

A GLIMPSE OF EVIL

A Psychic Eye Mystery

Victoria Laurie



AN OBSIDIAN MYSTERY

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Acclaim for the Psychic Eye Mystery Series

“Intuition tells me this book is right on target—I sense a hit!”

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—Darque Reviews

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—Genre Go Round Reviews

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“Ms. Laurie has penned a fabulous read and packed it with ghost-hunting action at its best. With a chilling mystery, a danger-filled investigation, a bit of romance, and a wonderful dose of humor, there’s little chance that readers will be able to set this book down.”

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What's a Ghoul to Do?
Demons Are a Ghoul's Best Friend
Ghouls Just Haunt to Have Fun
Ghouls Gone Wild

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For my dear, dear friend, Dr. Jennifer Casey.

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Hugs and love,

Victoria

Chapter One

Let me just state for the record that being the FBI's "civilian intuitive profiler" (aka resident psych) was not the cake job I thought it'd be. I'm not sure what I actually expected when I took the position—perhaps my name printed on the door to a nice candlelit room with soft cozy furniture, where I'd jot down my impressions as they came to me and hand them off to an attentive agent for follow-up. I learned quickly that the FBI doesn't do cozy and candles. Nope. They're all business. "Just the facts, ma'am." Oh, and paperwork. The FBI is *all* about its documentation . . . in triplicate.

But back on April first, I had no idea that I was about to be strapped to a desk in a crowded room, lit by the unflattering light of fluorescents, while piles of files stacked up around me, threatening to crush me in a tsunami of recycled paper. No, on this day I was actually feeling pretty upbeat as the bureau's newest civilian profiler. I was super-excited about my prospects, in fact, and all I thought to contribute to solving crime and bringing in the bad guys.

I should have known then that nothing good ever happens on April Fools'.

Still, as my sweetheart, Dutch, and I cruised through Waco on our way to Austin on that last day of March, I will admit, I could have been overly optimistic due to all the exciting changes taking place in our lives.

Now, Dutch has been my steady for the past three years. Until the end of March, we'd been doing the "living in sin" thing at Dutch's bungalow back in Royal Oak, Michigan—a quaint suburban town just outside Detroit. Then the offer had come in to relocate to Austin, and we'd said yes.

The move was driven a little more by Dutch—it meant accepting a promotion for him and helping to pioneer a brand-new division: two challenges that my S.O. really wanted to tackle. And because I genuinely love him, I'd gone along with the idea. Okay, so maybe there'd been a job offer for me there too, but it hadn't come without strings attached, believe me.

Anyway, as far as our relationship goes, I will freely admit that, of the two of us, I'm the lucky one. Dutch is a manly sort of man; heck, even his five-o'clock shadow arrives by four, and his voice is that wonderfully rich baritone that reminds me of chocolate and espresso: rich, smooth, and earthy. And did I mention that he's also really easy on the eyes? No? Well, let me just state for the record, then—the man is fan-yourself-when-he-passes beautiful and then some.

More specifically, he's thirty-six, with square chiseled features, light blond hair, a body I like to climb like a rock wall, and the most gorgeous pair of midnight blues you've ever lost yourself in.

He's also a great cook, doesn't leave his laundry on the floor, and patiently puts up with *me*. Which, given my lack of homemaking skills, inability to distinguish the floor from the hamper, and penchant for getting into serious trouble on a regular basis, definitely qualifies him for sainthood.

Dutch's day job is at the FBI. He's the assistant special agent in charge of . . . something. What exactly, I'm still not clear—but he's one of the good guys, assisting in the managing of a group of other good guys at a brand-new bureau office in Austin, Texas.

Dutch's boss is a guy named Brice Harrison, a man I'd come to know and like, even though he and I had gotten off on the wrong foot when we'd first met.

More specifically, he thought I was a nut. I thought he was an ass.

We were both a little right.

Since then, I'd managed to win Brice and his superiors over by helping to solve a b

multijurisdictional case involving some missing teenagers. After proving myself on that case, Brian had been so impressed that he'd specifically recruited me as a civilian profiler for the new branch at the Texas state capital.

I'd gratefully accepted, as I realized that Dutch really wanted the promotion that Harrison was offering him, and that my income as a professional psychic had been significantly dampened by the downward-spiraling economy in Michigan.

So, after the holidays, Dutch and I had packed up his house, scouted out a rental home in Austin and were ready to move. And that's when my test results came back.

See, for all positions within the bureau—even those considered “civilian”—you must pass a lengthy and difficult interview process along with one incredibly intense psychological profile. By asking you a series of questions, which I assume are largely devoted to determining if you're a nutcase, the bureau can decide if they should hire you, or lock you up and throw away the key.

Don't believe me?

Sample one of the actual questions from the test: “Was there ever a time when you wished your parents were dead?”

Ummmm . . . no?

Maybe?

Okay, yes, when I was about sixteen and on the heels of being unfairly grounded for something my sister did, I will admit that I *did* fantasize about it but only for a second. I . . . um . . . pinkie swear.

The actual test, however, didn't allow for any elaboration or explanation; it was just “yes” or “no” and from my perspective, that all added up to a whole lotta bad news for me.

So, I was very surprised when the results came in a week later and showed that I was actually quite sane . . .

Score!

. . . but angry.

Say *what*, now?!!!

According to some FBI behavioral “genius” at HQ, my psychological profile suggested that I was likely given to frequent and unpredictable outbursts—particularly those expressing a sense of rage and frustration. Based on that analysis, the bureau was requiring me to attend “anger management” classes prior to being offered the position with the Austin bureau.

This disclosure was followed by a rather comedic outburst of said rage and frustration, and for a long while, my response to the idea that I attend the AM class was to tersely spout off a list of the various and varied ways the FBI could go stuff themselves . . . and, yes, in hindsight I *do* see the irony!

Whatever.

In the end, it was the only choice I had; otherwise, bureau policy dictated that I couldn't be hired. After considerable study of my shrinking bank balance, my dwindling client list, and the sad face that Dutch displayed every time I looked like I might refuse to go to the classes, I gave in. Which is why our move was delayed two months from February first to the end of March right after I received my certificate. (The FBI will have to excuse me if I don't rush to frame it and mount it on the wall for everyone to see.)

After meeting the terms, I was officially hired, and we were on our way. The trip itself had been long and uncomfortable—I'm not a fan of extended road trips—but I'd seen some beautiful scenery all the way from southern Michigan to Oklahoma. But right around the time we entered north Texas, things got . . . well . . . dull.

“Yo, Abs,” Dutch said as I stared with concern out the window of his SUV, which had my MINN

Cooper hitched behind it. "Penny for your thoughts?"

"It's so stark," I said, pulling my eyes away from the window. "I mean, I had no idea Texas was so flat."

Dutch smiled wisely. He'd been flying down to Austin every week since the end of January to help Brice set up the new office and interview candidates for the squad. "The topography changes just outside Austin. Don't you worry. Central Texas is almost as gorgeous as you are."

I blushed. Dutch was laying on the charm extra thick these days, mostly, I assumed, because he was so happy I'd agreed to the FBI terms for hiring me. "Yeah, yeah," I said with a wave of my hand. We rode again in silence for a while and I stroked the top of Eggy's head. Both of our pet dachshunds were in the cab and I had to admit they had been incredibly well behaved on the long journey.

"How're they doing?" Dutch asked as I moved Eggy over into my lap and Tuttle nudged her way closer to my thigh.

"Really well. But I think we're close to the edge here. At some point they've got to be as sick of riding in this car as we are."

"There'll be plenty of room for them to run around at the house," Dutch assured me.

"You swear you loved it?" I asked. The bureau had purchased Dutch's old house in Michigan, which allowed us to rent something temporary in Austin until we found our own home to buy.

"It's perfect for the time being," he assured me.

I sighed heavily and tried to think happy thoughts. I'd lived in Michigan almost my whole life, and no matter how many times Dutch tried to tell me that Austin was the shizzel, for me, seeing was believing.

"You nervous about tomorrow?" Dutch asked into another stretch of silence.

I glanced sideways at him. "That's the seventh time you've asked me that, cowboy. I'm starting to think I should tell you something other than 'no.' "

He laughed. "I'm just trying to let you know that it's okay if you are. I mean, these guys can be a little rough at first."

Dutch was referring to my new job with the bureau, which began the next morning at eight a.m. As far as I knew, my new job description entailed giving the Cold Case Squad, or CCS, my impressions on various cases, and teaching the other agents in the office how to open up their own intuition.

"Harrison has my back, though, right? I mean, he keeps telling me he won't allow anyone to disrespect me, which is incredibly ironic coming from him of all people." Harrison had been one of the most skeptical, hardheaded nuts my intuition had ever had to crack.

"Oh, he'll have your back, all right. Candice would kill him if he didn't."

"I can't wait to see her," I said wistfully. My business partner and closest friend, Candice Fuscini, was a private investigator by trade, and she had followed Harrison down to Texas two months ago. I knew from the few e-mails that I got from her that she was ridiculously head over heels for him, and the two were even talking about moving in together.

"They've invited us over for dinner," Dutch added. "I heard that Candice laid down a big chunk of change last week for some swanky condo in downtown and she moved in a few days ago."

"How is it you know more about Candice than I do?"

"Harrison keeps me in the loop," Dutch said with a bounce to his eyebrows.

I smiled. "You're pretty proud of yourself, aren't you?"

"Little bit."

I shook my head and stared out the window again, but Dutch's cautionary words about my first days on the job were settling in and making me nervous. "Do you really think they'll give me a hard time?"

I asked him after a bit.

“Who?”

“The other agents on the squad.”

“Yes.”

My mouth fell open. “Gee, cowboy, thanks for cushioning it a little.”

Dutch reached out and squeezed my hand. “Sorry, doll, but you’re better off knowing what you’re about to walk into.”

“Do you think it’ll be as bad as the first time I met Harrison?”

Dutch considered that for a minute, which made me even more nervous, because the first time Harrison and I had met had been *baaad*. “Maybe just a little less awkward than that,” Dutch said.

“Shit,” I said, and that won me a sideways glance from him. My anger management instructor had forbidden us to swear. “Zu,” I amended quickly. “Shih tzu!”

Dutch laughed and shook his head. “That’s a new one.”

Since I’d been conditioned the last two months not to swear because my instructor was convinced I led immediately to an anger impulse, I’d been coming up with some rather “colorful” alternatives. “I’m never going to be able to stop,” I admitted. Of all the alternate behaviors we’d learned in the class, the single greatest challenge for me was the no swearing. I’d yet to go a full day without letting at least one expletive fly.

“Anything’s an improvement,” Dutch muttered. And although I leveled my eyes at him, I knew he was right. My mouth could put most sailors to shame.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, then got back on topic. “So, what’s your advice for making my first introduction to these agents less awkward?”

“Don’t be yourself,” Dutch said, and it took me a minute to realize he was kidding.

“I’m *serious!*”

Dutch laughed heartily but then sobered a little when he noticed I wasn’t laughing. “I think it can hurt to be as professional and down-to-earth as possible. You don’t want to go in there and talk about your crew like they’re real or anything.”

That shocked me. “My crew” was the term I used for my spirit guides, and they were such a part of my intuitive process that I was aghast at his suggestion. “Why the hello-dolly not?”

That won me another smile. “Because the minute you start talking about the voices in your head the moment these guys will earmark you for a nut and discount everything you tell them after that. Then they’ll discount both me and Harrison because we believe in you, and pretty soon we’ll have another political mess on our hands.”

Now I understood why Dutch had continued to pester me about whether I was nervous and what I planned to say to the agents when I met with them. “So what should I talk about?”

“Well,” Dutch said, scratching his chin thoughtfully. “I think you should stick to basics. Dumb down as much as possible and maybe give them a demonstration. But don’t read them. Read a case.”

“Why can’t I read them?” I asked. That was my forte after all.

“Because you’ll intimidate them.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Come on,” I scoffed.

But Dutch wasn’t smiling. “You don’t think that going in there and publicly revealing all the secrets will turn them immediately against you?”

My eyebrows shot up. I hadn’t considered that. “Okay,” I conceded. “I see your point. So, I tune in on a case, then what? Have them go out and solve it?”

Dutch shook his head. “Nope,” he said. “What you should do is tune in on a case that has already

been solved. Something where we've already nabbed the bad guys, but something that took a while solve, which will be totally relevant because that's this group's specialty after all."

I sat with that for a bit and realized he was right. "Okay," I said. "I get it. So I'll go in the tomorrow and do my thing, but not overdo my thing, and impress the heck out of these guys and we all be singing 'Kum Ba Yah' around the campfire by dinnertime."

Dutch grinned. "That's the spirit," he said, adding, "And up ahead is the city limits. We'll be at our new house in about twenty minutes."

I looked ahead, and saw that Dutch had been absolutely right before when he talked about the change in topography. As I-35 coasted into North Austin, the road began to undulate over more hilly terrain. I tried to take in as much of my new home as possible.

Dutch took an exit, and not long afterward, my breath caught; as far as my eye could see, there were great sandstone cliffs, the color of champagne with amber and brown undertones, sometimes jutting up alongside us, other times dropping away and giving us breathtaking views. Interspersed in the cliffs were willowy trees with pink, purple, fuchsia, and white blooms, lush green grass and bluebonnets covering the highway median as far as the eye could see. Dutch glanced over at me as we cruised closer and closer to our destination and asked, "What do you think?"

"It's so beautiful," I said softly. And then I turned to him and smiled. "I think we're home, cowboy."

Later that evening after we'd supervised the movers unloading our things into the new house (and Dutch was right: the rental was large and spacious with a lovely fenced-in backyard for the pups), we cruised into the city, heading to Candice's, which was right in the heart of bustling downtown.

After pulling into the underground parking for a huge modern-looking building, we took the elevator up to the thirty-eighth floor and stepped out into a narrow hallway lit by artsy sconces and painted an earthy brown. We walked only a few steps when Dutch stopped in front of number A12 and knocked. The door was opened almost immediately. "You made it!" Candice exclaimed, and threw herself at me, crushing me in a giant bear hug.

"Hey, Candice!" I squeaked.

Candice let go but held my arms as she eyed me with interest. "You look amazing!"

I smiled. It was Candice who looked amazing. Love had done wonders for her complexion, and there was a little extra glint in her eye and an extra wattage to her smile. "Thanks, honey. You look pretty good yourself. This place agrees with you."

Candice's smile broadened even more, and she gave Dutch a big hug too before grabbing my hand and pulling me inside. "It does, sugar," she said. "And just look at the view!"

We entered Candice's condo and I will admit, the view was pretty spectacular. Only, I'm not talking about what was just beyond her window; I'm talking about Special Agent in Charge Brice Harrison who was leaning relaxed and gorgeous against the bar.

Brice was dressed to kill; he wore black dress slacks and a cashmere V-neck sweater that hugged his trim, fit body like a second skin. His face had always been ruggedly handsome, but the last time I'd seen him, that frown that he seemed to never go without had vanished, and now he wore something closer to a smirk.

It changed him dramatically. He was still the cool-as-a-cucumber, humming-with-testosterone man I remembered, but there was a softer element now. And it looked gorgeous on him. "Hey, Brice," I said, surprised that I was actually happy to see him.

Harrison's smirk turned into a full smile and he walked smoothly over to us, shaking Dutch's hand and even giving me an unexpected hug. "Great to see you two," he said warmly.

I was so stunned I couldn't think what to say next. Most of my encounters with this man had been—at best—hostile. At worst they'd been downright murderous, so this change in our relationship would take some getting used to.

Candice seemed to pick up on the effect Brice was having on me, and she giggled, then took my hand again and pulled me to the balcony. "Come on, girl," she sang. "You have got to get a load of this!"

We walked out onto the terrace and I gasped. "Holy cow!"

"It's pretty fabulous, isn't it?"

"Honey, it's amazing!" I said, thinking she was one lucky duck to live with this kind of view. You could see the entire city and well beyond into the surrounding countryside from here.

I stared down, observing all the people who looked like ants. "The place really rocks with pedestrian traffic, doesn't it?"

Candice leaned back against the railing, tilting her face up to the last rays of sunshine. "Downtown is always bustling," she told me. "And the food here, Abby!" she said. "I don't think Brice and I have had a mediocre meal since we arrived. It's been one fabulous dish after another. And the night scene! Abs, wait until we take you guys clubbing!"

I smiled tiredly. "Can't wait, but maybe not tonight. It was a long drive down."

Candice moved over to wrap an arm around my shoulders. "Right, right," she said. "I'm just so excited that you're finally here. I've missed you, Sundance."

"Who'd like some wine?" Brice asked from behind us, and we turned to see him holding two glasses of red.

Candice and I took the wine and he and Dutch joined us on the balcony. Brice sat close to Candice and held her hand. The two were obviously taken with each other, and my heart filled with happiness for my dear friend.

Still, I will admit that I was a bit surprised at how serious the pair had gotten so quickly. I'd seen the moving boxes stacked neatly in one corner, and all of them had labels like "Brice's dishes," "Brice's books."

It seemed that the talking about moving in together had turned into the real deal. And it was about then, as I was watching them and seeing my new boss hold my friend's hand, that my radar pinged and a sudden thought went through my head. I let out a tiny gasp as I stared in earnest at Candice's left hand, and my expression must have changed, because all of a sudden Brice abruptly said, "Hey, Abby, can I see you in the kitchen?"

I pulled my eyes away from Candice's hand and stared at him. "You . . .," I said, more words failing me.

Brice stood up quickly. "Kitchen?" he repeated urgently. "Now?"

"What's wrong, honey?" Candice asked.

"Nothing's wrong," Brice replied smoothly. "I just want to go over a few things with Abby before her first day at work tomorrow."

Dutch gave me and Brice a funny look. "Should I come?"

But Harrison shook his head and motioned for me to go ahead of him. "No. You two sit out here and enjoy this great weather and the view. We'll be right back."

Once I was through the door, Brice reached for my elbow and guided me into the galley-style kitchen. "Don't say a word until we're out of hearing range," he cautioned softly.

I pressed my lips together and attempted to hold in the giggle that was burbling around inside me. When we got into the kitchen, Brice stood in front of me and asked, "How much do you know?"

"I know her ring size," I said with a big fat grin. "Did you need it for anything *special*, Age Harrison?"

Brice looked truly uncomfortable, which was an unusual expression for him. He was always confident. And cool. And collected. And I'd just made him toss all of that right off the balcony.

He ran a hand through his hair and glanced nervously over my shoulder to the terrace. "It's crazy, right? I mean, we barely know each other."

I laughed and he flinched. I attempted to rein in my humor and talk to him seriously. "It's not crazy," I assured him, but he still looked torn. "Listen, Brice, I know Candice, and I can tell you that she is as crazy about you as you are about her."

Harrison chewed his lower lip, and a small line of perspiration appeared on his brow.

"Do you want me to tell you what I see?" I asked him coyly. I will admit, I was delighting at the opportunity to flaunt my intuitive abilities in front of him. I'd earned that right after all he'd put me through in the beginning of our work relationship.

Brice sighed and stared at his shoes. "Would you?"

"Of course!" I said. I waited until he raised his eyes again to say, "She's not going to want a big fancy wedding, so I hope you're okay with something small."

Brice's face flushed with relief and he let go of the small breath he'd been holding. But then he seemed to think of something that gave him pause. "Will I make her happy?"

"Not always," I told him honestly, and when he looked taken aback, I added, "But that's normal, Brice. No couple always gets along. Overall, however, I think that you two will have one of those relationships that last. All the elements are there for a terrific future together. You're good for each other. You push each other—you're both driven, loyal, and ridiculously honest. You're also both stubborn as mules. It's almost like you're the same person. And that kind of understanding for someone else is a rare thing, and mostly why I think you two could really work. It'd be an unbreakable bond, and a deep, deep love, Brice. One most people spend their whole lives looking for."

Brice's smile returned. "Thanks," he said, and I was surprised again when he leaned in and hugged me for a second time. As he let go, he whispered, "Just don't tell her before I get the chance to pop the question, okay?"

I stuck out my hand to shake his. "Deal."

Later that evening after we left Candice's place, Dutch suggested we take a drive along the cliffs near our home. "There's a spot I want to show you."

I smiled and stroked the side of his face. He could be wonderfully romantic sometimes. As we drove, he asked me, "So, what'd Harrison tell you about tomorrow?"

"Hmm?"

"The meeting in the kitchen you two had," he said, reminding me. "Did he tell you much about the squad?"

My brain raced to make up details and failed. "Um . . .," I said, pressing my temples with my fingers.

"Hey," he said, knowing me too well. "What gives?"

"We didn't talk about tomorrow."

Dutch eyed me. "So why'd he pull you aside?"

"Can you keep a secret?"

Dutch's eyebrows arched.

“Okay, I know, stupid question. Of course you can. Brice is going to ask Candice to marry him.”

~~The car swerved and veered to the left, pushing us perilously close to oncoming traffic. I grabbed the door handle and squealed.~~

“Sorry,” Dutch apologized, quickly righting the SUV.

I put a hand on my chest. “What happened there?”

“Just tired,” Dutch said, and offered me what looked like a forced smile. “Maybe we should just head home and save the view for another time.”

I laid my head on his shoulder and sighed. “That sounds awesome,” I told him. “We’ll do romantic view next time.”

When we finally got home, I climbed into bed and had only a moment’s worry over what I might encounter at my new job the next day. I was honestly just too exhausted to give it much thought. In hindsight, maybe I should have braced myself for one heck of a turbulent ride.

Chapter Two

I rode in to the office with Dutch and spent much of my time sweating about how I looked and what I should say when I was introduced to the other agents. Mostly my introductory speech read like a corporate conference nametag, “Hello! My name is Abigail Cooper!” Beyond that, I figured I’d win it and hope for the best.

The bureau office was on Nueces Street between Eighth and Ninth, a block away from the Austin Public Library. It was located inside a gorgeous plantation-styled home that had been converted into an office building but still held the original charm with beautiful trim and plenty of character.

When Dutch and I got out of the car, I stood for a minute just admiring it. “Doesn’t look much like what I expected,” I admitted.

“Why? Because it’s not square, steel, and tinted glass?”

I glanced at Dutch, who was smiling back at me. “Yeah,” I said. “This place has way too much personality for the FBI.”

Dutch laughed. “Maybe,” he said, reaching for my hand. “But it’s probably only temporary.”

“Temporary?”

“Remember, this division is strictly experimental. The bureau doesn’t officially have an Austin location yet. The Central Texas office is still in San Antonio.”

“So why aren’t we in San Antonio?” I asked as Dutch held the door open for me.

“Too much opportunity for us to get sucked into other bureau business,” Dutch explained. “Harris pushed hard to get us our own setup away from all the usual bureaucratic noise and distraction. He wanted this division to be focused only on cold cases, and he knew that if we were located in one of the other offices, our investigators could be temporarily reassigned whenever the other division chief wanted to borrow one of our guys on a case they thought might be more important.”

“Sounds like a bunch of politics.”

Dutch winked. “Exactly.”

I sighed. I’d never been good at office politics. To be well skilled in that area, you had to occasionally ignore it when someone fed you a line of buffalo chips. I wasn’t so good at that. I was much better at calling people out on their shih tzu.

Which was why I was particularly anxious about going back to a corporate office setting. Still, the idea of solving some old cases and bringing closure to a family or two appealed to me. And, I’ll also admit, I was a wee bit excited about teaching some old FBI dogs a few new tricks.

Dutch and I climbed the stairs to the third floor and pushed our way through a door marked on the wall with the suite number into a brightly lit office with several desks arranged in pairs of twos, split by a central aisle and flanked at the end by two glassed-in offices.

To one side was a brand-new gleaming whiteboard with “WELCOME, AGENTS” written in large black letters. New filing cabinets lined the side walls, and boxes and boxes of files were stacked along the floor in front of them.

Crouched down next to one of the boxes was a pretty woman with curly auburn hair who was busy arranging the boxes by date and grouping them next to the coordinating cabinet.

Gathered around one of the desks were several men dressed in shirts and ties. I guessed they ranged in age from midthirties to early sixties. Everyone looked up when we entered and the place got quiet.

real fast.

Gulp.

“Good morning,” Dutch said to the men. He sounded confident, which helped stem my anxiety a little. “It’s good to see you all again.”

The men nodded and a few muttered, “Good morning, sir.”

Dutch turned slightly and introduced me to the group. “This is our new civilian profiler, Abigail Cooper.”

Immediately there were exchanged glances and the faint buzz of mumbled commentary, none of loud enough to reach my ears, but it was clear—these guys had heard about me and what I was supposedly bringing to the table, and if I’d hoped they’d be open-minded, it was obvious from the expressions that I’d hoped wrong.

Feeling the heat rise to my cheeks, I was saved by the woman on the floor, who got up quickly and came directly over to us. “Good morning!” she said happily, sticking out her hand to shake mine. “I’m Mrs. Katherine Copperidge, the office manager here. It’s great to finally meet you, Ms. Cooper.”

I shook her hand and attempted a smile. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Copperidge,” I said.

Her smile widened. I could tell she saw my discomfort and was working hard to put me at ease. “Please, call me Katie.”

“Abby,” I said, feeling a little better.

“Hello, Katie,” Dutch said when she turned to him. “It’s great to see you again.”

“Agent Rivers,” she said, taking his extended hand. “Special Agent Harrison is in his office, and he’d like to meet with you briefly before addressing the squad.”

Dutch left me for Harrison’s office, and Katie took my elbow and led me to one of the desks close to the whiteboard against the window. All I had to do was turn around to see the beautiful trees just outside. “This is your desk,” she said, pulling out the new chair for me to try. I sat down and swiveled from side to side. The chair was one of those ergonomic numbers meant to give optimum support to the back. It was actually pretty comfortable.

“This is great,” I told her. “Thanks.”

Katie placed a paper in front of me. It was a list of office supplies. “Just circle any items you need from that list and I’ll have it on your desk by the end of the day.” Next she gave me a lanyard and pulled a small camera from her blazer pocket. “We’ll also need to take your photo for your civilian badge and key card. The security system for the doors is being installed today, so you’ll need to swipe in and out after tonight.”

I plastered a smile on my face as she took the picture, and then, with a pat on my shoulder, she hurried off to make my ID.

I looked again at the group of agents on the other side of the room, who were speaking softly but sneaking an occasional glance my way. Uncomfortable, I averted my own eyes and stared around the big room. I’ll admit I had a moment of buyer’s remorse and seriously considered bolting for the door.

My old office back in Michigan had been so comfortable and cozy. And most importantly—save for Candice in the next suite—it had been all mine. This sterile, stiff, and fluorescent-lit atmosphere was really going to take some getting used to.

Brice and Dutch came out of the office at that point and Brice’s eyes caught mine. I swore I saw something like indecision there, and I wondered if he was now regretting offering me the post as much as I was regretting taking it.

With nothing more than a nod to the other investigators and to me, he approached the whiteboard.

and began to erase the “WELCOME, AGENTS.” Dutch stood with his arms folded across his chest on the other side of the whiteboard, and a few of the other agents came forward to take their seats.

The desk next to mine was taken up by one of the younger-looking investigators, a Hispanic man with jet-black hair and large brown eyes. I watched him covertly out of the corner of my eye. There was something in the way he moved, with the grace and stealth of a panther. I figured bad guys didn't really stand a chance when he faced off with them.

I avoided making eye contact with him and kept my expression neutral; I thought it best to wait until I figured out where I stood with these guys before I tried to make nice.

Brice began writing a list on the whiteboard. The first item was labeled “CCS Introductions,” then next “Departmental Procedures,” then “Audits,” and finally “Stats.”

Brice then turned to face us. He waited until he was sure he had everyone's attention before he began speaking in a low, even tone, which was his trademark.

“Good morning, agents and staff,” he said. “I would like to officially welcome you to the FBI's newest office here in Austin. As you know, we're a special group with our own budget and our own agenda. We've been located away from any other bureau office for the specific reason that when we begin investigating these cold cases, we don't want any animosity reaching our squad from other departments. We're not trying to show up other investigators, merely taking a second look at the dead files to make sure they meet the FBI's investigative protocols.

“Being located in Austin also allows us to operate from a central location in relation to all the other main cities in Texas. We're within a three-hour drive to both Dallas and Houston, and only an hour and a half away from San Antonio.

“Which brings me to my next point,” Harrison said, and he paused here to look around the room as if measuring us up. “This job will come with a lot of downtime and paperwork. Far more than you're used to, in fact. You'll be required to thoroughly audit these old files, looking for missed clues or leads that were not thoroughly vetted. Once we have determined that a case may be viable, it will be assigned to one or more of you for follow-up, which will require you to travel to wherever the case originated.

“Airfare will only be approved for areas further than six hours away by car. I know you were briefed on these requirements before you committed to joining this squad, but I wanted to emphasize that again.”

I let my eyes swivel around the room. No one seemed fazed by anything that Harrison had said, and he continued. “We've been given the official division name of the Cold Case Squad, or CCS, and as you haven't already noticed, we're a diverse group of some of the best investigators Texas has to offer.

“Because we're the first division of its kind, and something of a test case to my superiors, we've been allowed some leeway when it comes to our investigative techniques. As a department we will be relying heavily on gut instinct, and those of us already bearing a successful track record in that area will help mentor the rest of the group.”

Harrison's steely gaze settled on me and I felt my mouth go dry and my cheeks heat up. I was really hoping that Harrison wouldn't call any more attention to me and just allow me a few days to settle in with these gruff-looking men before he mentioned anything about my being psychic. I understood that the squad already knew about my background, but having it called out the first day was going to make me uncomfortable.

“Abigail Cooper joins our team with a rather unique set of skills. She's been invaluable to the Troop Michigan, field office, and has assisted us in the resolution of several cases that would otherwise have

gone cold.”

I could feel every pair of eyes in the room on me and I held my breath, hoping Harrison would move on quickly.

“Ms. Cooper has been granted the official title of civilian profiler. By trade she’s a gifted intuitive and for those of you in this room who do not believe in psychics—let me assure you, there was a time when I was far more skeptical than any of you. She won me over. In fact, she blew me away. And I have no doubt that within a very short period of time, she’ll do the same for you.”

In any other situation I would have felt grateful for Harrison’s faith in me, but the polite silence was broken by a few mumblings and I knew these guys weren’t going to discard their individual doubts just because the boss told them to.

Still, Brice’s eyes narrowed at the reaction from his agents. “Let me also state, ladies and gentlemen, that I will not tolerate any disrespect for *any* member of this squad. Do I make myself clear?”

I nodded my head enthusiastically, but I was the only one who put a lot of effort into it. I had the feeling that I wasn’t the only person who would have to work at gaining the agents’ respect.

“Excellent,” Harrison said, as if he hadn’t noticed their reluctance. He then turned to the boxes lining the walls. “Behind you are the cold cases sent to us from Houston, Dallas, Corpus Christi and San Antonio. We’ll be receiving El Paso’s and Lubbock’s cases in a few days.”

We all turned and eyed the Bankers Boxes. They looked far too numerous for our little squad to tackle.

“I believe the best way to proceed is one box at a time per investigator,” Harrison said. “CCS has been given the overall goal of a five percent solve ratio, but I’d like to push that closer to eight percent. If we audit at least one hundred files per month, I believe the six of you will be able to resolve five to eight of those cases. With the talent in this room I know we can achieve that goal.”

There was a collective groan from several men in the room. I wondered why. Eight cases solved seemed like a really lowball number to me.

Harrison held up his hands to settle everyone down. “I know that’s aggressive,” he said, “but we’ve got a lot riding on our success rate. If we overdeliver, that could mean more resources and money for our budget, not to mention possible promotions for all of you. And remember, we have a year to accomplish that. It’s going to take some time to get the momentum going, but I know we can do it.”

My brow furrowed and I looked at Dutch to gauge his reaction, but he had his poker face on, so it was hard to tell if he was worried about hitting the goal or not.

Harrison then signaled to Katie at the back of the room and she began handing out several staple pieces of paper to the investigators. “Mrs. Copperidge is passing out the audit forms for the files. I’d like you each to take a box, audit each file, and turn them in to me. Those files with the highest percentage will get assigned out first, but we won’t assign an investigation into any case that does not score higher than a seventy-five. From there we can prioritize and decide which ones to focus on.”

Katie appeared in front of my desk at that moment and handed me a thick stack of paper. “Here you go, Abby,” she said with a smile.

“Thanks,” I said, taking the pile and feeling a little overwhelmed by the volume of each individual form. I was also quickly realizing that I’d become the FBI’s most recent paper pusher. Whatever illusions I’d had about my glamorous new job had officially flown out the window.

Dutch came over at that moment and stood close to me. “Don’t worry,” he said. “We’ll do the first box of audits together. It’s not so bad once you get the hang of it.”

I leveled a look at him that said I sincerely doubted that, before switching my attention back

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