartbeat quicken as she processed Van’s words. Lancaster’s ability to elude detection was no amateur feat if even Van Roff hadn’t found him. That kind of mastery was a skill honed by someone deeply intimate with the web’s hidden corners. Someone much like Van, but who had chosen to live and work on the dark side.

“Van, he’s a murderer,” she pressed. “He’s killed three people so far, and we’ve got to stop him before he kills again.”

“Trust me, I’ve tried. But Timothy...it’s like he’s everywhere and nowhere,” Van sighed. “He can make it seem like he’s logged in from several places at once. A phantom presence.”

“Can you try again? For us?” Ann Marie’s request carried the weight of urgency. She knew Van was their best hope, especially against such an elusive adversary.

“I owe Riley one—or ten. I’m on it.” Van’s determination was palpable, even through the phone.

“Anything you can find could be crucial,” Ann Marie told him.

“Leave it with me,” Van assured her.

“Thanks, Van,” Ann Marie said, but as she ended the call, her heart sank. They were up against an opponent who could very well outpace them all.

“Riley, we—” Ann Marie started, but Riley raised a hand, her gaze fixed on the tablet.

“Wait, I think I’ve got something,” Riley interrupted, her voice taut with restrained excitement. She turned the tablet towards Ann Marie, revealing a screen filled with text and images.

“Look at this,” Riley said, pointing to an old newspaper story that seemed to leap out from the rest of the digital noise. “An article in the Slychester Eagle, dated back to the year Martha Lancaster took her life.”

Ann Marie leaned in and read the headline: ‘Local Math Professor Disgraced in Plagiarism Scandal.’ Ann Marie grasped its importance. It was an exposé, and it could have been the catalyst for a woman’s downfall, the final nudge towards a tragic end.

“Riley...how much of the public did this story reach?” Ann Marie asked.

“It went viral,” Riley said. “It was everywhere—syndicated and shared, seen by God knows how many people. And I’m sure it was a major piece of the public shame that tore Martha Lancaster apart.”

“Who wrote it?”

“Scroll up,” Riley instructed, and there it was, stark against the white background, the byline: Gwen Beck.

“According to her bio, she was local reporter in Slychester,” Riley said.

There fell a moment of shared dread between the two agents, a silent acknowledgment of what might come next if indeed this writer came within reach of a vengeful killer.

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“She could be his next target,” Ann Marie mused, her thoughts racing as she considered the implications of Gwen Beck’s article. It wasn’t just any piece of journalism; those words had surely shattered the last pieces of Martha Lancaster’s reputation.

“Very possibly,” Riley replied, her dark hair framing her face as she bent over the tablet again. “If we’re dealing with revenge, then the reporter is right in the crosshairs.”

“Twenty years later...” Ann Marie’s voice trailed off, the idea that such hatred could endure for two decades unnerving her. She had seen grief age and mature into acceptance in her father’s mortuary, but this was different—this was life and death in the raw. It was about a wound that festered, a vendetta undiminished by time.

“Time doesn’t heal all wounds, not when it comes to matters like these,” Riley said, as though reading Ann Marie’s mind. “Especially for someone who believes justice was never served.”

“We need to know if Gwen Beck is still alive. If she’s still in Slychester.”

“If she is, we need to talk with her right away,” Riley replied, her tone grim. “And let’s hope we can get to her before he does.”

Ann Marie watched Riley’s fingers charge across the tablet with an intensity that matched the gravity of their situation.

“Got her,” Riley muttered. “Gwen Beck is still in Winchester. She’s widowed and

retired from the Eagle...but she's teaching night classes at Corbin College."

"Let's get a warning to her," Ann Marie voiced, her hand already moving towards her phone.

Riley was on the same wavelength, her eyes focused and intense. "We need to find her contact information first," she said, opening up a new tab on her tablet.

Together, they scoured online directories and public records, their fingers flying over touchscreens and keyboards until they found Gwen Beck's number.

"We need to call her right this minute," Riley asserted with renewed urgency, quickly punching in the digits they had unearthed into her own FBI-issued phone.

"Hello, may I ask who's calling?" a man's voice answered, gruff and unexpected.

"Special Agents Riley Paige and Ann Marie Esmer, FBI," Riley stated. "We need to speak with Gwen Beck."

"I'm Officer Claude Burgher, Slychester police," he identified himself, and Ann Marie felt like her heart skipped a beat.

"Officer Burgher? What's your involvement with Ms. Beck?"

Ann Marie watched Riley's posture stiffen as Officer Burgher's words crackled through the speakerphone. "Apparently, Ms. Beck has gone missing."

"Gone missing? When and how?"

"A neighbor heard noises outside Ms. Beck's home," Burgher explained. "She didn't go out to check right away, thinking it was unimportant. But a few minutes later, she

decided to take a look and saw that Beck's car was still in the driveway. Then she thought she saw signs of a struggle...but her elderly neighbor wasn't in sight, and she didn't answer her home phone. So she called the police."

"They didn't find her?" Riley prodded.

"No, she wasn't at home, neither inside or outside," Burgher confirmed. "And she never showed up for the night class she was supposed to teach tonight at Corbin College. There were some marks in the drive that could indicate a struggle, and her car keys were found on the ground. I'm at her house right now. It looks like we've got a ... situation."

"We certainly do, Officer. But my partner and I are on it. We'll get right on this and circle back to you shortly."

Riley ended the call, her eyes meeting Ann Marie's. Now they both knew something for certain—Gwen Beck was not just a possible target; she was likely to already be a victim.

"Riley," Ann Marie said, her words clipped by concern, "There's no body, and no message, at least not yet. This killer—if he's taken her, he's not playing by his own rules anymore. And she may well still be alive."

Riley was pacing, her movements sharp and precise. "I think you're right. An abduction. It's a new play for him," she mused out loud. "No algebra, nobody left behind. He's keeping her alive for something...something more personal."

"Could it be he's planning something special for the reporter who wrote about his mother?" Ann Marie ventured. "Some kind of ... finale?"

A nod from Riley was all the confirmation Ann Marie needed. Her gut churned at the

thought of what horrors might await Gwen Beck if they didn't intervene in time.

"Putnam and Prendergast need to know about this," Riley said. "They need to understand—the killer has made his move."

Together, they rushed out of the room and down the short hallway. As they burst into Detective Prendergast's office, Putnam and the detective looked up, startled.

Ann Marie relayed the update, her words tumbling out in a rush. "A reporter named Gwen Beck is missing—believed to be abducted. Shortly before Martha Lancaster's suicide, Beck wrote an article in the Slychester Eagle about her, a complete exposé."

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“She lives in Slychester,” Ann Marie added. “Tonight her neighbor suspected a problem, called it in. The police checked; she wasn’t at home. She hasn’t made it to the evening class she’s been teaching at Corbin College, and her car’s untouched. But her keys were found in the driveway. We’re thinking it was an abduction.”

“Abduction? A different M.O.?” Putnam snapped. “Are you sure this is the same guy?”

“It’s an escalation,” Riley said firmly, her experience with the darkest of minds shining through her composed exterior. “You know as well as I do, some serials change their own rules as they approach their endgame. Maybe he sees this as his magnum opus.”

“His masterpiece,” Ann Marie whispered. It was a grotesque thought—but a fitting term. “If he wants to draw this out, to savor his final act, then maybe we still have time to catch him before he kills her.”

“If we can find where he’s taken her...” Riley interjected,

“But how do we track him?” Prendergast asked, a frown creasing his brow. “How do we find where he’s taken her?”

“Patterns,” Riley said suddenly, her voice cutting through the tension. “We need to go back over everything, every clue he’s left us, everything we know. There has to be something we’ve missed.”

The silence that followed was almost a physical presence in the room. Ann Marie could see the cogs turning behind Riley’s dark eyes, the way her brows knitted

together in concentration. There was an electricity to the moment, a sense of a fuse burning down, and Ann Marie felt it tingling in her veins.

“Wait,” Riley said, breaking the stillness. Her voice had that edge of clarity that came when she was on the brink of an epiphany. “The anonymous email to the Cipher Society. The one Derek Aldrich quoted—the killer vowed by ‘the sacred shrine we hold most dear’ to take the lives of the people who had wronged Martha Lancaster.”

“It was a promise,” Ann Marie whispered.

“Could he be more literal?” Riley remarked.

“Martha Lancaster’s grave,” Ann Marie added. “That’s what Aldrich told us the ‘sacred shrine’ was.”

Riley’s gaze snapped to her junior partner, a silent acknowledgment of the connection made.

“Yes, and that’s in Slychester,” Riley confirmed. “That has to be it.”

“Can we get there in time?” Ann Marie asked.

Ann Marie and Riley both knew Gwen Beck’s life hung in the balance, and with each passing second, the scales tipped towards an outcome they were desperate to avoid. As for Agent Putnam, Ann Marie could see doubt in his eyes. But she knew that Riley wasn’t going to take no for an answer. Riley stood up, her movements decisive.

“We have to. Let’s get to work.”

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Gwen's consciousness surfaced slowly, each breath a ragged gasp. Her head pounded, and a raw ache circled her neck. The space around her felt close, unforgiving, and dark. Panic fluttered in her chest, but she realized that the pain was guiding her back to reality.

As she shifted, trying to understand where she was, Gwen could feel the cool press of metal against her cheek. The urge to move, to escape, surged, but her body refused to obey. With mounting dread, she tested her confines, only to find her wrists ensnared in a merciless grip. Duct tape, she realized with grim certainty, bound her hands as effectively as chains.

The air was thick, laced with the acrid tang of rubber and oil—a mechanical, lifeless scent that invaded her senses. It spoke of captivity, of vulnerability. She wanted to scream, but she could only manage a whimpering moan.

Her world was reduced to darkness and motion. Then she recognized the only sounds piercing the blackness: the steady thrum of tires on asphalt and the distant growl of an engine. Gwen's heart sank with the knowledge of where she must be—bound and trapped in the trunk of a car. Her breath came in shallow bursts, hot and panicked.

She realized that somewhere beyond the walls of her enclosure, someone else was controlling her fate. Whoever had attacked her in her driveway still held her, a trapped bird in a pitch-black night. Where they were taking her, and what awaited her at the end of this journey?

She focused on subtle shifts and turns, trying to glean any hint of her location or where she was being taken. But the world outside the metal shell remained elusive, sounds muffled as if she were submerged underwater.

In the dark, Gwen's mind began to race, unbidden images flashing with merciless clarity. The attack, so sudden it fragmented time—her keys slipping from numb

fingers, the asphalt of her driveway pressing into her knees as she fell. She had fought, oh how she had fought, but the cord around her neck pulled had tight, stealing her consciousness.

Memory tore through the fog of Gwen's mind, sharp and brutal. The weight of her attacker's body against hers, the smell of sweat and malice that had filled her nostrils as she struggled. His breath, hot and heavy against her ear,

She replayed the moments leading up to the assault, searching for a misstep, a clue. But her attacker had been swift and hard, she had seen no face, no identifying mark—only the force of hatred that had borne down upon her without warning.

Why her? The question looped endlessly, the lack of motive terrifying. She thought of her classroom, of the students who might be gathering their notebooks, awaiting a lecture that would not come. A shiver ran through her, more frightening than the chill of the trunk's isolation: her assailant could be anyone, driven by any number of slights real or imagined. She had reported many stories, after all, argued with subjects, and sometimes even with colleagues.

As the car veered once more, Gwen's head knocked against the side, pain flaring white-hot for an instant. Nausea returned, a roiling tide that began to pull her under. As the car steadied and continued along its unknown path, darkness crept back in, claiming Gwen Beck once more into unconsciousness, leaving her questions unanswered and her fate uncertain.

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His car's headlights carved a path through the darkness as Timothy Lancaster turned off the main road. Kirkwood Hill Cemetery loomed ahead, its silent stones watching over the dead. The moon hung low in the sky, bathing the world in a pallid light that seemed to ripple across the landscape like water.

In the quiet, his thoughts turned inward, reflecting on the journey that had led him here. A freelance online tutor with no fixed address, no fixed identity, Timothy had become invisible. But tonight, his actions would resonate with the clarity of long-delayed revenge.

Timothy followed the road that wound through the cemetery for about a quarter of a mile, then eased the car to a stop, the engine ticking in the stillness as it cooled. Some distance from the highway, surrounded by the slumbering dead, he was finally here. This was the place where everything would end—or begin anew.

He stepped out into the night, the car door closing with a soft thud behind him. He paused, taking in the cemetery's expanse in the moonlight, the gently rolling land, the deep shadows beneath clusters of trees, the rows of tombstones, large and small. Some bore elaborate figures, angels or cherubs with serene expressions, their stony eyes seeming to watch over the resting souls beneath them. There were a few mausoleums, those laughable monuments to the wealthy. Others were modest markers, simple stone slabs etched with names and dates.

Just as Timothy had hoped, there was no other living soul in sight. His hands hovered over the trunk release. The latch clicked, a soft sound. As the trunk lid lifted, the moonlight spilled in, illuminating Gwen Beck's form, as still and silent as the residents of this solemn ground.

Her face, stark against the dark confines of the trunk, was an eerie mask of vulnerability. Her breathing, though shallow, reminded Timothy that justice had not yet been served. He allowed himself a moment to savor the sight—to revel in the power he held over the woman who had wielded her pen like a blade against his mother's reputation.

He avoided looking at his captive's face; there was no need for emotional complications. Instead, he focused on the task. She was the means to an end he had envisioned for so long. Grasping her arm firmly, Timothy dragged Gwen from the safety of the trunk. He heard her low moan, a signal that she might be starting to awaken.

"Stay quiet," he muttered under his breath. Her form slid onto the ground, but she showed no sign of consciousness now.

He bent over and picked her up roughly, her feet dragging, scuffing the ground. With each grunt and each tug, he moved closer to what needed to be done. The cemetery around him was still, almost respectful of his mission, as if the dead understood the gravity of his purpose. But Timothy didn't stop to admire the serenity of the graves; there was no need for such distractions.

With each labored step he took, Timothy Lancaster felt the increasing weight of Gwen Beck's limp form in his arms. Her head lolled to one side as if searching for comfort in the unforgiving world around them. They moved slowly past rows of solemn graves, where some were lovingly adorned with fresh flowers that whispered of recent visits. Others stood silent and forlorn, forgotten in the passage of time, their names barely visible against the weathered stone.

After about fifty feet, he reached his destination. Here, in a sea of memories marked in stone, he paused, taking in a deep breath to steady himself. This spot held significance, a marker not just of an ending, but of the beginning of justice.

They had reached the right grave, and he let the woman's body slump onto the cold earth with a soft thud against the manicured grass of Martha Lancaster's final resting place.

His mother's voice whispered in the back of Timothy's mind, a gentle reassurance that he was doing right by her. All that remained was for Gwen to awaken fully so that he could look into her eyes as he delivered the final act of vengeance.

Timothy stood before the weathered stone that bore his mother's name. He traced the grooves of "Martha Lancaster" with a tenderness that seemed at odds with the night's grim purpose. He allowed himself a moment, feeling the weight of the years and the burden of her tarnished legacy. His voice, when it broke the silence, held a somber intensity. "I've brought her to you, Mom. At long last, you're getting your justice."

His mother had been wronged by the very world she sought to enlighten with her knowledge. Now, in this hallowed space, Timothy felt the righteousness of his cause seeping into his bones. It fortified his spirit, driving away any lingering doubt. This was more than revenge; it was the correction of a historical oversight. She would be vindicated through him, and the whispers would be silenced forever.

Timothy knelt beside Gwen, observing her shallow breathing. Frustration creased his forehead as he willed her to wake. This wasn't the confrontation he had meticulously played out in his mind. She needed to be awake for this—to comprehend the full extent of her fate, to feel the sting of retribution.

"Come on, Gwen," Timothy whispered, his voice barely breaking the silence. "I need you here."

His eyes, darkened by the gravity of the moment, remained fixed on her face, searching for any glimmer of the recognition he needed. It wasn't supposed to be like this—Gwen Beck, the woman who had torn down his mother's legacy with her

words, was supposed to face him, to understand why she was lying on the very grave she had desecrated.

The moon bathed the scene in a ghostly light, lending a macabre beauty to the tableau before him. Timothy still felt his mother's expectations, still yearned for her approval.

He brushed a lock of hair from Gwen's forehead, his touch unintentionally gentle. He remembered his mother's hands, how they used to smooth over the wrinkles in his bedspread, creating order out of chaos. This was what he was doing now—ironing out the creases of injustice, setting things right. He needed Gwen to wake, to be present, so he could finally finish his work.

Then Timothy's palm met Gwen's cheek with a force that startled even the night itself. The sharp crack of the slap seemed to linger in the air, an unwanted echo in the solemn stillness of Kirkwood Hill Cemetery. He watched, his heart hammering against his ribcage, as her head jerked to one side from the impact. Her moan was low, primal—a sign of life, but not yet the awareness he sought.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

As Riley steered her sedan through the sleepy outskirts of Slychester, the car's headlights cut a swath through the gloom. A block short of her grim destination, she spotted the familiar outline of a police cruiser.

"Looks like Officer Burgher's already here," Ann Marie murmured from the back seat. Putnam, sitting beside Riley, just gave a curt nod, his eyes surveying the scene with clinical detachment.

Riley pulled in beside the cruiser and killed the engine. She saw that two uniformed cops were standing outside the cruiser, waiting.

“Agent Paige,” one of them greeted her, his voice grave.

“Officer Burgher?” Riley asked, and he nodded. Burgher was the cop she’d spoken to earlier about Gwen Beck’s disappearance. She’d messaged him that she would need his help at the cemetery.

“Meet my partner, Officer Truman Gingham,” Burgher said, gesturing to the man beside him. Riley extended a hand to the newcomer, finding his grip firm but cautious. Gingham’s eyes were sharp, taking in the scene with a trained wariness that Riley recognized all too well.

“Agent Esmer, Agent Putnam,” she introduced her companions briefly, stepping aside as Ann Marie exchanged pleasantries, her charm momentarily slicing through the night’s seriousness. Putnam, however, merely grunted a greeting, maintaining his stoic composure.

“Thanks for joining us,” Riley said. “We believe Gwen Beck may be the captive of a man named Timothy Lancaster. We’re planning to intercept.”

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“You think he’s brought her here?” Gingham’s eyebrows rose.

“Yes, to a particular gravesite. His mother’s, Martha Lancaster.”

The glow from Officer Burgher’s tablet cast an eerie light on his earnest face as he enlarged a map of Kirkwood Cemetery. He tapped a spot with authority, “Martha Lancaster’s grave is right here.”

Riley’s eyes traced the single entry road and its offshoots that carved through the cemetery. Each branch was a decision point, a potential ambush site, or a place to lose a trail. There would be no simple chase; it was a tactical puzzle where the stakes were human life.

“Only one road in or out,” she murmured.

“Then we can just drive in and grab him at the grave,” Putnam suggested, his voice carrying a clinical detachment that grated on Riley’s nerves. His readiness to confront chaos head-on was typical, though not always practical.

“Timothy may not intend to kill her immediately,” Riley countered, her gaze never leaving the map. “It was that simple, she’d have been found dead closer to home. This could turn into a hostage situation.”

Putnam’s skepticism was clear, his body tensed as if preparing to leap into action at any moment.

But Riley knew better than to rush in blindly. Lives were not chess pieces, and

Timothy Lancaster was no predictable opponent. She'd followed many twisted corridors within the thoughts of killers. It wasn't just about finding them; it was about outmaneuvering them.

"How can we be so sure of that?" Putnam asked, his sharp eyes searching her face for doubt. For a moment he seemed about to challenge her authority, but then seemed to remember that Meredith had specifically told him to listen to Paige.

"We can't be sure," Riley replied. "But if I am right, we can't take any chances."

She turned back to the map of Kirkwood Cemetery on Burgher's tablet. "We go in quietly from different directions, jumping fences if necessary," she said, tapping three separate points along the edges. "Ann Marie, you go in here from the west. Putnam, you're on the east. I'll come through from the south."

Putnam frowned, his sharp features etched with doubt.

"Stealth gives us the advantage," Riley continued.

"Fine," Putnam conceded after a tense pause, his tone clipped.

"Burgher, Gingham, you two hold the fort here," Riley instructed, pointing to the solitary road snaking into the cemetery. "Nobody gets in or out without going past you. Check anyone thoroughly. Check cars, trunks included. Understood?"

The two officers nodded, their expressions serious as they glanced at each other before turning back to Riley. They were the final line of defense, the barrier between the suspect and any hope of escape.

"Got it, Agent Paige," Burgher confirmed.

Putnam still appeared less than thrilled, his posture rigid as he reluctantly agreed to the plan. “Let’s just get this over with,” he muttered.

With a last look at the map, Riley felt the pull of the chase, the need to end this before another life was shattered.

“Time to move,” she said, her voice low but clear. Ann Marie gave a brief nod, her eyes reflecting the same resolve that Riley felt. Putnam, followed suit grudgingly, his steps decisive as he headed off in his assigned direction.

The three FBI agents dispersed, each moving quietly through the night, planning to converge upon a common goal. Behind them, the officers stood vigilant.

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Gwen’s senses flickered back more fully as the cold grip of consciousness took hold. She realized that she wasn’t in the trunk of a car. She was out in the open on her knees, her balance unsteady. Her wrists were still bound.

A sharp yank on her hair forced her head back; moonlight washed over a weathered gravestone right in front of her.

The cemetery? She wondered, struggling to focus.

“Look at it,” a man’s voice snarled, his breath hot on her ear. “Say hello to my mother.”

She managed to read the name in silver relief: ‘Martha Lancaster’.

Gwen’s thoughts struggled with the realization of where she was—the Kirkwood Cemetery. But why?

“Apologize to her,” the voice demanded, his tone low and dangerous. “She’s listening.”

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Gwen's heart hammered against her ribs, the reality of her situation settling in. This was no random kidnapping; this was retribution for a past that Gwen had exposed to the world. She'd been captured by a man she'd assumed was long since dead—Timothy Lancaster. The grave before her was a monument to revenge, and Gwen, bound and helpless, was an unwilling participant in some kind of twisted memorial.

Gwen felt a primal fear, but she was not a woman who succumbed to fear easily. She had faced down corrupt politicians and exposed scandals over her long career.

She fought back terror, and began to feel something else—a fierce resolve not to bend to Timothy Lancaster's will. Staring at the gravestone, she knew Timothy's intentions were as cold and unyielding as the stone itself. He would never let her leave this place alive.

With her life on the line, she realized that perhaps provocation was her only means of escape—if she could throw him off balance, even for a moment. If death was staring her in the face, she would confront it head on, with the same tenacity that had defined her career and life.

“Timothy,” she began, “you expect me to beg forgiveness from a gravestone? You expect me to apologize to the silence of the night?”

She took a measured breath, willing her bound hands not to shake. “Your mother made her choices, Timothy,” Gwen continued. “One of them was to plagiarize someone else's work. The other was to end her own life.”

She could sense Timothy's growing agitation, but she pushed forward, fueled by a mixture of desperation and defiance.

"Those were her decisions to make, not mine. I reported the facts, did my job as a journalist. That's all. I have nothing to apologize for."

Gwen turned and met Timothy's gaze, her own eyes reflecting the conviction of her words.

"Your mother's actions are not my burden to bear. I cannot repent for sins that are not mine."

In that moment, Gwen Beck was more than a retired journalist or a college teacher—she was the embodiment of every story she had ever chased. She would not bend to the will of a man consumed by the shadows of the past.

Gwen's breath hitched as she saw Timothy's jaw clench, his eyes ablaze with fury that threatened to erupt. But then, a sound somewhere off in the distance—perhaps the closing of a car door or just the wind playing tricks—snatched his attention away from her for a split second.

It was all the opening she needed.

Summoning every ounce of adrenaline-fueled strength, Gwen surged to her feet, the layers of tape binding her wrists turning into an improvised weapon. With a swift and desperate arc, she swung her arms, the impact resounding with a thud as Timothy staggered backward. His body met the cold marble of his mother's headstone with a sickening crack, and he crumpled to the ground, momentarily stunned.

Gwen didn't pause to see if he would rise again. Her survival instincts screamed at her to move, to use this reprieve to put as much distance between herself and Timothy

Lancaster as humanly possible.

As she broke into a staggering run for safety, she felt a raw, primal urge to scream for help, to call out into the night. But Gwen believed any such sound would be futile. The cemetery was a desolate place at night. No one would hear her cries here. No one could save her but herself. No, the best choice was to make as little noise as possible, to disappear among the graves.

She darted between the tombstones, her bound hands a hindrance, but not enough to stop her determined escape. A labyrinth of graves stretched out before her, and she wove through them with the agility of a hunted animal fleeing its predator. She knew that if she didn't escape now, she would never have another chance.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Pain pulsed through Timothy Lancaster's skull, a pounding echo of the blow when he'd fallen against the headstone. It felt to him like a rebuke for letting his captive escape. He spat out blood, the crimson stain disappearing into the earth near his mother's grave.

"Damn it," Timothy muttered as he pushed himself up from the cold, damp grass. How could he have forgotten that Gwen Beck was not as defenseless as her age suggested, that she'd fought back when he'd first taken her from her own driveway? The sting of self-reproach was bitterer than the blood in his mouth.

Even so, he told himself, she'd been nearly unconscious when he dragged her here. Surely she couldn't get away from him in the end. Surely, her movements would be clumsy with fear and desperation. His eyes moved methodically from one dark shadow to another, searching for any hint of movement. Although the moonlight was strong, he saw nothing. The old journalist had outmaneuvered him, for now.

Timothy pulled out his phone and turned on the flashlight, checking the soil around the grave. His lips curled into a grim smile.

Heel marks scored the soft earth—a trail leading away from the grave. Gwen Beck could run, but she could not hide—not from justice, not from him. He was younger, and he had agility on his side. The woman's hands were bound. She was disadvantaged, vulnerable—how long could she even stay on her feet?

Timothy began to follow the trail.

Only a few strides along, an unexpected sight caught Timothy's attention—a pair of shoes discarded on the path as if their owner had vanished into thin air. Gwen's shoes. The heels were only medium-high, but they had been marking her escape route with gouges in the soil. But from that point on, the trail vanished.

A pang of frustration knotted his gut. But he couldn't let her get the best of him. She was smart, and her determination to escape was clear, but so was his determination to capture her, and she was running barefoot now.

Timothy moved forward with a predator's grace, his mother's voice in his mind guiding him through the darkness. The cemetery stretched out before him, a seemingly endless expanse of stone and sorrow. Gravestones seemed to Timothy like jagged teeth as he wove between them.

He felt the statues on tombstones watching. One with an angel's wings seemed to wave him on.

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Riley's boots crunched softly as she landed beyond the wrought-iron fence of Kirkwood Hill Cemetery. She had vaulted over fairly easily, her ongoing work on the

FBI obstacle course maintaining her agility despite the months in a classroom.

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She remembered the map Officer Burgher had shown her earlier, yet the reality of the sprawling cemetery in the moonlight was much less clear. She knew that Martha Lancaster's grave lay somewhere straight ahead, and that was where she had to go.

She also knew Putnam and Ann Marie would be closing in on that location as well—Ann Marie from the west, Putnam from the south—but her chosen entry point was closest to the grave. Riley's hand was firm on the Glock as she crept forward, her body low and eyes scanning the terrain. In the pale glow of the moon, marble and granite stood out sharply.

As she neared the designated spot, her crouch deepened. She was sure a gravestone she'd spotted was the one she sought. But it stood alone in the quiet of the graveyard. She moved closer and saw the inscription highlighted in the moonlight—Martha Lancaster. Yes, this was the right one, but there was no sign of Timothy Lancaster or Gwen Beck.

Riley switched on her cellphone light, the bright LED cutting through shadows. Small disturbances in the earth and grass caught her eye immediately—scuffs, broken twigs, signs of a struggle that had played out in this solemn place. Her gaze followed the evidence. Footprints led westward, some certainly made with a woman's shoes.

It was possible, maybe even likely, that Gwen Beck had managed to escape Timothy's grasp, at least momentarily.

She traced the path, and then there they were, abandoned on the dew-covered grass—a pair of women's shoes, sensible heels that spoke of pragmatic choices. They lay askew, as if tossed aside mid-stride, and Riley felt a pang of empathy for the

victim.

Riley knelt beside the shoes, examining them under the pale light of her cellphone. She looked beyond the shoes, seeking the continuation of the trail, but the footprints she had been following dissolved into the disturbances on the soft earth. Timothy and Gwen could be anywhere, and the vast expanse of the graveyard mocked her urgency with its sprawling silence.

Riley's resolve hardened as she searched deeper into the cemetery. She strained her ears for any sound that might lead her to Timothy and Gwen, but the silence was oppressive, broken only by the rustling of leaves in the faint breeze.

And then, without warning, a figure flitted across her peripheral vision, a fleeting wraith darting from one gravestone to another. Riley's heart leapt. Adrenaline surged through her veins as she focused on the spot where the figure had vanished.

"Show yourself!" Riley's authoritative voice sliced through the stillness, her command echoing off the gravestones. "FBI!"

The weight of her Glock felt reassuring in her hand, a familiar comfort amidst the uncertainty that shrouded the graveyard.

A rustling sound drew her attention to a nearby tombstone, where a figure slowly rose from behind it. It was a woman, her silhouette haggard against the silvery light of the moon. Her hands were bound with duct tape, and her clothes—a skirt and a blouse—were torn and soiled. Despite this, the woman's eyes held a stubborn spark that had yet to be extinguished.

This was Gwen Beck, the missing reporter from Slychester—and she was very much alive.

“Don’t worry, you’re safe now,” Riley said, her voice gentler as she cautiously lowered her Glock. She stepped forward slowly, not wanting to startle the traumatized woman.

But from the shadows, a figure exploded into their fragile bubble of safety—a man with wild eyes and desperation etched into every line of his face. Timothy Lancaster.

He seized Gwen from behind, one arm snaking around her chest while the other brandished a pocketknife at her throat.

“I’ll do it!” he snarled, his voice jagged with madness. “I’ll kill her right here, right now! Go ahead, shoot me afterward if you want!”

Riley’s heart pounded, her mind racing. Timothy was cornered and dangerous, ready to drag his victim down with him. And there she stood, her finger hovering over the Glock’s trigger, knowing that the wrong move could end in tragedy.

“Timothy,” Riley began, her voice steady despite the adrenaline flooding her veins, “I know you’re angry. You think the world has wronged your mother, and now you want to rectify that.” She took a slow step forward, her Glock now pointing harmlessly toward the ground.

“Your mother’s legacy doesn’t have to be this,” she continued, tapping into the empathy that sometimes bridged the gap between hunter and hunted. “Martha wouldn’t have wanted her son to be a murderer.”

Riley watched as Timothy’s eyes flickered with confusion, his resolve wavering for a heartbeat. She knew that each word could be a move towards salvation or catastrophe.

“Let’s talk about it, Timothy,” she said, hoping her words would reach whatever humanity was left within him. She lowered her weapon until it hung by her side, her

posture open and non-threatening. She could see the terror etched into the woman's face, the silent plea for life that resonated with Riley's own experiences.

"Think about what you're doing." Riley's voice softened further, each syllable deliberate and soothing. "There's a chance for you to make things right. To honor your mother in a way that doesn't end in more pain."

Riley kept her gaze locked on Timothy, searching for a sign of the boy who loved his mother before grief twisted him into the man standing before her. But as she watched, he started to laugh.

I didn't reach him, Riley realized.

And now Gwen Beck's doom was but the stroke of a knife away.

Just then, a figure rushed into the scene. It was Ann Marie, who must have been creeping up on the scene unnoticed by all, including Riley. Ann Marie took Timothy by surprise, twisting his knife hand away from Gwen's throat and hurling him to the ground face down.

"Don't move," the young agent said, holding her gun on him. With a whimper, he curled up and made no resistance. Ann Marie cuffed him efficiently.

Riley didn't waste a second; her feet carried her swiftly across the uneven terrain toward Gwen Beck.

"Shh, it's okay," Riley murmured, reaching Gwen and dropping to her level. "You really are safe now."

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Riley's voice, steady and clear, resonated through the lecture hall as she recounted the final showdown with Timothy Lancaster in Kirkwood Hill Cemetery. The faces of her students showed a mix of admiration and horror as they hung onto every word.

"His obsession with his mother's legacy led him down a path of retribution," Riley said, her eyes scanning the sea of young, aspiring agents before her. "But it also led to his own downfall."

She paused for effect before advancing to her next point of discussion. With a click, the projector hummed to life, and two algebra quiz sheets filled the white screen. Murmurs rippled through the class as they took in the images.

"These," Riley explained, "are not just remnants of a high school math class. They are calculated messages from a killer." Her gaze lingered on the first sheet, its corner stained darkly with the blood of Robert Nash. Then she shifted to the second, pristine and unmarked, intended for Gwen Beck—a message never delivered.

The room was still, save for the occasional shuffle of notes being taken. Riley let the silence hang heavy, driving home the reality of the brutality they might one day face themselves.

"Take a good look," Riley instructed. "How would you decipher their message?"

"Those are algebra problems," a student offered. "Solve them, I guess."

“Good enough, guess,” Riley replied. “One answer on this sheet,” she pointed to a seemingly random equation on Nash’s quiz, “gives us an important number—37.12. What do you think that could mean?”

“A latitude coordinate?” came a reply.

“Right.” She moved her laser pointer to the second sheet, Gwen Beck’s would-be death marker. “And here, we find the longitude— -78.52.”

She paused, letting the coordinates sink in.

“An FBI team followed those coordinates to an out-of-the-way spot in Pine Creek State Park,” Riley continued, her gaze sweeping over her students. “What they found was a grave encircled by stones, mirroring the resting place of Patricia Warren that we’d found earlier in Blue Ridge Wilderness Park.”

The room fell quiet, waiting for more information.

“The body was that of Clive Brown,” Riley said. “The college department head who fired Martha Lancaster from Corbin College—and vanished without a trace 20 years ago.”

“Any questions?” she asked, knowing full well the minds before her were racing with them.

A hand shot up from the middle row—a young woman with keen eyes that reminded Riley so much of herself at that age.

“How did it feel to work on a case so close to your heart? I mean, with the murder of your favorite high school teacher, Margaret Whitfield,” the student’s words tumbled out, almost tripping over themselves in their haste.

“It’s...complicated,” she began, her voice betraying a hint of emotion. “Justice is often bittersweet. It doesn’t bring back those we’ve lost, but...” She paused, her gaze returning to the expectant faces before her. “But I’d like to believe that Mrs. Whitfield can rest easier now, knowing that her killer won’t hurt anyone else.”

Another hand rose, this time from a confident young man in the front row.

“Does solving a case like this make you want to quit teaching and get back into fieldwork full-time?” he asked, a flicker of challenge in his eyes.

Riley let out a soft, almost imperceptible chuckle. It was a question she had asked herself during the last couple of days more times than she cared to admit. She leaned back against the desk, arms crossed, her stance relaxed but her mind anything but.

“Fieldwork will always be a part of who I am,” she admitted, allowing herself a moment of reflection. “But teaching...sharing my experiences with all of you, helping to shape the next generation of investigators—that’s something I’m not ready to give up.”

Her smile was genuine, even as she grappled with the pull of the field, the adrenaline, the satisfaction of piecing together the puzzles left behind by twisted minds.

Gathering her notes, she glanced around the room, the sea of eager faces, some still hungry for the sordid details of the cases she’d dissected before them.

“Alright, everyone, that’s it for today,” Riley announced, signaling the end of the session.

“Do your assignments,” she said sternly. “I’ll still be here tomorrow. For now, I’m sticking to my ‘day job.’”

Riley's laughter mingled with the students. As the students filed out, she couldn't shake the relief that settled over her. Leo Dillard, with his unsettling intensity, hadn't been present. It was a small mercy, one she clung to as she made her way through the familiar corridors of the Academy.

The walk to her office was a quiet one, her footsteps echoing in the empty hallway. She pondered the curious balance she maintained between the classroom and the chaos of fieldwork.

Her pulse quickened as she rounded the corner, spotting the tall figure of Leo Dillard lurking outside her office door. His presence, an unwelcome intrusion into her sanctuary, set her instincts on edge.

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“You weren’t in class,” she remarked, her voice carefully neutral.

“I know, I’m sorry,” he replied, looking at her with those piercing eyes that seemed to attempt to unravel her composure. “I had a lot on my mind and really needed to talk to you—one-on-one.”

The memory of their last encounter in her office lingered unpleasantly. She resisted the urge to tell him to leave, reminded again of the delicate balance she maintained as both an instructor and a protector.

“Alright,” she conceded, as she reached for her keys. “But make it quick, Leo.”

The lock clicked, a sound that seemed to resonate with finality, and she stepped inside, steeling herself against whatever Leo Dillard thought he needed from her so desperately. She ushered them both into the room.

“Please, have a seat,” Riley gestured toward the chair opposite her desk, her tone betraying none of the apprehension she felt. Then she settled into her own chair.

“Congratulations on cracking the Lancaster case,” Leo began, his voice smooth, almost rehearsed. “The whole Academy is buzzing about what a brilliant job you did.”

“Thank you, Leo,” she acknowledged.

He leaned forward, an earnest expression on his features. “Also, I meant to wish April a happy birthday. I hope she enjoyed it.”

A shiver of disquiet traced Riley's spine as she contemplated how he knew about her daughter's birthday. The private details of her life were not fodder for classroom exchanges or casual conversation.

"Thank you," she said, her voice steady despite the alarm bells ringing softly in her mind.

His gaze lingered a moment too long before he continued, unfazed by her curt response. "You know, we should really spend more time together outside of class, get to know each other better."

Riley's fingers tightened around the edge of her desk. Leo's voice snagged on her nerves like barbed wire, his words invasive.

"I know about you and Bill Jeffreys—the relationship you have," he said with an air of condescension that set Riley's teeth on edge. "But he's not right for you. He's practically out to pasture—an old agent staring down retirement."

The statement clanged in her head, discordant and presumptuous. She stood abruptly, her chair scraping back against the floor. "Leo, I think it's time for you to leave," Riley said, her tone brooking no argument.

The silence that followed was thick, charged with an undercurrent of defiance. Riley's patience had reached its limit. She strode to the door and pulled it open. The gesture was clear: an unspoken invitation to exit, a dismissal she expected him to heed.

"Please," she said, gesturing towards the hallway.

Leo rose slowly, his height unfolding like a shadow stretching. As he passed by her, he leaned in, his lips aiming for hers in a bold, unwanted advance.

Instinctively, Riley shoved him away, her hands firm and unforgiving against his

chest. She pushed him beyond the threshold, her strength catching him off guard. Leo stumbled back, surprise etched on his face, but she spared no thought for his shock.

The door slammed shut with a resounding thud. Riley leaned against the wood, its solid presence a small comfort against the tremor that now shook her frame.

She told herself he was just an arrogant youngster, that his foolish advances shouldn't bother her, if he persisted she would simply report him. But Riley had faced plenty of monsters—men and women whose minds were dark—and she recognized something of that in Leo.

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The closing door echoed like a gunshot in Leo's ears. He stood motionless, his hand still suspended in the air where Riley's door had been a moment before.

Her face, stern and angry, lingered in his mind's eye—an image at odds with the warmth he'd imagined between them. Confusion knotted his brow as he tried to reconcile the woman who had just shut him out so definitively with the one he had envisioned sharing his thoughts, his dreams.

The sting of that rejection ran deep, a wound to his pride and his heart alike. Where was the connection, the chemistry he felt sure was between them? What had he misread?

He had come seeking kinship, perhaps even understanding, but left with nothing but the echo of a closing door. As he walked away from Riley's office, the fabric of his fantasies unraveled. The woman he thought he knew was now just an illusion.

The warmth he had felt in her presence, the domestic tranquility he yearned to be part of, all dissolved, leaving Leo grasping at the remnants of what never was. Riley Paige had embarrassed him, left him exposed and raw. She had drawn him in with her

enigmatic aura, only to shut him out when he dared to lean too close to her flame. It was a cruel game she had played, whether she knew it or not, and for that, she must atone.

A steely edge crept into his thoughts, the gentle longing that once occupied his heart now replaced with a simmering anger. He would no longer be the discarded suitor, the footnote in someone else's narrative. Riley Paige would come to understand the gravity of her mistake—he would make sure of that.

The cost of dismissing Leo Dillard as inconsequential was going to be terrifying and painful for Riley Paige.