



## THROWING OFF SPARKS

### A RILEY REEVES MYSTERY

#### PROLOGUE

The rain cleared out and left the streets feeling like a steam shower as I crept south on Harry Hines in the right lane, stopping every so often to check the street girls' faces against pictures on my phone, hoping in equal parts that I both did and did not find a match for the petite brunette with innocent green eyes in the picture.

My clients' words replayed in my mind every time a girl's face came close to a match. *We don't care where she is or what she's been doing, we just want Kaylee home.*

It wasn't the first time I'd heard that sentiment from a girl's parents. Often, they had a hard time making good on their promises when the details came clear, and the girls would end up in the same situation, only more hurt than before.

With luck, the experience only left them a little worse off. Without it, they often overdosed or disappeared, or their parents were right back in my office the next week, begging me to find their daughter again.

I finally picked out Kaylee Richardson coming out of a convenience store two blocks south of Royal. The green eyes gave her away. They were still big and round like in the pictures, but with a reptilian glare replacing the innocence. If such a thing as innocence existed to begin with. I had my doubts about that.

I drove down the block and parked in an old hotel's parking lot. It had been a Regency at some point in the past, but time had stripped it of its corporate franchise and left it dilapidated and forgotten. Now a half-lit sign with a hole the shape of a rock labeled it The Jupiter Inn.

I backed my grey Honda Pilot into a spot by the sidewalk and got out to lean against the back bumper.

Times like these I regretted quitting smoking, though my heart had never really been in it. I'd mostly done it for an excuse to spend time with my ex-husband while he drank himself into a coma on the back porch at night. When we split, I quit, no longer requiring the connection.

Kaylee stopped a hundred feet from me when a late-model Ford Taurus pulled into the driveway in front of her and tooted its horn.

The Taurus' driver said something to her through the open passenger window that I was too far away to hear, but I had a good idea about the subject matter.

Kaylee looked down the street in my direction and up the other. She gestured toward the hotel behind me and said something to the driver, then headed off toward the hotel's side door. The Taurus made a U-turn at the next block and came back toward us. It turned into the hotel and pulled in up against the building.

"Kaylee," I called out as she made her way over to the car. She stopped at the mention of her name, her head already turning in my direction out of habit. I hoped I didn't look like police in my battered grey Asics, torn jeans, and blue three-quarter-sleeve ringer t-shirt. I almost always kept my curly black hair pulled back, which didn't help matters.

"I know you?" she asked, pulling on a thin cigarette I'd watched her light outside the gas station.

I shook my head. "Not yet. My name is Riley Reeves, your parents sent me to make sure you're okay."

Electricity washed over her at the mention of her folks. No doubt shame had run her out of Tyler, Texas, a

socialite gossip mill where everyone knew everyone's business and no one tried to hide that. But only desperation could have landed her in a place like this, where anonymity might shield her from judgment, but her addiction could only mute the danger to a dull throb in thirty-minute bursts.

"Tell them to leave me alone," she said, flipping away the cigarette as if to shake off an insect, then turning to walk away.

"Kaylee, wait," I said.

The Taurus' driver froze halfway out of the car when he noticed us talking.

Kaylee's eyes tracked him as she spoke. "They wanted me out, so I've been out. Nothing else to say. Now kick rocks, you're cramping my style."

"Kaylee," I said again. She shot me the finger and beamed a fake smile across the lot to the driver.

"Everything good to go?" he asked, glaring at me from behind the safety of the car's open door. I made note of his appearance, about six foot with a paunch belly and balding head, Lou Case shirt half unbuttoned above jeans that had to be two decades old.

"Everything's fine," Kaylee said to him. "This lady's on a mission from God, but she decided to go to hell instead."

I memorized the Taurus' plate as I walked across the lot and around the other side of the building. When I rounded the corner I started to run, hoping to make it into the door on the other side of the building in time to see which room she went into.

I caught sight of the far stairwell door slamming shut as I stepped inside. The place smelled like a mixture of cat piss and vomit. In some places, the carpet had peeled back from the pocked walls, which I assumed were full of mice. I'd been in this same hotel the day before, where a disinterested Indian clerk assured me he'd never seen the Kaylee in my picture before.

Maybe he hadn't, given recent changes.

I took off down the hall and opened the stairwell just in time to see the door a floor up close. My footfalls echoed as I took the first set of VCT tile stairs. I dodged a puddle of what looked to be urine on the landing before taking the second set two at a time.

It opened to an empty hallway that smelled as bad as the first, with a lingering smell of burned marijuana.

I wanted to figure out which room was hers, see if I could get her to talk to me after her date left. Nothing I could do about what happened between now and then. Or so I thought.

I made my way down the hall and back, listening closely at each door for voices. Some rooms had televisions playing. Others had no sounds at all. A few had the unmistakable anonymous grunting that accompanies sex work.

I stopped again at the closest door to the stairwell, which I figured was hers, and put my ear up to the yellowed, cracking paint.

"I told you I don't do weirdo fetish stuff," a voice I made out as Kaylee's said.

"I'm not asking," a male voice replied. There was a hollow smack and Kaylee moaned.

I tried the handle but it held, as expected, so I banged on the door and called out her name. The room fell silent for a moment, then the male voice spoke again.

"You setting me up, is that it?" he said.

Kaylee whimpered but didn't respond. I reared up like a horse and kicked the door above the handle.

It didn't give, so I kicked again.

And again.

I stumbled and fell sideways on the fourth kick, saving my own life. Two shots from inside the room sent door fragments spraying out into the hall. The bullets struck the wall beyond where I'd been not two breaths before.

I hit the floor and rolled right in the direction I'd fallen. I had to fight the urge to get up and run.

Kaylee screamed from inside the room.

“Open your mouth,” the man’s strained voice said. “Now. And you, out in the hall,” he continued, “I’ll blow her brains all over this room if you don’t back off.” I took a deep breath to calm my nerves.

“Don’t do anything drastic,” I said. “We both know that the cops are on the way, the entire building probably heard the shots. My guess, they’ll be here in a few minutes, maybe less. But you can still get out of this unharmed if you’ll listen to me.” I paused to give him a chance to digest my words, then added, “Now. How much money do you need?”

“What?” the man said, his voice shaky now, probably from the adrenaline.

“How much did you pay her?” I asked.

“Seventy-five.” His voice sounded far off now, hollow.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m going to drop two one-hundred-dollar bills right here outside the door, for your trouble. Then I’m going to go back to my room and let you leave in peace. All you have to do is grab the cash on your way out the door, get in your car, and drive away. No one will ever bother you about this again afterward, I guarantee it. Everybody goes their separate ways, you with an extra \$125 in your pocket.”

He didn’t respond. I tried again.

“Look, we’re running out of time,” I said. “I’m going to slide the money under the bottom of the door so that you can see it. Please don’t shoot me. Then I’m going back to my room so you can be on your way. Here.” I crawled over and slid the money under the door, doing my best to stay low and out of the line of fire. “There it is,” I said. “Do you see it under the door?”

“I see it,” he said. His voice sounded hoarse like his mouth had gone slack and dry.

“Okay, good. I’m gone now. I was you, I’d go too. Cops could be here any second.”

I backed down the hall and ducked into an unlocked linen closet that had garbage in it instead of supplies. The smell would normally have made me wretch, but with my adrenaline so high, I barely took note of it.

I pulled the pulse Taser in my back waist holster out and peeked through the cracked closet door to watch.

The handle clicked and the door swung open. The man I'd seen in the parking lot stuck his head out and looked both ways down the hall. He knelt down and picked up the cash while he scanned with a chrome revolver, what looked to be a .38 special, in his right hand. He backed toward the stairs sweeping the hall with the .38, then turned and pushed through the stairwell door in a hurry.

I stepped out into the hall with the targeting laser already on his left kidney and popped him with fifty-thousand volts that sent him vaulting into space above the stairs.

The momentum sent the pistol over the rail as the door swung shut between us, severing the Taser's line. I heard him hit the landing with a muted thud.

I found him collapsed there in the piss puddle on the landing, took the stairs two at a time and hit him with the Taser's contact stun for good measure. That put him down for a while.

I retrieved the .38 and ran back up the stairs, stopping to grab as many of the identification tags from the Taser as I could see from the hall carpet. No use leaving unnecessary tracks, though I doubted anyone would notice them.

The door to Kaylee's room hadn't shut all the way. Kaylee, naked from the waist down, was curled up into a ball on the bed, hugging her knees. She had a split lip, bruised cheek, and wild, almost catatonic eyes.

"We need to go," I said. She looked at me from a thousand miles away and I worried she'd gone into shock. "Kaylee, did you hear me?" I said.

## *THROWING OFF SPARKS – PREVIEW*

Again she didn't respond. I pulled her up by the arm and guided her toward the door anyway.

Her eyes came into focus at my touch, but she made no move to resist.

"Where are you taking me?" she finally stammered as we stepped into the hallway.

"Home," I said. "But we need to get out of here soon or there will be trouble."

"Okay," she whispered.

We made our way down the stairs. Her attacker had managed to get to his knees on the landing by then. Kaylee stiffened at the sight of him, then pulled away from me and soccer kicked him right between the eyes. His face erupted and dropped into the slurry of urine and blood on the concrete landing. I bent down and snatched the Taser cartridge from his back, then we continued down the stairs.

Sirens radiated in the distance as we got into my Pilot. I put it in drive and used my blinker to make a right onto the street. I had confidence that my surveillance vehicle was unremarkable enough to go unnoticed, but there was no need to draw attention by driving erratically or breaking minor laws. I reached into the go-bag behind Kaylee's seat and pulled out a pair of sweatpants I used as pajamas when files kept me out of town overnight.

"Put these on," I said, handing them to her. She nodded and complied as best she could in the cramped space.

I swung onto I-30 with the Bank of America building's neon green lights reflecting down onto the windshield. Twenty minutes later we were moving out of the city. Kaylee hadn't said another word in that time. She was fast asleep by the time we hit I-20 going east, headed back behind the Pine Curtain of East Texas, where we both belonged.