

THE FALL

THE URANIUM LILY CASEFILES



JJ CLAYBORN

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CHAPTER ONE

Thursday

Detective Riley Schiller knew that today would be different, but he didn't realize it would change his life forever. He stood with crossed arms in the office of Captain Sydnee Ernser. He stared hard at the captain, bracing himself for the conversation that he knew was coming, the one that he'd be dreading for months.

Sydnee, who was in her mid-fifties and was well-practiced in the art of giving looks of disappointment to her children, stood behind her desk. She stared right back at him, her arms folded mirroring his posture, her finger tapping steadily against her bicep.

Riley Schiller was only a decade younger than his captain, but in that moment he felt like a child about to be scolded. He tried to hold her stare, but the intensity of her glare was too much. Her dark skin contrasted her grey eyes making them seem more intense to Riley. He felt like she could see right through him and averted his gaze.

The corner of Sydnee's mouth formed into the smallest of smiles. She knew that she had him where she wanted. She walked out from behind the desk and leaned against the front of it, re-crossing her arms, finger still tapping away. "I know that you don't want to have this conversation, Detective..." she said in her watered down Long Island accent.

"Great," Riley said, uncrossing his arms and shoving his hands into his pockets. "I know it, and you know it, so we can just skip it and I can get back to work."

Sydnee shook her head. "It doesn't work that way, as you are well aware."

Riley bristled, crossing his arms once more, standing there indignantly, waiting for the words that he knew was coming.

Captain Ernser sighed. "I know that you don't want to hear it, but effective tomorrow, I'm assigning you a new partner."

Riley started to object, but Sydnee cut him off. "Shut up, Riley," she barked. "I'm the damn Captain. I give the orders, you follow them. You don't have to like me, and you may not agree with me, but you do have to follow my orders. Or, you can save me the trouble and turn in your badge now. This isn't a democracy and I'm not asking for your opinion. Are we clear?"

Riley stared quietly at the captain.

"I asked if that was understood," she repeated, standing to her full height.

Riley felt his pale cheeks flush with heat. He nodded, his sandy brown hair flopping out of place slightly. "Yes."

"Good," Sydnee leaned back against her desk. "Tomorrow morning you will begin working with Katelynn Martinez. I want you to show her the ropes around here."

Riley shook his head and rolled his eyes. "Surely there's someone else who can babysit a rookie cop."

"I'm not asking, dammit." She fixed him with a hard stare. "Besides, I never said that she was a rookie. She's done three years in Vice and comes highly recommended. I've put it off as long as possible, but we need to get the squad back to full capacity."

"I don't want another partner. I like working alone..." Riley started to retort.

Captain Ernser shot him a harsh glare. "For the last time, I'm not asking. After Miguel..."

Riley straightened up and interrupted her, his finger pointing accusatorily, his voice hoarse. "Don't! Don't talk about him."

An awkward silence punctuated the air. Riley and Captain Ernser stared at each for several seconds before Ernser shook her head and began pacing back and forth in front of her desk. "I miss him too." She stopped to look back at Detective Schiller, shaking her head slowly. "You were one of my best detectives. But you've been slipping. You've been slipping a lot. I gave you a lot of latitude while you were out playing Captain Ahab, but that leeway is over." She paused to look him in the eyes. "You have a choice to make, Riley. You need to shit or get off the pot. Whether you like it or not, Martinez is transferring to Homicide

effective tomorrow, and she's your new partner. She's no rookie, but you have more experience on the job. She will learn from you. If you do good work, she'll learn that. If you mess up and go off the reservation... well, she'll learn that too."

Riley stood still, with his lips pursed. He bit his tongue debating whether or not to speak. "Yes, ma'am," he finally said.

There was a moment of awkward silence and the captain softened her tone a little. "Look, Martinez is good police. Really good, in fact. Hell, one day she might even take my job." She shook her head. "But that won't happen if she learns your sideways methods. I need you to get back in the saddle and straighten it up or I'll transfer her to a different partner; one that won't drag her down. And if I have to do that, I'm transferring you out of Homicide and over to parking duty. Is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," Riley replied curtly. Inside he knew the Captain had a valid point, but he would never admit that to her. He hated being wrong, even more so when it was pointed out by people that he respected and admired.

"You're good police. Before Miguel, you were one of my best detectives. That's the Riley I need right now. That's the Riley who needs to show Martinez the ropes."

Riley nodded, stared at her for a minute, then turned and left her office. He had a lot to consider.

Sydnee threw her arms up in frustration and called after him. "It's okay, you can dismiss yourself whenever you'd like. I was done talking anyway, Riley." She shook her head and muttered under her breath, "jerk".

* * *

Friday

Loud buzzing woke Riley from a dead sleep. It took a long minute for his brain to recognize the buzzing was his phone. He glanced at the clock.

"4:30? This better be good," he muttered to himself, picking up the phone. "Hello?" He said, making no attempt to hide the grogginess of his voice.

The familiar voice of Lieutenant Anderson, his immediate supervisor, came through the speaker. "Detective Schiller, I know it's early, but we need you to come in right now."

Riley rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "Now? You've got to be kidding me. It's 4:30 in the morning."

"Yes, Schiller, right now." He tried to sound authoritative, especially since Riley had a bad habit of bucking authority lately. Riley had always been slightly rebellious, but this past year Riley had openly defied orders several times and been formally reprimanded for it.

Riley yawned. "Can't it wait? They're already dead, it's not like they're going anywhere. Just two more hours..."

"No, dammit. You need to get in here, right now. The victim is a small child, a young girl. The brass is all over this and they want answers yesterday."

Riley was genuinely surprised. They didn't often get cases involving children. He immediately climbed out of bed and clicked on the lights. "Okay. I didn't know," Riley said apologetically. "I'll be right there."

"I'll text you the address. It's over in Sheepshead Bay, off Avenue U. Detective Martinez will meet you there," Anderson said hanging up.

Riley stared at the phone for a second, contemplating what Anderson said. "Detective Martinez," he muttered to himself, sighing and shaking his head. The phone vibrated as an address popped onto the screen, shaking Riley out of his thoughts. He tossed it on the bed as he quickly dressed.

He stared at the coffee pot for a moment before deciding that he should probably skip his morning cup of Joe today. Checking once more to ensure that he had everything, he grabbed his keys and headed out.

An hour later, Detective Schiller pulled up in front of a large, grey, multistory office building. The early morning light hadn't yet crept high enough to illuminate the building. Several police cruisers with flashing lights sat haphazardly, casting their glow ominously up and down the pre-dawn street. Riley navigated around the cars until he found an opening where he could park.

Getting out of the car he saw several officers roaming around, cataloging things that might be evidence. A bright yellow line of police tape signaled the beginning of the crime scene. Riley walked up to it and flashed his badge. The officer charged with maintaining the scene let him

pass underneath the tape with a wave of his arm.

Riley approached the steps to the building when a woman's voice called his name.

“Schiller, wait up!”

Looking left, Riley could see a woman he didn't recognize approaching. She was about five and a half feet, he guessed. She had a medium brown skin complexion that suggested a Latin or Spanish ancestry. Dark black shoulder-length hair framed her face and accentuated her blue eyes. She was dressed neatly and ready to go. She almost seemed happy, which only reminded Riley how much he hated mornings. He stole a glance at his own clothing; he looked like he just crawled out of bed. He sighed, disappointed with himself for being shown up by the new kid.

Riley nodded to her when she got close enough. “You must be Martinez.”

Katelynn smiled and nodded back. “Guilty as charged. I got a call from Lieutenant Anderson and he said to meet you here.”

“How'd you know I was Schiller?” Riley asking, already suspecting the answer.

She flashed a grin. “The department employee directory has everyone's photo in it,” she said, winking at him.

“Fair enough,” Riley said, nodding in approval.

“Here, I got you a coffee. I heard rumors about how much you hate mornings,” she said, handing him a steaming brown Styrofoam cup.

Riley's face betrayed his surprise. After a second he recovered his senses and took the drink. “Thank you, Martinez.” The coffee smelled amazing this early in the morning. He took a deep breath and sipped it gingerly. “I needed this,” he said, slightly raising the cup. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and ran a hand through his hair, trying to look just a little more presentable.

Martinez had moved on and was already at the top of the stairs, waiting for him. “Are you coming?” she called back.

Riley hurried up the stairs, and they entered the main lobby together. He stole a sideways glance at Martinez. She seemed okay so far, but he still wasn't sure about working with a partner. It would take some time to settle in.

He looked around the room and whistled appreciatively at the

elegance of the lobby. The outside of the building belied the opulence of the interior. A giant, white marble floor ran the length of the main hallway and the lobby. White stone walls stretched up to the ceiling. A fancy chandelier hung high from the ceiling above them. The room was furnished on both sides by a wide, curved oak staircase that lead to the second floor. Riley's attention was pulled to the right. At the base of the stairs, a group of police officers stood in a huddle, looking down at the floor.

Katelynn saw it too. She tapped him on the arm and pointed, then made her way over there with Riley right behind her.

"What do we have?" Katelynn asked, trying to peer around the uniformed officers standing in front of her.

The other officers straightened up and moved out of the way at her question. They had been hunched over, watching the coroner work, but now they parted to give the detectives an unobstructed view.

One man in blue coveralls stood as well. He looked at Detective Martinez and scrunched his face in confusion. "I don't recognize you. I'm Jensen Crooks, City Coroner," he stated, introducing himself with a nod.

Katelynn nodded back. "Detective Martinez, I'm new to Homicide." She started to reach out a hand to shake his, but he held up his gloved hands and shrugged. She smiled and gestured over her shoulder with her thumb, "You probably know Schiller already."

"I sure do," the coroner confirmed, nodding to Riley.

Riley shook his head and rolled his eyes, annoyed at his new partner making obvious statements. "Time of death?"

"Based on liver temp, I'd estimate the time of death was about three hours ago, give or take." He knelt down and pointed a gloved finger at the girl. "You can clearly see right here, that her neck was broken, which appears to be the cause of death. Based on what I'm seeing, it looks like she might have fallen down the stairs and broken her neck on the way down."

Katelynn produced a pocket-sized tablet computer and was keying in notes. "So, this is an accident?" she inquired.

"I didn't say that." Crooks was quick to correct her, holding up his finger and shaking it as he spoke. "Not definitively. I won't know more until we can get her back to the lab to do a proper autopsy. I'm just saying

it looks like her neck was broken in the fall. Whether she fell by accident, or someone pushed her, that's a different question altogether, and I can't answer that here."

Riley looked hard at the girl for the first time. She had shoulder length blonde hair and freckles. She wore a light blue sun dress and strap on sandals. She was around three and a half feet tall, he estimated. "How old is she?" Riley asked quietly, frowning, his gravelly voice scarcely above a whisper.

"Not sure, definitively, but based on average child development figures, and taking an estimate of her height and weight, I'd guess between five and six. I'll be able to answer that more accurately after we get her back to the lab."

Katelynn frowned, shook her head and typed out more notes. "Do we know who she is?"

"No, sorry. There's no ID on her, so we have no way to identify her yet," one of the other officers on the scene answered.

Katelynn made it a point to read his nametag and write that down in her notes. She stopped typing and stared at the girl for a few seconds before an uncontrollable shiver ran through her. She had seen dead bodies before, but this was her first child victim. In the Vice unit it was mostly gang members, drug dealers, or Johns and hookers. This was a first for her, and she wasn't ready for it. And the way the girl's neck twisted around unnaturally made her sick to her stomach.

"I really hope this is an accident," Katelynn said, thinking aloud.

Riley looked at his new partner and wondered how this partnership was going to work out. Mikey wouldn't have missed it. Hell, Mikey was usually two steps ahead of him. Riley thought for a minute about just leaving Martinez out of it and handling the case himself, but Captain Ernser's warning played back in his mind. "It's not." Riley was certain. "I'd be willing to bet money that the autopsy finds foul play."

Martinez turned and looked at Riley. She cocked her head to the side and gazed into his amber eyes for a moment, trying to read him, to see if he was just messing with her because she was new. "So, you don't think she fell down the stairs on her own?" She stared at him with a questioning gaze.

"Not for a minute," Riley said, shaking his head.

Katelynn pursed her lips. "Really? That's interesting." She wrote a

note as Riley chuckled to himself. “Why do you think it’s not an accident?” she asked him.

Riley held up a finger, indicating that he wanted her to wait a second and called the responding officer over. “Officer Harper, how did we first learn about this case?” he asked the patrolman.

Harper flipped through some notes he had scribbled in his pocket notebook. “It looks like we got a call at about four this morning, giving us the location.”

Riley nodded knowingly, smiling to himself as though that single piece of information proved him right. “Any eye-witnesses?” he asked.

Harper checked the notes. “No, the caller was anonymous; a man. Muffled voice.”

Riley nodded. “Big surprise there,” he said sarcastically. “Did you at least get to trace the call?” he asked.

Harper shook his head. “We tried. But the call came in from a burn phone.”

“There you go,” Riley said triumphantly, looking at Martinez and grinning like an idiot. “Like I said, a homicide.” Inwardly he wondered about her. She acted like she knew good police work, but something like this seemed obvious to Riley and he wondered again how she missed it.

“That doesn’t prove murder, Riley,” Katelynn countered. “It’s going to take more evidence than that. The DA will throw this case out so fast, unless we get some hard evidence proving murder.” She shook her head and wondered if the stories she heard about him were true. Was he really that bad? Had he slipped that far? Was he really that reckless?

Riley nodded and smiled arrogantly. “True, but let’s review the facts. The call came in from an anonymous caller, so he clearly didn’t want to be identified.”

“Right,” Katelynn agreed, nodding.

Riley sipped the coffee again and continued. “And the call was from a burn phone, so he obviously didn’t want us digging around and finding out who he is. That’s more than a little suspicious.”

“Okay, I’m with you so far.” Katelynn nodded in agreement.

Riley took another sip. “And the call came in at four in the morning...but it’s now just past six...” he waited a moment to see if she would connect the dots that were so clear to him. When she remained silent he continued. “...and the coroner estimated her time of death as

three hours ago...”

“...an hour before the call came in.” Martinez finished the thought. She jotted and note and furrowed her brow. “It still doesn’t prove murder, but why wait around for an hour before calling it in?” She asked, tapping her pen against her teeth.

Riley nodded. “That’s a good question. But, there’s an even better question that we’ve overlooked.”

“Oh? And what is that?” Katelynn’s forehead furrowed in thought again.

Riley nodded and made a sweeping gesture to the young girl. “What the hell is a five year old girl doing in a deserted office building at three in the morning, anyway?”

The shock was evident on Katelynn’s face as the realization hit her. “Son of a bitch! Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s your first day on Homicide. The crimes here are a little different than the gang-fights that you’re used to seeing.” A moment of self-awareness passed through him and he wondered if he was really a great detective and that’s why he saw this, or if too much time looking at dead bodies had made him paranoid. He pushed the question from his head and continued, “The scene looked obvious at first glance, no doubt as it was meant to.” Riley sighed in frustration, finishing off the coffee. “Sometimes, if the answer seems apparent enough, the cases get closed without too much investigation. The brass is on the Captain to close cases quickly, and as a result things sometimes get overlooked. The wrong people get blamed, or cases like this one get closed out as accidental. It’s not pretty, but it happens. There’s so much to do, when an easy out comes along a lot of cops take it. Why go looking for extra work?” He walked over stared at the girl once more. “It took me years to start questioning the obvious.”

Katelynn nodded. “I still should have picked up on that earlier. I’m better than that.” She glanced at the girl’s body. Jensen was loading her onto a stretcher for transport back to the morgue. “So what are we missing? Her body was clearly staged.”

Riley nodded. Part of him hated explaining it to Martinez because Mikey would have already known this. But a small part of him was hopeful that with a few cases she’d catch on quickly. “Well, we know what the killer wants us to think: they want us to think that she fell down

the stairs accidentally.” Riley looked around inquisitively. “But the real question is what are we being distracted from? Did they move her body to the stairs to make it look like she was upstairs to hide the fact that she was down here on the first floor? Or did he move her to the bottom of the stairs to obscure which floor she was actually on? For all we know she could have been on any of them,” Riley explained.

Martinez looked around the lobby and stared at the directory sign. “So, what’s in this building that’s worth breaking into late at night?”

Riley looked up and pointed at the ceiling. “Well, there’s a bank on the top two floors of this building. Money is always one of the first motives that comes to mind for murder.”

Katelynn shook her head in disagreement. “No. I’m not buying it, no pun intended. What would a little girl have to do with a bank?”

Riley shrugged. “Maybe there’s a biometric lock box in the vault that’s keyed to her fingerprint? I honestly have no idea. But, whenever cash is at stake it seems like the most obvious motive, and one that we should try to eliminate early on.”

“That makes sense. But she wasn’t found in the bank, so we’ll need a warrant,” Katelynn added.

“True. There’s not much that we can do until we get more details from the autopsy. Maybe that will give us enough to get a warrant.”

The detectives walked toward the door. They found the officer in charge. “We need to go brief our captain, the brass is breathing down our necks on this one. Keep this placed locked down, no one in or out. This is still an active crime scene.”

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