

Chapter Two



Ah. The perfect day for retail therapy. Riley raised her face to the mild November sun and smiled as she exited the shoe store in Houston's River Oaks shopping district, clutching another bag.

Her friend Avery hooked her arm through hers. "Those bright pink stilettos will be perfect with your gown for the New Year's Ball."

"I know, right? I should be all set now."

A little early to be thinking about New Year's, but considering everything else she had going on, it would behoove her to plan sooner rather than later. A lot of work went into the charitable ball her family had hosted for three decades, and which she'd directed the past two years.

The crispness in the air hinted at the holidays fast approaching, with Thanksgiving only a couple of weeks away. After several stressful months on a difficult case, she'd planned to concentrate on her charities more than work to close out the year.

Then Shane's letter had come. And she couldn't ignore it. Not with her conscience picking at her about that verdict.

Meeting with him thirteen days ago had been the final push she needed to right what she perceived to be a colossal wrong.

Caitlyn's killer was still out there.

Avery pulled Riley to a stop in front of a store window displaying designer holiday dresses. "Ooo, let's go in here. I love this store."

"Let's go after lunch." She checked her watch. "We have ten minutes to make our reservation, and Fran will start texting us in eleven if we're not there." And there was no way Avery would be out of this store in less than an hour. "I think I'll run these bags up to the car so they're not taking up space at the table. Wanna go with me?"

Her pretty ginger-haired friend scrunched her pink-tinted lips to the side. "I'll go see if Fran and Barbara are at the cafe."

"Sounds good. I'll be there in a few."

A short stroll to the parking garage, up the elevator to the third level, and she was putting her bags in the trunk of her little BMW sports coupe with five minutes to spare. The trunk closed with a *whump*, and she started back to the elevator.

Twenty-three stab wounds. According to the autopsy in the case file, an early strike to her heart killed Caitlyn within seconds. Likely dead by the time she hit the floor, at least she hadn't been aware of the other wounds inflicted on her body. What kind of madman could—

No. Not today. She wouldn't think about work today, on this beautiful fall Saturday. Even though every minute she spent *not* working on the case meant more minutes Shane spent in that awful—

An arm wrapped around Riley's shoulders, forcing the air from her lungs. Her body slammed against a hard chest. A sharp pain jabbed her in the side.

"Don't scream, Miss Hudson, or I'll end you right here."

The man's tone chilled her.

He pulled her backward. Her pulse hammered in her throat.

The heels of her boots scraped along the concrete, fighting to keep her feet under her. Terror pulsed throughout her body. This couldn't be happening.

Her hands gripped the man's forearm. Her eyes darted from side to side. Where was everybody?

Lord, help me! Please!

He pulled her behind a large car. The trunk sat open. A cold chill ran down her spine.

No. No. No. She had to fight. If he was going to kill her, let him do it now before he took her somewhere he could do whatever he had planned.

Lord, be with me.

She yelled, hoping to draw attention. Twisting, she threw her weight to one side, then the other. His grasp tightened around her neck. She was losing strength. She needed to breathe.

She drew up her knee and kicked backward. The three-inch block heel of her boot made contact. Her attacker's grip loosened.

A guttural expletive blew past her ear as he pitched forward. She pulled her arm in. Rammed her elbow into his face. Twisting again, she broke his hold. Her handbag hit the ground, its contents scattering.

She spun, seeing his face for the first time. Bearded, wisps of dark hair under a baseball cap. Eyes dark and piercing. His left hand swiped blood from his lip. He raised the gun still clutched in his right hand. She kicked again. Her boot collided with his elbow. The gun clattered across the pavement.

She turned to run, but he grabbed her ponytail. Fire shot over her scalp, and she screamed. Clawing at his hand, she dug her nails into his flesh. "Stop!"

"Hey!" A man's voice echoed through the parking garage. "Let her go!"

Her attacker released her hair. She fell to her knees. His

footsteps retreated behind her. Jumping to her feet, she took off toward the man running in her direction. Avery stepped out of an elevator. Her eyes widened and jaw fell slack.

Riley's timely rescuer slowed. "You okay?"

"Yes." Her voice barely squeaked past the fear blocking her throat.

Nodding, he picked up speed again.

"He's got a gun!"

As he neared the car, the engine revved, and the vehicle hurtled backward. He dove out of the way, and the older model Buick sped toward the exit. The still-open trunk lid bounced up and down as the car careened around the corner out of sight, the squeal of tires growing fainter as it neared the bottom.

The man stood and braced his hands on his knees, his breathing harsh.

Riley ran up to him. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

He took a few deep breaths and straightened. A brown swath of dirt from the concrete floor stretched from shoulder to hip on one side of his black jacket. "I'm fine. I hoped to get a plate, but it was covered in mud."

Avery finally reached them and grabbed Riley's arm. "What was *that*?"

Riley shook her head. "I was on my way back. He just grabbed me."

Riley's rescuer pulled his cell from his jacket. "I'll call the cops, but let's get you both somewhere safe in case he comes back."

While Avery retrieved Riley's bag and stuffed the contents back inside, he made his call to 911, informing the operator they'd be at the bistro where Riley wished she'd gone instead of bringing her bags up to her car. But then perhaps some other poor girl would be in that trunk and on her way to who knew what brutality. An icy pall cascaded over her skin.

Checking the empty parking spot, she noted no gun. The

assailant must have retrieved it before he got away. If only her blow could have propelled it further afield.

The small crowd that had gathered—where had they been two minutes ago?—parted as Avery and their escort entered the elevator.

Riley peered at the man next to her. “After all of this, I feel like I should know your name.”

“Logan. Logan Devers.”

“Riley Hudson. And this is Avery. Thank you so much for everything.”

“Of course. I’m just glad I got up there when I did.”

Divine intervention. Had to be.

Exiting on the bottom floor, Riley walked between them. Her body shook with leftover adrenaline, and she prayed her legs would hold out. “Not everybody would’ve intervened like you did. I’m so grateful.”

“Nothing else entered my mind.”

“I can’t believe this.” Avery held tight to Riley’s arm. “Of all places ... *here*?”

“And in broad daylight. Low-life predator.” At the bistro, Logan gestured at a waiter. “Can you seat the ladies, please?”

“Yes, sir.”

He turned back to Riley. “I’ll wait for the police. Right now, you need to sit.”

A wide-eyed Barbara pushed her glasses up on her nose, her gaze raking over Riley. “What’s going on?”

“Riley was almost abducted,” Avery answered before Riley’s brain had formulated a coherent response. “And if that guy who was just here hadn’t shown up, she might be gone without a trace.”

Riley shook her head. “I would’ve fought to the death before letting him put me in that trunk.”

Fran’s eyes widened. “A *trunk*? My lands.” She pulled a chair from the table. “Sit. You look like you’re about to fall over.” She

peered up at the waiter. “Hot tea all around, please. Let’s do chamomile. We’ll see after that if my friend feels like lunch or not. We may need to get her home.”

“Yes, ma’am. Not a problem. And tea’s on the house.”

“Thank you. We appreciate it.”

Frances. Always the collected one of the group. Barbara was the gregarious one, Riley the brainy one, and Avery ... well, Avery was their drama queen.

“Thanks, Fran.” Riley sank into the chair and clasped her shaking hands in her lap, letting her gaze roam around the table.

How she loved these women of faith who had seen her through a myriad of ups and downs, hills and valleys in their two-plus-decade association. They’d been there for each other as they navigated their way through adolescence, braces, mean girls, crushes gone bad, college exams, grad school pressures, and the start of their careers. Grief over lost loved ones, joy over new successes or goals realized. Theirs was a friendship forged in iron. Unbreakable. Everlasting.

She couldn’t think of anybody she’d rather be with at this minute than these three women.

After the waiter returned with their tea, Logan walked up to their table with one female and one male officer in protective vests and the requisite cop gear strapped to their waists. Her stomach flipped. Now she would have to recount everything that had happened in the parking garage.

So much for her low-stress day.