

A RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY--BOOK #10

ONCE LOST

BLAKE PIERCE

A Riley Paige Mystery

Блейк Пирс

Once Lost

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ONCE LOST is book #10 in the bestselling Riley Paige mystery series, which begins with the #1 bestseller ONCE GONE (Book #1)—a free download with over 900 five star reviews! Still reeling from her former partner Lucy's death and from her partner Bill's PTSD, FBI Special Agent Riley Paige does her best to try to keep herself stable and to patch together her family life. She has to decide what to do about April's boyfriend, recovering from his abusive father, and about Blaine, who is ready for their relationship to move ahead. But before she can work it out, Riley is summoned for a new case. In an idyllic suburban town in the Midwest, teenage girls are going missing—and a body has already turned up. The police are stumped, and Riley is called in to catch the killer before another girl goes missing. Making things worse is that Riley is assigned a partner she does not want—her nemesis, Special agent Roston—who had been interrogating her in Shane's case. Even worse: Shane is on the loose, he wants revenge—and he has Riley's family in his sights. A dark psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, ONCE LOST is book #10 in a riveting new series—with a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

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Blake Pierce

ONCE LOST

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes eleven books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising six books (and counting); of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising five books; and of the new KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising four books (and counting).

An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Blake loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.blakepierceauthor.com to learn more and stay in touch.

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PROLOGUE

Katy Philbin was giggling as she stepped carefully down the stairs,
Stop it! she told herself.

What was so funny, anyway?

What was she doing, giggling like a little girl – not like the seventeen-year-old she actually was?
She wanted more than anything in the world to act like a serious adult.

After all, *he* was treating her like an adult. He'd been talking to her like an adult all evening long, making her feel special and respected.

He'd even been calling her Katherine instead of Katy.

She really liked it when he called her Katherine.

She also liked the adult drinks he'd been making for her all evening – “Mai Tais,” he called them, and they were so sweet that she could barely taste the alcohol.

And now she couldn't even remember how many she'd had.

Was she drunk?

Oh, that would be awful! she thought.

What would he think of her if she couldn't even handle a few icy, sweet-tasting drinks?

And now she was feeling extremely light-headed.

What if she fell down these stairs?

She looked down at her feet, wondering why they weren't moving as they should be. And why was the light so dim here?

To her embarrassment, she couldn't even remember exactly why she was here on this flight of wooden steps that seemed to get longer by the moment.

“Where're we going?” she asked.

Her words came out all fuzzy and sloppy but at least she'd managed to stop giggling.

“I told you,” he said in reply. “I want to show you something.”

She looked around for him. He was somewhere at the bottom of the stairs, but she couldn't see him. Just one lamp spilled a small pool of light in a corner far away.

But that light was enough to remind her where she was.

“Oh, yeah,” she murmured. “Down'n your basement.”

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” she said, trying to convince herself that it was true. “I'll be right down.”

She forced one foot to reach for the next step.

She heard him say, “C'mon, Katy. The thing I promised to show you is over here.”

Dimly she realized ...

He called me Katy.

She felt oddly disappointed, after a whole evening of being called Katherine.

“Be there in jus' a minnit,” she said.

The slur in her words was getting worse.

And for some reason, she found that extremely funny.

She heard him chuckle.

“Are you having a good time, Katy?” he asked in a pleasant voice – a voice that she'd liked and trusted for many years.

“The besht,” she said, giggling again.

“I'm glad.”

But now the world seemed to be swimming around her. Hanging onto the railing, she sat down on the stairs.

He spoke again in a less patient voice.

“Hurry up, girl. I’m not going to stand here all day.”

Katy pulled herself back to her feet, struggling to clear her head. She didn’t like the tone of his voice now. But could she blame him for getting impatient? What was the matter with her, anyway? Why couldn’t she get down these stupid stairs?

She was finding it harder and harder to focus on where she was and what she was doing.

She lost her grip on the railing and dropped down to sit on the step.

She wondered again – how many drinks had she had, anyway?

Then she remembered.

Two.

Only two!

Of course, she hadn’t been drinking at all since that horrible night ...

Not until now. But just two drinks.

For a moment she couldn’t breathe.

Is it happening again?

She told herself sternly that she was being silly.

She was safe and sound here with a man she’d trusted all her life.

And she was making a fool of herself, and the last thing she wanted to do was make a fool of herself, especially around him, when he’d treated her so nicely and served her all those drinks and ...

And now everything was foggy, blurred, and dark.

And she felt a strange nausea churning inside her.

“I’m not feeling sho good,” she said.

He didn’t reply, and she couldn’t see him.

She couldn’t see anything.

“I think I’d besht – better go home now,” she said.

He still didn’t say anything.

She reached out blindly, groping around in the air.

“Help me – me get up – off the shtairs. Help me go up the shtairs.”

She heard his footsteps coming toward her.

He’s going to help me, she thought.

So why was that churning, sick feeling getting worse by the second?

“D-d-rive me home,” she said. “Could shyoo do that for me? Please?”

His footsteps stopped.

She could feel his presence right in front of her, even if she couldn’t see him.

But why wasn’t he saying anything?

Why wasn’t he doing anything to help her?

Then she realized what that nauseous feeling actually was.

Fear.

She summoned up her last ounce of will, reached up and took hold of the railing, and pulled herself to her feet.

I have to leave, she thought. But she was unable to say the words aloud.

Then Katy felt a heavy blow to her head.

And then she didn’t feel anything at all.

CHAPTER ONE

Riley Paige struggled to blink back tears. She was sitting in her office at Quantico, looking at a photo of a young woman who had a cast on her ankle.

Why am I punishing myself like this? she wondered.

After all, she needed to think about other things right now – especially a BAU meeting scheduled for just a few minutes from now. Riley was dreading that meeting, which might threaten her professional future.

In spite of that, Riley couldn't make herself look away from the picture on her cell phone.

She had snapped that picture of Lucy Vargas last fall, right here in the Behavioral Analysis Unit offices. Lucy's ankle was in a cast, but her smile was simply radiant, a dazzling contrast to her smooth brown skin. Lucy had just been injured on the first case she had worked with Riley and her partner, Bill Jeffreys. But Lucy had done great work, and she knew it, and so did Riley and Bill. That was why Lucy was smiling.

Riley's hand trembled a little as she held the cell phone in her hand.

Lucy was dead now – gunned down by a deranged sniper.

Lucy had died in Riley's arms. But Riley knew that Lucy's death hadn't been her fault.

She wished Bill felt the same way. Her partner was currently on mandatory leave and not doing at all well.

Riley shuddered as she remembered how things had unfolded.

The situation had been chaotic, and instead of shooting the sniper, Bill had shot an innocent man who was trying to help Lucy. Fortunately, the man wasn't badly injured, and no one blamed Bill for his actions, least of all Riley. Riley had never seen him so debilitated with guilt and trauma. Riley wondered how soon he could come back to work – or if he ever could.

Riley's throat tightened as she remembered holding Lucy in her arms.

"You've got a great career ahead of you," Riley had pleaded. *"Now stay with us, Lucy. Stay with us."*

But it was hopeless. Lucy had lost too much blood. Riley had felt the life ebbing away from Lucy's body until it was gone.

And now tears began to trickle down Riley's cheeks.

Her recollections were interrupted by a familiar voice.

"Agent Paige ..."

Riley looked up and saw Sam Flores, the lab technician with black-rimmed glasses. He was standing in her open office door.

Riley stifled a gasp. She hastily wiped away her tears and turned her cell phone face down on her desk.

But she could tell by Sam's stricken expression that he'd glimpsed what she'd been looking at. And that was the last thing she wanted.

A romance had been budding between Sam and Lucy, and he'd taken her death very hard. He still looked brokenhearted.

Now Flores looked at Riley sadly, but to Riley's relief he didn't ask what he'd just interrupted. Instead he said, "I'm on my way to the meeting. You coming?"

Riley nodded, and Sam nodded back at her.

"Well, good luck, Agent Paige," he said, then continued on his way.

Riley muttered aloud to herself ...

"Yeah, good luck."

Sam seemed to realize she was going to need it for this meeting.

It was time to pull herself together and face whatever was coming next.

*

A little while later, Riley sat in the large conference room surrounded by more BAU personnel than she had expected, including technicians and investigators in a wide range of capacities. Not all of the faces were familiar, and not all of them were friendly.

I could really use an ally right now, she thought.

She certainly missed Bill's presence. Sam Flores sat nearby, but he looked too downcast to be of any help to her right now.

The least friendly face of all was Special Agent in Charge Carl Walder, who sat directly across the table from her. The man with the babyish, freckled face glanced back and forth between Riley and a written report in front of him.

He said in a sullen voice, "Agent Paige, I'm trying to understand what's going on here. We've granted a request to post agents at your house around the clock. This seems to have something to do with Shane Hatcher's recent activities, but I'm not sure exactly how or why. Please explain."

Riley gulped hard.

She'd known that this meeting was going to deal with her relationship with Shane Hatcher, a brilliant and dangerous escaped convict.

She also knew that a full and honest explanation would mean an end to her career.

It might even put her in prison.

She said, "Agent Walder, as you know, Shane Hatcher was last seen at a cabin that I own up in the Appalachian Mountains."

Walder nodded and waited for Riley to say more.

Riley knew she had to choose her words very carefully. Until recently, she and Hatcher had had a secret pact. In return for helping Riley on an intensely personal case, Riley had agreed to let Hatcher hide away in the cabin she had inherited from her father.

It had been a pact with a devil, and Riley looked back on it with shame.

Riley continued, "As you also know, Hatcher escaped an FBI SWAT team that surrounded my cabin. I have reason to think he might turn up at my home."

Walder squinted at her suspiciously.

"Why do you think that?"

"Hatcher is obsessed with me," Riley said. "Now that he's been spotted, I'm fairly sure he'll try to reach out to me. If so, the agents around my house have got a good chance of capturing him."

Riley cringed a little inside.

It was a half-truth at best.

The real reason she wanted agents around her house was to protect her and her family.

Walder sat drumming his fingers on the table for a moment.

"Agent Paige, you say that Hatcher's obsessed with you. Are you sure that obsession isn't mutual?"

Riley bristled a little at the insinuation.

She was relieved when her immediate superior, Brent Meredith, spoke up. Meredith cut a daunting presence as always with his black, angular features and his stern look. But Riley's relationship with Meredith had always been respectful, even friendly. He'd often been her ally in difficult times.

She hoped that he'd be one right now.

He said, "Chief Walder, I think that Agent Paige's request for agents at her home was well-founded. We mustn't pass up even the faintest possibility of bringing Hatcher to justice."

"Yes," Walder said. "And I am not satisfied with the fact that we knew exactly where he was but he still got away." Walder drew himself up in his chair, stared directly at Riley, and asked, "Agent Paige, did you warn Hatcher about the SWAT team that was closing in around him?"

Riley could hear a gasp in the room.

Not many people would have the nerve to ask her such a question. But Riley had to suppress a laugh. This was one question she could answer truthfully. It was why she had reason to fear Hatcher now.

“No, I did not,” Riley said firmly, meeting Walder’s gaze with a glare.

Walder dropped his eyes first. He turned to Jennifer Roston, a young African-American woman with short straight hair who sat looking at Riley with intense dark eyes.

“Do you have questions, Agent Roston?” he asked.

Roston said nothing for a moment. Riley waited somewhat anxiously for her reply. Roston had been assigned to bring Shane Hatcher to justice. Roston was new to the BAU and eager to make her mark. Riley didn’t think she could count on the new agent to be her ally.

Roston hadn’t taken her eyes off Riley during the whole meeting so far.

“Agent Paige, would you mind explaining the exact nature of your relationship with Shane Hatcher?”

Riley bristled again.

She wanted to say ...

Yes, I mind. I mind very much.

Roston’s tactic was becoming clear to Riley.

Some days ago Roston had privately interrogated Riley about this very topic in this very room.

Now Roston clearly intended to ask her the same questions all over again, hoping to catch Riley in a contradiction. Roston expected Riley to crack under the pressure of a large meeting like this. And Riley knew from hard experience not to underestimate her. Roston was highly skilled with mind games.

Say as little as possible, she told herself. Be extremely careful.

*

After the meeting broke up, everyone left the room except Riley.

Now that it had ended, Riley felt too badly shaken to get up from her chair.

Roston had asked her familiar questions – for example, how often Riley had communicated with Hatcher, and how. She’d also asked about the death of Shirley Redding, a real estate agent who had gone to the cabin against Riley’s wishes and had died there. The police didn’t suspect foul play, but Riley was sure that Hatcher had murdered her for intruding on his territory. Riley sensed that Roston also suspected the truth.

Through all of Roston’s questions, Riley had responded with familiar lies.

She could tell that Roston was far from satisfied.

This isn’t over, she thought with a chill. How long could she hope to conceal the whole truth about her relationship with Hatcher?

But a much more terrifying worry also weighed on her.

What was Shane Hatcher going to do now?

She knew he felt bitterly betrayed that she hadn’t warned him about the approaching SWAT team. In fact, he had deliberately allowed himself to be seen at the cabin, allowed the FBI to close in, just to test her loyalty.

From Hatcher’s perspective, she had failed that test.

She remembered a text message he had sent to her afterward ...

“You will live to regret it. Your family might not.”

She knew Hatcher too well not to take his threats seriously.

Riley sat at the big table clenching her hands together anxiously.

How did I let it come to this? she wondered.

Why had she allowed her relationship with Hatcher to continue even after his escape from prison?

Something Walder had just said echoed in her mind ...

“You say that Hatcher’s obsessed with you. Are you sure that obsession isn’t mutual?”

Now that she was sitting here alone, she couldn’t deny the truth behind Walder’s question.

Hatcher had fascinated Riley ever since she first met him in Sing Sing, seeking out his considerable expertise as a self-taught criminologist. He still fascinated her now that he was at large – fascinated her with his brilliance, his ruthlessness, and his strange capacity for loyalty. In fact, Riley felt an uncanny bond with him – a bond that Hatcher did everything he could to strengthen and manipulate.

It was just like Hatcher had sometimes told her:

“We’re joined at the brain, Riley Paige.”

Riley shuddered at the thought.

She hoped that at long last she had broken that bond.

But had she also brought the wrath of Shane Hatcher upon the people she loved most?

Just then Riley heard a voice behind her.

“Agent Paige ...”

Riley turned and saw that Jennifer Roston had just stepped back into the room.

“I think that you and I need to talk some more,” Roston said, sitting down at the table across from Riley.

Riley’s mind flooded with dread.

What trick might Roston have up her sleeve now?

CHAPTER TWO

Riley and Jennifer Roston sat looking at each other across the conference room table in silence for almost a full minute.

The suspense was almost more than Riley could take.

Finally Roston said, "That was quite a performance you just gave, Agent Paige."

Riley felt stung and angry.

"I don't need this," she growled.

She started to get up from her chair to leave.

"No, don't go," Roston said. "Not without hearing what I've got on my mind."

Then with an odd smile, she added, "You might be surprised."

Riley felt as though she knew perfectly well what Roston had in mind.

She had set her mind on destroying Riley.

Nevertheless, Riley stayed seated. Whatever was going on between her and Roston, it was high time to settle it. And besides, she was curious.

Roston said, "First of all, I think we got off to a bad start. There have been some misunderstandings. I never meant for us to be enemies. Please believe me. I admire you. A lot. I came to the BAU eager to work with you."

Riley was a little taken aback. Roston's facial expression and tone of voice seemed perfectly sincere. The truth was, Riley had been deeply impressed by everything she'd heard about Roston. Her academy scores were said to be astonishing, and she'd already won commendations for field work in Los Angeles.

And now, sitting here looking at her, Riley was impressed anew with Roston's demeanor. The woman was short but compact and athletic, and she radiated energy and enthusiasm.

But now seemed no time for Riley to heap praise on the new agent. There had simply been too much tension and mistrust between them.

After a pause, Roston said, "I think we've got a lot to offer each other. Right now. In fact, I'm pretty sure we both want exactly the same thing."

"What's that?" Riley asked.

Roston smiled and tilted her head a little.

"To put an end to Shane Hatcher's criminal career."

Riley didn't reply. It took moment for Riley to register that Roston's words were perfectly true. She no longer considered Shane Hatcher to be an ally. In fact, he was a dangerous enemy. And he had to be stopped before he did harm to any of Riley's loved ones.

To do that, he would have to be caught or killed.

"Tell me more," Riley said.

Roston tucked her chin on her hand and leaned toward Riley.

"I'm going to say a few things," she said. "I'd like you to listen without saying anything in reply. Don't deny or agree with what I say. Just listen."

Riley nodded uneasily.

"Your relationship with Shane Hatcher continued even after he escaped Sing Sing. In fact, it became more intense than ever. You've communicated with him more than once – several times, I'm pretty sure, occasionally in person. He's helped you on official cases, and he's helped you in more personal ways. Your relationship with him has become – what's the word? Symbiotic."

It took Riley considerable self-control not to react to any of this.

All of it was, of course, absolutely true.

Roston continued, "I'm pretty sure you were aware of his presence at your cabin. In fact, you probably agreed to it. But the death of Shirley Redding was no accident. And it wasn't part of your

bargain. Hatcher has gotten out of control, and you want nothing more to do with him. But you're scared of him. You don't know how to break the connection."

An unsettling silence fell between Riley and Roston. Riley wondered how she knew all this. It seemed downright uncanny. But Riley didn't believe in mind reading.

No, she's just one hell of a detective, Riley thought.

This new agent was extremely smart, and her instincts and intuition seemed to be as strong as Riley's.

But what was Roston trying to do right now? Was she setting a trap, trying to get Riley to confess all that had gone on between her and Hatcher?

Somehow, Riley's gut told her otherwise.

But did she dare trust her?

Roston was smiling enigmatically again.

"Agent Paige, do you think I don't know how you feel? Do you think I don't have secrets of my own? Do you think I haven't gotten in over my head, made a pact with someone I shouldn't have? Believe me, I know exactly what you're dealing with. You took a chance, and rules sometimes need to be broken. So you broke them. Not many agents have your guts. I really do want to help."

Riley studied Roston's face without replying. She was again struck by the younger agent's sincerity.

Riley could feel a grim smile forming at the corners of her mouth. Apparently something dark lurked inside Roston, as it did in herself.

Roston said, "Agent Paige, when I first started working on the Hatcher case, you gave me access to all the computer files you had relating to him. Except for one titled 'THOUGHTS.' It was listed in the summary, but I couldn't find it. You told me you'd deleted it. You said it was just rough notes and redundant stuff."

Roston leaned back in her chair, seeming to relax a little.

But Riley was anything but relaxed. She'd rashly deleted the file called THOUGHTS, which actually contained vital information about Hatcher's financial connections – connections that allowed him to remain at large and wield considerable power.

Roston said, "I'm pretty sure you've still got that file."

Riley suppressed a shudder of alarm. The fact was, she had kept the file on a thumb drive. She'd often thought about simply erasing it, but somehow she couldn't bring herself to do so. Hatcher's spell over her had been strong. And just maybe she'd thought she might need to use that information someday herself.

Instead of erasing it, she'd been carrying it around in a state of indecision.

It was in Riley's purse right now.

"I'm pretty sure that file is important," Roston said. "In fact, it might contain information that I need to put Hatcher away once and for all. And we both want that to happen. I'm sure of it."

Riley gulped.

I mustn't say anything, she thought.

But didn't everything Roston said make perfect sense?

That thumb drive might well be the key to freeing Riley from Shane Hatcher's clutches.

Roston's expression softened more.

"Agent Paige, I'm going to make you a solemn promise. If you give me that information, nobody will ever know that you ever withheld it. I won't tell a soul. Never."

Riley felt her resistance collapse.

Her every instinct assured her of Roston's sincerity.

She silently reached into her purse, took out the thumb drive, and handed it to the younger agent. Roston's eyes widened slightly, but she didn't say a word. She just nodded and put the drive in her pocket.

Riley felt a desperate need to break the silence.

“Do you wish to discuss anything else, Agent Roston?”

The younger agent chuckled a little.

“Please, call me Jenn. All my friends do.”

Riley squinted uncertainly as Roston got up from her chair.

“Mind you, I won’t presume to call you anything except Agent Paige. Not until you feel comfortable otherwise. But please. Do call me Jenn. I positively insist.”

Roston left the room, leaving Riley sitting there in astonished silence.

*

Riley settled down to catch up with paperwork in her office. Whenever she wasn’t working on a case, it seemed as though tons of bureaucratic tedium awaited her and didn’t let up until she went out into the field again.

It was always unpleasant. But today she had an especially hard time focusing on what she was doing. She grew more and more worried that she’d just made a terribly foolish mistake.

Why on earth had she just handed that file over to Jennifer Roston – or “Jenn,” as she now insisted Riley call her?

It was nothing less than a confession of obstruction on Riley’s part.

Why had she given it to this particular agent when she’d never shown it to anyone else? How could an ambitious young agent do anything other than report Riley’s transgression to her superiors – maybe even to Carl Walder himself?

Any minute now, Riley might find herself under arrest.

Why hadn’t she just erased the file?

Or she could have gotten rid of it, as she had done with the gold chain Hatcher had given her. The chain had been a symbol of her bond with Hatcher. It had also contained a code for contacting him.

Riley had thrown it away in a frantic effort to free herself of him.

But for some reason, she hadn’t been able to bring herself to do the same with the thumb drive.

Why?

The financial information it contained was surely enough to at least limit Hatcher’s movements and activities.

It might just be enough to stop him for good.

It was a riddle, as were so many aspects of her relationship with Hatcher.

While Riley was sorting papers on her desk, her cell phone rang. It was a text message from an unknown number. Riley’s gasped when she saw what it said.

Did you think this would stop me? Everything is already moved. You can’t say you weren’t warned.

Riley found it hard to breathe.

Shane Hatcher, she thought.

CHAPTER THREE

Riley stared at the text message, panic rising inside her.

It wasn't hard to guess what had happened. Jenn Roston had opened the file as soon as she and Riley had parted. Jenn had found out what was in it and had already gotten right to work trying to shut down Hatcher's operation.

But in his message, Hatcher himself defiantly announced that Jenn hadn't succeeded.

Everything is already moved.

Shane Hatcher was still at large, and he was angry. With his financial resources intact he might be more dangerous than ever.

I've got to answer him, she thought. I've got to reason with him.

But how? What could she possibly say that wouldn't infuriate him more?

Then it occurred to her that Hatcher might not fully understand what was happening.

How could he know that it was Roston sabotaging his network, not Riley? Maybe she *could* make him understand at least that much.

Her hands shook as she typed in a reply.

Let me explain.

But when she tried to send the text, it was marked "undeliverable."

Riley groaned with despair.

Exactly the same thing had happened the last time she'd tried to communicate with Hatcher. He'd sent her a cryptic message, then cut her off. She used to be able to communicate with Hatcher by video chat, text, and even phone calls. But those days were over.

Right now, she had no way at all of reaching him.

But he could still reach her.

The second sentence of his new message was especially chilling.

"You can't say you weren't warned."

Riley flashed back to what he had written the last time she had communicated with him.

"You will live to regret it. Your family might not."

Riley gasped and said aloud ...

"My family!"

She fumbled with her cell phone as she punched in her home number. She heard it ring, then keep on ringing. Then the outgoing message came on, her own voice.

It was all Riley could do to keep from screaming.

Why wasn't anyone answering? The schools were on spring break. Her kids were supposed to be home. And where was Riley's live-in housekeeper, Gabriela?

Just before the outgoing message ended, she heard the voice of Jilly, the thirteen-year-old that Riley was in the process of trying to adopt. Jilly sounded breathless.

"Hey, sorry, Mom. Gabriela went to the grocery store. April and Liam and I were out in the backyard kicking a soccer ball around. We're expecting Gabriela to get back any minute."

Riley realized she'd been holding her breath. She made a conscious effort to start breathing again.

"Is everything all right?" she asked.

"Sure," Jilly said with a shrug in her voice. "Why wouldn't it be?"

Riley struggled to calm herself down.

"Jilly, could you go and look out the front window for me?"

"OK," Jilly said.

Riley heard a few footsteps.

"I'm looking," Jilly said.

“Is the van with the FBI agents still out there?”

“Yeah. And so is the one in the alley. I just saw it when I was in the backyard. If that Shane Hatcher guy comes around, those guys are sure to catch him. Is something wrong? You’re kind of scaring me.”

Riley forced a laugh.

“No, nothing’s wrong. I’m just – being a mom, I guess.”

“OK. I’ll see you later.”

The call ended, but Riley’s worry was still surging inside her.

She went down the hall and straight to Brent Meredith’s office.

She stammered, “Sir, I – I need to take the rest of the day off.”

Meredith looked up from his work.

“May I ask why, Agent Paige?” he asked.

Riley opened her mouth, but no words came out. If she explained that she’d just gotten a threat from Shane Hatcher, wouldn’t he insist on seeing the message? How could she show it to him without admitting that she’d just given the file to Jenn Roston?

Meredith looked concerned now. He seemed aware that something was wrong that Riley couldn’t talk about.

“Go,” he said. “I hope everything is all right.”

Riley’s heart flooded with gratitude at Meredith’s understanding and discretion.

“Thank you, sir,” she said.

Then she hurried out of the building and got in her car and drove home.

*

As she neared her townhouse in a quiet Fredericksburg neighborhood, she was relieved to see that the FBI van was indeed still there. Riley knew there was another van stationed in the alley. Although the vehicles were unmarked, they were hardly inconspicuous. But there was nothing to be done about that.

Riley parked her car in her driveway, walked over to the van, and looked inside the open passenger window.

Two young agents were sitting in the front seats – Craig Huang and Bud Wigton. Riley’s spirits lifted a little. She thought highly of both agents, and she’d worked with Huang several times recently. Huang had been a little too gung-ho for Riley’s liking when he first came to the BAU, but he was rapidly maturing into an excellent agent. She didn’t know Wigton as well, but he had an excellent reputation.

“Anything going on?” Riley asked them through the window.

“Not a thing,” Huang said.

Huang sounded bored, but Riley felt relieved. No news was definitely good news as far as she was concerned. But was it too good to last?

“Mind if I have a look inside?” Riley asked.

“Be our guest,” Huang said.

The side door to the windowless van slid open, and Riley stepped inside to find another agent, Grace Lochner, stationed inside. Riley knew that Grace also had a sterling reputation at the BAU.

Lochner was seated in front of a battery of video screens. She turned toward Riley with a smile.

“What have you got going here?” Riley asked.

Seeming eager to show off the technology at her disposal, Lochner pointed to a couple of screens that showed overhead views of the neighborhood.

She said, “Here we’ve got real-time satellite images showing all the comings and goings within a half mile of here. Nobody can get near here without us noticing.”

Laughing a little, Lochner added, “I’m glad you live in a quiet neighborhood. It gives us less traffic to keep track of.”

She pointed out several more screens showing street-level activity.

She said, “We’ve hidden cameras around the neighborhood to see what’s going on closer up. We can check license plates of any vehicle that comes near here.”

A voice crackled over an intercom.

“Have you guys got a visitor?”

Lochner answered, “Agent Paige just stopped by to say hello.”

The voice said, “Hello, Agent Paige. This is Agent Cole, in the vehicle around back of your house. I’ve got Agents Cypher and Hahn with me too.”

Riley smiled. Those were all familiar names of well-respected agents.

Riley said, “I’m glad to have you on the job.”

“Our pleasure,” Agent Cole said.

Riley was impressed by the communication between the two vans. She could see the van behind her house in a couple of Lochner’s screens. Obviously, nothing could happen to either team without the other team knowing about it immediately.

Riley was also pleased by the display of weaponry stocked inside the van. The team had enough firepower to fight off a small army if necessary.

But she couldn’t help but wonder – was it enough to fight off Shane Hatcher? She left the van and walked on toward her house, telling herself not to worry. She couldn’t imagine even Shane Hatcher thwarting all this security.

Still, she couldn’t help remembering the text message she had just received.

You can’t say you weren’t warned.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Riley stepped inside her house, the place seemed eerily empty.

“I’m home,” she called out.

But nobody replied.

Where is everybody? Her alarm started to turn into panic.

Was it possible that Shane Hatcher had slipped through all that security after all?

Riley struggled not to imagine what might have happened if he had. Her pulse and breathing quickened as she hurried to the family room.

All three kids – April, Liam, and Jilly – were there. April and Liam were playing chess and Jilly was playing a video game.

“Didn’t you hear me?” she asked.

All three looked up at her with blank expressions. They had obviously all been concentrating on what they were doing.

She was about to ask the kids where Gabriela was when she heard her housekeeper’s voice behind her.

“Are you home, *Señora* Riley? I was downstairs and I thought I heard you come in.”

Riley smiled at the stout Guatemalan woman.

“Yes, I just got in,” she said, breathing easier now.

With a welcoming nod and a smile, Gabriela turned and headed toward the kitchen.

April looked up from the game she was playing with Liam.

“Is everything OK, Mom? You look kind of agitated.”

“I’m fine,” Riley said.

April turned her attention back to the game.

Riley took a moment to marvel how mature her fifteen-year-old daughter looked. April was slender, tall, and dark-haired, with Riley’s hazel eyes. April had been through more than her share of life-threatening danger during the last few months. But she seemed to be doing very well these days.

Riley looked over at Jilly, a smaller girl with olive skin and big dark eyes. Riley was in the process of adopting her. At the moment, Jilly was sitting in front of a large screen blasting bad guys away.

Riley frowned a little. She didn’t like violent video games. As far as she was concerned, they made violence – especially gun violence – seem both too attractive and too sanitized. She believed they had an especially bad influence on boys.

Still, Riley considered, maybe these games were harmless compared to Jilly’s own experience. After all, the thirteen-year-old had survived real-life horrors. When Riley had found Jilly, she had been trying to sell her body out of sheer desperation. Thanks to Riley, Jilly had a chance at a better life.

Liam looked up from the chessboard.

“Hey, Riley. I was wondering ...”

He hesitated before asking his question.

Liam was the newcomer to the household. Riley had no plans to adopt the tall, gangly kid with red hair and blue eyes. But she had rescued him from a drunken father who had beaten him up. He needed a place to live right now.

“What is it, Liam?” Riley asked.

“Is it OK if I go to a chess competition tomorrow?”

“Could I go too?” April asked.

Riley smiled again. Liam and April had been dating when Liam had come to live down here in the family room, but they had promised to keep that relationship on hold for the time being. They had to be *hermanos solamente*, as Gabriela had put it – brother and sister only.

Riley liked Liam, all the more so because of the positive influence the bright boy had on April. He'd gotten April interested in chess and foreign languages and schoolwork in general.

"Of course you can go, both of you," she said.

But then she felt a renewed burst of worry. She got out her cell phone and found some photos of Shane Hatcher and showed them to all three kids.

"But you've got to watch out for Shane Hatcher," she said. "You've got these pictures on your own phones. Always remember exactly what he looks like. Contact me right away if you see anyone who looks anything like him."

Liam and April looked at Riley with surprise.

"You've told us all this before," Jilly said. "And we've looked at those pictures a thousand times. Has something changed?"

Riley wavered for a moment. She didn't want to scare the kids. But she felt that they needed to be warned.

"I got a message from Hatcher a little while ago," she said. "It was ..."

She hesitated again.

"It was a threat. That's why I want you all to be especially on your guard."

To Riley's surprise, Jilly grinned at her.

"Does this mean we get to stay home from school when spring break is over?" she asked.

Riley was startled by Jilly's nonchalance. She also briefly wondered – maybe Jilly had the right idea. Should she keep the kids out of school? And should Liam and April not go to that chess competition tomorrow?

Before she could think things through, April said, "Don't be silly, Jilly. Of course we're going to keep right on going to school. It's not like we can put our lives on hold."

Then turning to Riley, April added, "It's not a real threat. Even I know that. Remember what happened in January?"

Riley remembered all too well. Hatcher had saved April and Riley's ex-husband, Ryan, from a killer bent on revenge against Riley. She also remembered how Shane Hatcher had delivered the killer bound and gagged for Riley to deal with at her own discretion.

April went on, "Hatcher wouldn't hurt us. He went to a lot of trouble to save me."

Maybe April's got a point, Riley thought. At least where she and the other kids are concerned. But she was still glad that the agents were stationed outside.

April shrugged a little and added, "Life goes on. We've all got to keep doing what we do."

Jilly said, "And that goes for you too, Mom. It's a good thing you got home early. You've got plenty of time to get ready for tonight."

For a second, Riley couldn't remember what Jilly meant.

Then it came back to her – she had a date tonight with her handsome former neighbor, Blaine Hildreth. Blaine was the owner of one of the nicest casual restaurants here in Fredericksburg. He was planning to come by and pick Riley up and treat her to a wonderful dinner.

April hopped to her feet.

"Hey, that's right!" she said. "Come on, Mom. Let's go upstairs and I'll help you choose something to wear."

*

Later that evening, Riley was sitting on the candlelit patio at Blaine's Grill, enjoying wonderful weather, excellent food, and charming company. Across the table from her, Blaine cut a handsome figure as always. He was just a little younger than Riley, lean and fit, with a slightly receding hairline that he wasn't the least bit vain about.

Riley also found him to be a pleasant conversationalist. As they ate a delicious dinner of rosemary chicken pasta, they chatted about current events, memories of long-ago times and travels, and goings-on in Fredericksburg.

Riley was delighted that their talk never once turned to her work at the BAU. She was in no mood to even think about that. Blaine seemed to sense that and steer clear of the subject. One thing Riley really liked about Blaine was his sensitivity to her moods.

In fact, there was very little about Blaine that Riley didn't like. True, they'd had a bit of a spat not long ago. Blaine had tried to make Riley jealous over a woman friend, and he had succeeded all too well. Now they were both able to laugh about how childish they'd both been.

Maybe it was partly the wine, but Riley felt warm and relaxed inside. Blaine was comfortable company – fairly recently divorced like Riley, and anxious to get on with life without quite knowing how.

Dessert finally arrived – Riley's favorite, raspberry cheesecake. She smiled a little as she remembered how April had secretly called Blaine before an earlier date to alert him to some of Riley's favorite things, including raspberry cheesecake and her favorite song – "One More Night" by Phil Collins.

As she enjoyed her cheesecake, Riley talked about her kids, especially how Liam was settling in.

"I was a little worried at first," she admitted. "But he's an awfully good kid, and we all love having him around the house."

Riley paused for a moment. It felt positively luxurious to have someone to talk to about her domestic doubts and worries.

"Blaine, I don't know what I'm going to do with Liam in the long run. I just can't send him back to that drunken brute of a father, and God only knows what's become of his mother. But I don't see how I can legally adopt him. Taking in Jilly has been really complicated and it's not settled yet. I don't know if I can do it again."

Blaine smiled at her sympathetically.

"You'll just take things one day at a time, I guess," he said. "And whatever you do, it will be the best thing for him."

Riley shook her head a bit sadly.

"I wish I knew that for sure," she said.

Blaine reached across the table and took hold of her hand.

"Well, take my word for it," he said. "What you've already done for Liam and Jilly is wonderful and generous. I admire you so much for it."

Riley felt a lump form in her throat. How often did anyone ever say anything like that to her? She was often praised for her work in the BAU, and had even received a Medal of Perseverance recently. But she was not accustomed to being praised for simple human things. She hardly knew how to take it.

Then Blaine said, "You're a good woman, Riley Paige."

Riley felt tears well up in her eyes. She laughed nervously as she wiped them away.

"Oh, look what you've done," she said. "You've made me cry."

Blaine shrugged, and his smile grew even warmer.

"Sorry. Just trying to be brutally honest. The truth sometimes hurts, I guess."

They laughed together for a few moments.

Finally Riley said, "But I haven't asked about your daughter. How's Crystal doing?"

Blaine looked away with a bittersweet smile.

"Crystal's doing just great – good grades, happy and cheerful. She's away right now for spring break, at the beach with her cousins and my sister."

Blaine sighed a little. "It's only been a couple of days, but it's amazing how fast I start missing her."

It was all Riley could do not to start crying all over again. She'd known all along that Blaine was a wonderful father. What might it be like to be in a more permanent relationship with him?

Careful, she told herself. *Let's not rush things.*

Meanwhile, she had almost finished her raspberry cheesecake.

"Thank you, Blaine," she said. "It's been such a lovely evening."

Gazing into his eyes, she added, "I hate to see it end."

Gazing back at her, Blaine squeezed her hand.

"Who says it has to end?" he asked.

Riley smiled. She knew her smile was enough to answer his question.

After all, why should their evening end? The FBI was guarding her family and no new killer was demanding her attention.

Maybe it was time to enjoy herself.

CHAPTER FIVE

George Tully didn't like the looks of one patch of ground over by the road. He didn't exactly know why.

Nothing to worry about, he told himself. The morning light was probably just playing tricks on him.

He took a deep breath of fresh air. Then he stooped down and picked up a handful of loose soil. As always, it felt soft and luxurious. It also smelled good, rich with nutrients from past corn harvests – husks and ears plowed back into the soil.

Good old black Iowa dirt, he thought as bits of it trickled down between his fingers.

This land had been in George's family for years, so he'd known this fine soil all his life. But he never got tired of it, and his pride in farming the richest land in the world never waned.

He looked up across fields that stretched as far as he could see. The earth had been tilled for a couple of days now. It was ready and waiting for corn kernels dusted purple with insecticide to be placed where each new cornstalk would soon appear.

He'd held off on the planting until today to make sure of the weather. Of course there was never any way to be certain that a frost wouldn't come even this late in the year and ruin the crop. He could remember a freak April blizzard back in the '70s that had taken his father by surprise. But as George felt a breath of warm air and looked up at some high clouds streaking across the sky, he felt as confident as he could hope to feel.

Today's the day, he thought.

As George stood watching, his field hand Duke Russo came driving a tractor that dragged a forty-foot-long planter behind it. The planter would seed sixteen rows at a time, thirty inches apart, one kernel at a time, deposit fertilizer on top of each one, cover the seed, and roll on its way.

George's sons, Roland and Jasper, had been standing in the field awaiting the tractor's arrival, and they walked toward it as it rumbled along one side of the field. George smiled to himself. Duke and the boys made a good crew. There was no need for George to hang around for the actual planting. He waved at the three men, then turned to head back to his truck.

But that odd patch of earth near the road caught his attention again. What was wrong over there? Had the tiller missed that patch? He couldn't imagine how that could have happened.

Maybe a groundhog had been digging there.

But as he walked toward the spot, he could see that no groundhog had done this. There was no opening, and the soil was patted down.

It looked like something had been buried here.

George growled under his breath. Vandals and pranksters sometimes gave him trouble. A couple of years ago, some boys from nearby Angier stole a tractor and used it to demolish a storage shed. More recently, others had spray-painted obscenities on fences and walls and even cattle.

It was infuriating – and hurtful.

George had no idea why the kids would come out of their way to give him trouble. He'd never done any harm to them that he knew of. He'd reported the incidents to Joe Sinard, Angier's police chief, but nothing ever got done about it.

"What have those bastards done this time?" he said aloud, tapping the soil with his foot.

He figured he'd better find out. Whatever was buried here might wreck his equipment.

He turned toward his crew and waved for Duke to stop the tractor. When the engine was off, George yelled to his sons.

"Jasper, Roland – fetch me that shovel in the tractor cab."

"What's wrong, Pop?" Jasper called back.

"I don't know. Just do it."

A moment later, Duke and the boys came walking toward him. Jasper handed his father a shovel. As the group watched curiously, George prodded the soil with his shovel. As he did, a strange, sour smell met his nostrils.

He felt a wave of instinctive dread.

What the hell's under here?

He turned over a few shovels full of dirt until he struck something solid but soft.

He shoveled more carefully, trying to uncover whatever it was. Soon something pale came into view.

It took a few moments for George to register what it was.

“Oh, Lord!” he gasped, his stomach churning with horror.

It was a hand – a young woman's hand.

CHAPTER SIX

The next morning, Riley watched as Blaine fixed a breakfast of eggs Benedict with fresh squeezed orange juice and rich, dark coffee. She reflected that passionate lovemaking was not limited to ex-husbands. And she realized that waking up in comfort with a man was something new.

She felt grateful for this morning, and grateful to Gabriela, who had assured her she would take care of everything when Riley had phoned her last night. But she couldn't help but wonder if a relationship like this would survive, given the many other complications of her life.

Riley decided to ignore that question and focus on the delicious meal. But as they ate, she soon noticed that Blaine's mind seemed to be elsewhere.

"What's the matter?" she asked him.

Blaine didn't reply. His eyes roamed about uneasily.

She felt a flash of worry. What was the problem?

Was he having second thoughts about last night? Was he less contented with this than she was?

"Blaine, what's wrong?" Riley asked, her voice shaking a little.

After a pause, Blaine said, "Riley, I just don't feel ... *safe*."

Riley struggled to make sense of what Blaine had said. Was all the warmth and affection they'd shared since their date last night suddenly gone? What had happened between them to change everything?

"I – I don't understand," she stammered. "What do you mean, you don't feel safe?"

Blaine hesitated, then said, "I think I need to buy a gun. For home protection."

His words jolted Riley. She hadn't expected this.

But maybe I should have, she thought.

Sitting across the table from him, she could see a scar on his right cheek. He'd gotten that scar last November in Riley's own home, trying to protect April and Gabriela from an attacker bent on revenge.

Riley remembered the terrible guilt she'd felt at seeing Blaine unconscious in a hospital bed after it was over.

And now she felt that guilt all over again.

Would Blaine ever feel safe with Riley in her life? Would he ever feel that his daughter could be safe?

And was a gun what he really needed to make him feel safer?

Riley shook her head.

"I don't know, Blaine," she said. "I'm not a great fan of civilians keeping weapons in their homes."

As soon as the words were out, Riley realized how patronizing they sounded.

She couldn't tell from Blaine's expression whether he was offended or not. He seemed to be waiting for her to say more.

Riley sipped her coffee, gathering her thoughts.

She said, "Did you know that statistically, home weapons are more likely to lead to homicides, suicides, and accidental deaths than successful home defense? In fact, gun owners are generally at greater risk of becoming homicide victims themselves than people who don't own guns."

Blaine nodded.

"Yeah, I know all about that," he said. "I've been doing some research. I also know about Virginia's self-defense laws. And that this is an open-carry state."

Riley tilted her head with approval.

"Well, you're already better prepared than most people who decide to buy a gun. Even so ..."

Her words trailed off. She was reluctant to say what was on her mind.

“What is it?” Blaine asked.

Riley took a long, deep breath.

“Blaine, would you want to buy a gun if I wasn’t part of your life?”

“Oh, Riley – ”

“Tell me the truth. Please.”

Blaine sat staring into his coffee for a moment.

“No, I wouldn’t,” he finally said.

Riley reached across the table and held Blaine’s hand.

“That’s what I thought. And I’m sure you can understand how that makes me feel. I care for you a lot, Blaine. It’s terrible to know that your life is more dangerous because of me.”

“I get that,” Blaine said. “But I want *you* to tell me the truth about something. And please don’t take this wrong.”

Riley silently braced herself for whatever Blaine was about to ask her.

“Are your *feelings* really a good argument against my buying a gun? I mean, isn’t it a fact that I’m in more danger than the average citizen, and that I ought to be able to defend myself and Crystal – and maybe even you?”

Riley shrugged a little. She felt sad to admit it to herself, but Blaine was right.

If a gun would make him feel more safe and secure, he ought to have one.

She was also sure that he’d be as responsible as a gun owner could possibly be.

“OK,” she said. “Let’s finish breakfast and go shopping.”

*

Later that morning, Blaine walked into a gun store with Riley. Right away Blaine wondered if he was making a mistake. He couldn’t guess how many fearsome weapons were on the walls and in glass cases. He’d never even fired a gun before – unless he counted the BB gun he’d had as a kid.

What am I getting into? he thought.

A large, bearded man in a plaid shirt was moving about among the merchandise.

“How can I help you folks?” he asked.

Riley said, “We’re looking for some home protection for my friend.”

“Well, I’m sure we’ve got something here that will suit you,” the man said.

Blaine felt awkward under the man’s gaze. He guessed that it wasn’t every day when an attractive woman brought her boyfriend in here to help him choose a weapon.

Blaine couldn’t help but feel embarrassed. He even felt embarrassed about feeling embarrassed. He’d never thought of himself as the kind of man who felt insecure about his masculinity.

As Blaine tried to snap himself out of his awkwardness, the gun seller eyed Riley’s own sidearm with approval.

“That Glock Model 22 you’ve got there’s a fine piece, ma’am,” he said. “A law enforcement professional, are you?”

Riley smiled and showed him her badge.

The man pointed to a row of similar weapons in a glass case.

“Well, I’ve got your Glocks right over here. Pretty good choices, if you ask me.”

Riley looked at the weapons, then looked at Blaine, as if to ask his opinion.

Blaine couldn’t do anything but shrug and blush. He wished he’d put the same time into researching weapons as he had into statistics and laws.

Riley shook her head.

“I’m not sure a semiautomatic is quite what we’re in the market for,” she said.

The man nodded.

“Yeah, they’re kind of complicated, especially for someone new to guns. Things can go wrong.”

Riley nodded in agreement, adding, “Yeah, things like misfires, stovepipe jams, double feed, failure to eject.”

The man said, “Of course, those aren’t real problems for a seasoned FBI gal like you. But for this feller, maybe a revolver is more the style you’re looking for.”

The man escorted them to a glass case full of revolvers.

Blaine’s eyes were drawn to some of the guns with shorter barrels.

At least they looked less intimidating.

“What about that one there?” he said, pointing to one.

The man opened the case, took out the gun, and handed it to Blaine. The weapon felt strange in Blaine’s hand. He couldn’t decide whether it was heavier or lighter than he’d expected.

“A Ruger SP101,” the man said. “Good stopping power. Not a bad choice.”

Riley eyed the weapon doubtfully.

“I think we’re looking for something with maybe a four-inch barrel,” she said. “Something that absorbs the recoil better.”

The man nodded again.

“Right. Well, I think maybe I’ve got just the thing.”

He reached into the case and took out another larger pistol. He handed it to Riley, who examined it with approval.

“Oh, yeah,” she said. “A Smith and Wesson 686.”

Then she smiled at Blaine and handed him the gun.

“What do you think?” Riley said.

This longer weapon felt even stranger in his hand than the smaller weapon had. All he could do was smile at Riley sheepishly. She smiled back. He could see by her expression that she’d finally registered how awkward he was feeling.

She turned to the owner and said, “I think we’ll take it. How much does it cost?”

Blaine was stunned by the price of the weapon, but was sure that Riley knew best whether he was getting a fair deal.

He was also rather stunned by how easy it was to make the purchase. The man asked him for two proofs of identity, and Blaine offered him his driver’s license and his voter registration card. Then Blaine filled out a short, simple form consenting to a background check. The computerized check took only a couple of minutes, and Blaine was cleared to buy his weapon.

“What kind of ammo do you want?” the man asked as he started to ring up the sale.

Riley said, “Give us a box of Federal Premium Low Recoil.”

Just moments later, Blaine was a somewhat baffled gun owner.

He stood looking down at the daunting weapon, which lay on the counter in an open plastic case, nestled in protective foam. Blaine thanked the man, shut the case, and turned to leave.

“Wait a minute,” the man said cheerfully. “Don’t you want to try her out?”

The man led Riley and Blaine through a door in the back of the store that opened into a startlingly large indoor shooting range. Then he left Riley and Blaine to themselves. Blaine was just as glad that nobody else was there at the moment.

Riley pointed out the list of rules on the wall, and Blaine read them carefully. Then he shook his head uneasily.

“Riley, I don’t mind telling you ...”

Riley chuckled a little.

“I know. You’re a little overwhelmed. I’ll talk you through it.”

She led him over to one of the empty booths, where he put on ear and eye protection gear. He opened the case with the pistol, careful to keep it pointed downrange before he even picked it up.

“Do I load it?” he asked Riley.

“Not yet. We’ll do some dry fire practice first.”

He took the pistol into his hands, and Riley helped him find the proper position – both hands on the gun handle but with fingers clear of the cylinder, elbows and knees slightly bent, leaning slightly forward. In a few moments, Blaine found himself aiming his pistol at a vaguely human shape on a paper target about twenty-five yards downrange.

“We’re going to practice double action first,” Riley said. “That’s when you don’t pull back the hammer with every shot, you do all the work with the trigger. That will give you a good sense of how the trigger feels. Pull the trigger back smoothly, then let it go just as smoothly.”

Blaine practiced with the empty gun a few times. Then Riley showed him how to open the cylinder and fill it with shells.

Blaine took up the same stance as before. He braced himself, knowing that the gun would kick a good bit, and carefully aimed at the target.

He pulled the trigger and fired.

The sudden backward force startled him, and the gun leaped in his hand. He lowered the gun and looked toward the target. He couldn’t see any holes in it. He fleetingly wondered how on earth anyone could hope to aim a weapon that jumped so sharply.

“Let’s work on your breathing,” Riley said. “Breathe in slowly while you aim, then breathe out slowly, drawing back the trigger so that you fire exactly when you’ve fully exhaled. That’s when your body is most still.”

Blaine fired again. He was surprised at how much more control he felt.

He looked downrange and saw that he had at least hit the paper target this time.

But as he prepared to take another shot, a memory flashed through his mind – a memory of the most terrifying moment of his life. One day when he’d still been living next door to Riley, he’d heard a terrible racket next door. He’d rushed over to Riley’s townhouse and found the front door partially open.

A man had thrown Riley’s daughter on the floor and was attacking her.

Blaine had rushed toward them and pulled the man off April. But the man was too strong for Blaine to subdue, and Blaine was badly beaten before he finally lost consciousness.

It was a bitter memory, and for a moment it brought back a feeling of heart-sickening helplessness.

But that feeling suddenly evaporated as he felt the weight of the gun in his hands.

He breathed and fired, breathed and fired, four more times until the cylinder was empty.

Riley pushed a button that brought the paper target up to the booth.

“Not bad for your first time,” Riley said.

Indeed, Blaine could see that those last four shots had at least landed within the human shape.

But he realized that his heart was pounding, and that he was overcome with a strange blend of feelings.

One of those feelings was fear.

But fear of what?

Power, Blaine realized.

The feeling of power in his hands was staggering, like nothing he’d ever felt before.

He felt so good that it positively scared him.

Riley showed him how to open the cylinder and pop out the empty shells.

“Is that enough for today?” she asked.

“Not on your life,” Blaine said breathlessly. “I want you to teach me everything there is to know about this thing.”

Riley stood smiling at him as he reloaded.

He could still feel her smile as he aimed at a fresh target.

But then he heard Riley’s cell phone ring.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When Riley's cell phone started ringing, Blaine's last shots were still ringing in her ears. Reluctantly, she pulled out her phone. She had hoped to have an uninterrupted morning with Blaine. When she looked at the phone she knew she was about to be disappointed. The call was from Brent Meredith.

She'd been surprised at how much she was enjoying teaching Blaine to shoot his new pistol. Whatever Meredith wanted, Riley felt sure it was going to interrupt the best day she'd had in a long while.

But she had no choice but to take the call.

As usual, Meredith was brusque and to the point.

"We've got a new case. We need you on it. How fast can you get to Quantico?"

Riley suppressed a sigh. With Bill on leave, Riley had hoped to have some time off until the pain of Lucy's death eased a little.

No such luck, she thought.

No doubt she would be leaving town shortly. Did she have enough time to run home and see everybody and change clothes?

"How about an hour?" Riley asked.

"Make it shorter. Meet me in my office. And bring your go bag."

Meredith ended the call without waiting for a reply.

Blaine was standing there waiting for her. He pulled off his eye and ear protection gear and asked, "Something to do with work?"

Riley sighed aloud.

"Yeah, I've got to get to Quantico right away."

Blaine nodded without complaint and unloaded the gun.

"I'll drive you there," he said.

"No, I'm going to need my go bag. And that's in my car at home. I'm afraid you need to drop me off at my place. I'm also afraid we're in a bit of a hurry."

"No problem," Blaine said, carefully putting the new weapon in its case.

Riley gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"It sounds like I'm going to be leaving town," she said. "I hate that. I've had such a wonderful time."

Blaine smiled and kissed her back.

"I've had a wonderful time too," he said. "Don't worry. We'll pick up where we left off as soon as you get back."

As they left the shooting range and exited through the gun store, the owner called a hearty goodbye to them.

*

After Blaine dropped her off at her house, Riley dashed inside to explain to everyone that she was leaving. She didn't even have time for a change of clothes, but at least she had showered at Blaine's house this morning. She was relieved that her family seemed unruffled by her sudden change in plans.

They're getting used to getting along without me, she thought. She wasn't sure she really liked that idea, but she knew it was a necessity in a life like hers.

Riley checked that everything she needed was in her car and then made the short drive to Quantico. When she arrived at the BAU building, she headed straight for Brent Meredith's office. To her dismay, she encountered Jenn Roston walking in the same direction down the hall.

Riley and Jenn made eye contact for just a fleeting moment, then they both hastened on in silence.

Riley wondered whether Jenn felt as awkward right now as she did. Just yesterday they'd had an uncomfortable meeting, and Riley was still uncertain whether she had made a terrible mistake in giving Jenn that thumb drive.

But Jenn probably wasn't worried about it, Riley figured.

After all, Jenn had had the upper hand yesterday. She'd controlled the situation brilliantly to her own advantage. Had Riley ever known anyone who had been able to manipulate her that way?

She quickly realized – of course she had.

That person was Shane Hatcher.

Still walking and still facing straight ahead, the younger agent spoke quietly. "It didn't pan out."

"What?" Riley asked, without breaking her own stride.

"The financial information on the thumb drive. Hatcher used to have funds stored in those accounts. But the money has all been moved out, and the accounts are closed."

Riley resisted the impulse to say, *"I know."*

After all, Hatcher had said as much yesterday in his threatening text message.

For a moment Riley didn't know what to say. She kept walking without comment.

Did Jenn think that Riley had double-crossed her by slipping her a phony file?

Finally Riley said, "That file was all I've got. I'm not holding out on you."

Jenn didn't reply. Riley wished she had some idea whether she believed her.

She also wondered – if she had put that information to use earlier on, might Hatcher be behind bars right now? Or even dead?

When they reached the door to Meredith's office, Riley stopped, and so did Jenn.

Riley felt a touch of alarm.

Jenn was obviously going to Meredith's office too.

Why was the new agent in on this meeting? Had she told Meredith about Riley withholding information?

But Jenn just stood there, still making no eye contact.

Riley knocked on Meredith's door, and then she and Jenn went inside.

Chief Meredith was sitting behind his desk, looking as intimidating as usual.

He said, "Sit, both of you."

Riley and Jenn obediently sat down in chairs in front of the desk.

Meredith was quiet for a moment.

Then he said, "Agent Paige, Agent Roston – I'd like each of you to meet your new partner."

Riley stifled a gasp. She glanced at Jenn Roston, whose dark brown eyes had widened at the news.

"That had better not be a problem," Meredith said. "The BAU is overloaded with cases right now. With Agent Jeffreys on leave and everybody else on assignment, you get each other. Consider it settled."

Riley realized that Meredith was right. The only other agent she might really want to work with right now was Craig Huang, but he was busy watching her home.

"This is fine, sir," Riley said to Meredith.

Jenn said, "I'll be honored to work with Agent Paige, sir."

Those words surprised Riley a little. She wondered if Jenn really meant them.

"Don't get too excited," he said. "This case probably won't amount to much. Just this morning, a teenage girl's body was found buried in farmland near Angier, a small town in Iowa."

“A single murder?” Jenn asked.

“Why is this a case for the BAU?” Riley asked.

Meredith drummed his fingers on his desk.

“My guess is it probably isn’t one,” he said. “But another girl went missing earlier from the same town, and she still hasn’t been found. It’s a small, quiet place where this sort of thing just doesn’t happen. Folks there say that neither girl was the type who might run away or take up with strangers.”

Riley shook her head doubtfully.

“So what makes anybody think this a serial?” she asked. “Without another body, isn’t that a little premature?”

Meredith shrugged.

“Yeah, that’s the way I see it. But the police chief in Angier, Joseph Sinard, is in a panic about it.”

Riley’s forehead crinkled at the sound of the name.

“Sinard,” she said. “Where have I heard that name before?”

Meredith smiled a little and said, “Maybe you’re thinking of the FBI’s executive assistant director, Forrest Sinard. Joe Sinard is his brother.”

Riley almost rolled her eyes. It made sense now. Somebody high in the FBI food chain was being pestered by a relative in the heartland, so the case had gotten kicked to the BAU. She’d been stuck with politically driven investigations like this in the past.

Meredith said, “You two need to go out there and see if there’s even a case to look at.”

“What about my work on the Hatcher case?” Jenn Roston asked.

Meredith said, “We’ve got plenty of folks working on that – technicians and fact-finders and such. I assume they’ve got access to all your information.”

Jenn nodded.

Meredith said, “They can spare you for a few days. If this even takes that long.”

Riley’s feelings were decidedly mixed. Aside from not being sure about whether she wanted to work with Jenn Roston, she didn’t much look forward to wasting her time on a case that probably didn’t even need BAU help.

She’d rather be helping Blaine learn to shoot.

Or doing other things with Blaine, she thought, suppressing a smile.

“So when do we leave?” Jenn asked.

“As soon as possible,” Meredith said. “I’ve told Chief Sinard not to move the body until you get there. You’ll fly into Des Moines, where Chief Sinard’s people will meet you and drive you to Angier. It’s about an hour from Des Moines. We have to get the plane fueled up and ready to go. In the meantime, don’t go too far. Takeoff will be in less than two hours.”

Riley and Jenn left Meredith’s office. Riley went straight to her own office, sat down for a moment, and looked around aimlessly.

Des Moines, she thought.

She’d only been there a few times, but it was where her older sister, Wendy, lived. Riley and Wendy, estranged for years, had gotten in touch last fall when their father was dying. Wendy, not Riley, had been with Daddy when he died.

Thinking about Wendy stirred up guilt over that as well as other disturbing memories. Daddy had been hard on Riley’s sister, and Wendy had run away when she was fifteen. Riley had been just five. After their father died, they had vowed to keep in touch, but so far that had amounted to a video chat.

Riley knew she should visit Wendy if she had the chance. But obviously not right away. Meredith had said that Angier was an hour away from Des Moines and that the local police would pick them up at the airport.

Maybe I can see Wendy before I come back to Quantico, she thought.

Right now, she had a little time to kill before the BAU plane took off.

And there was someone she wanted to see.

She was worried about her longtime partner, Bill Jeffreys. He lived near the base, but she hadn't seen him for several days. Bill was suffering from PTSD, and Riley knew from her own experience how tough recovery could be.

She took out her cell phone and typed a text message.

Thought I'd stop by for a few minutes. U home?

She waited a few moments. The message was marked "delivered" but not yet read.

Riley sighed a little. She didn't have time to wait for Bill to check his messages. If she wanted to see him before she left, she had to drop by right now and just hope he was home.

*

It was only a few minutes' drive from the BAU building to Bill's little apartment in the town of Quantico. When she parked her car and started toward the building, she noticed again what a depressing place it was.

There was nothing especially wrong with it as apartment buildings went – it was an ordinary red brick building, not a tenement or anything like that. But Riley couldn't help remembering the nice suburban home where Bill had lived until his divorce. In comparison, this place had no charm at all and now he lived alone. It wasn't a happy situation for her best friend.

Riley walked into the building and headed straight toward Bill's second-story apartment. She knocked on the door and waited.

No reply came. She knocked again and still got no response.

She took out her cell phone and saw that the message was still unread.

She felt a burst of worry. Had something happened to Bill?

She reached for the doorknob and turned it.

To her alarm, the door was unlocked, and it swung open.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Bill's apartment looked like it had been burglarized. Riley froze in the doorway for a moment, about to draw her gun in case an intruder was still here.

Then she relaxed. Those things strewn about everywhere were food wrappers and dirty plates and glasses. The place was a mess, but it was a personal mess.

She called out Bill's name.

She heard no answer.

Then she called out again.

This time she thought she heard a groan from a nearby room.

Her heart pounded again as she hurried through the doorway into Bill's bedroom. The room was dim and the blinds were closed. Bill was lying on the unmade bed, wearing rumpled clothes and staring up at the ceiling.

"Bill, why didn't you answer when I called?" she asked somewhat irritably.

"I did," he said in a near-whisper. "You didn't hear me. Could you stop being so loud?"

Riley saw a nearly empty bourbon bottle sitting on the nightstand. Suddenly the whole scene became clear. She sat down on the bed beside him.

"I had kind of a rough night," Bill said, trying to force a feeble chuckle. "You know what that's like."

"Yeah, I do," Riley said.

After all, despair had driven her to her own binges and ensuing hangovers.

She touched his clammy forehead, imagining how sick he must feel.

"What set you off drinking?" she asked.

Bill groaned.

"It was my boys," he said.

Then he fell silent. Riley hadn't seen Bill's two sons for a while. She guessed that they must be about nine and eleven years old by now.

"What about them?" Riley asked.

"They came over to visit yesterday. It didn't go well. The place was a mess, and I was so irritable and edgy. They couldn't wait to go home. Riley, it was awful. I was awful. One more visit like that, and Maggie won't let me see them again. She's looking for any excuse to cut them out of my life for good."

Bill made a noise that sounded almost like a sob. But he didn't seem to have the energy to cry. Riley suspected he'd done plenty of crying alone.

Bill said, "Riley, if I'm no good as a father, what good am I? I'm no good as an agent, not anymore. What's left?"

Riley felt a stab of sadness in her throat.

"Bill, don't talk like that," she said. "You're a great father. And you're a great agent. Maybe not today but every other day of the year."

Bill shook his head wearily.

"I sure didn't feel like much of a dad yesterday. And I just keep hearing that shot. I keep remembering running into that building, seeing Lucy lying there bleeding."

Riley felt her own body tremble a little.

She, too, remembered all too well.

Lucy had entered an abandoned building unaware of any danger, only to be taken down by a sniper's bullet. Following close behind her, Bill had mistakenly shot a young man who had been trying to help. By the time Riley got there, Lucy had used her last ounce of strength to kill the sniper with multiple rounds.

Lucy had died moments later.

It had been an awful scene.

Riley couldn't remember many worse situations in her entire career.

She said, "I got there even later than you did."

"Yeah, but you didn't shoot an innocent kid."

"It wasn't your fault. It was dark. You had no way of knowing. Besides, that kid's doing all right now."

Bill shook his head. He held up a shaky hand.

"Look at me. Do I look like the kind of guy who can ever get back to work?"

Riley was almost angry now. He truly did look terrible – certainly not like the shrewd, brave partner she'd learned to trust with her life, nor the handsome man she'd felt rashly attracted to from time to time. And all this self-pity didn't become him.

But she sternly reminded herself ...

I've been there. I know what it's like.

And when she'd been like this, Bill had always been there to get her through it.

Sometimes he'd had to be tough on her.

She figured he needed a bit of that toughness right now.

"You look like hell," she said. "But the condition you're in right now – well, you did to yourself. And you're the only one who can fix it."

Bill looked up into her eyes. She sensed that he was really paying attention to her now.

"Sit up," she said. "Pull yourself together."

Bill creakily pulled himself up and sat on the edge of the bed next to Riley.

"Has the agency assigned you a therapist?" she asked.

Bill nodded.

"Who is he?" Riley asked.

"It doesn't matter," Bill said.

"It sure as hell does matter," Riley said. "Who is he?"

Bill didn't reply. But Riley was able to guess. Bill's assigned psychiatrist was Leonard Ralston, known better to the public as "Dr. Leo." She felt herself flush with anger. But she wasn't angry with Bill now.

"Oh, my God," she said. "They've stuck you with Dr. Leo. Whose idea was that? Walder's, I'll bet."

"Like I said, it doesn't matter."

Riley wanted to shake him.

"He's a quack," she said. "You know that as well as I do. He's into hypnosis, recovered memories, all sorts of discredited crap. Don't you remember last year, when he persuaded an innocent man that he was guilty of murder? Walder likes Dr. Leo because he's written books and been on TV a lot."

"I'm not letting him mess with my head," Bill said. "I won't let him hypnotize me."

Riley was trying to keep her voice under control.

"That's not the point. You need someone who can *help* you."

"And who might that be?" Bill asked.

Riley didn't have to think about it for more than a few seconds.

"I'm going to make you some coffee," she said. "When I get back, I expect you to be on your feet and ready to get out of this place."

On her way to Bill's kitchen, Riley looked at her watch. She had little time to spare before the plane would be ready. She had to act quickly.

She took out her cell phone and punched in the personal number for Mike Nevins, a forensic psychiatrist in DC who worked for the Bureau from time to time. Riley considered him to be a close

friend, and he had helped her through several of her own crises in the past, including a terrible case of PTSD.

When Mike's phone started ringing, she put her cell phone on speaker, left it on the kitchen counter, and started setting up Bill's coffeemaker. She was relieved when Mike answered the phone.

"Riley! It's great to hear from you! How are things? How is that growing family of yours?"

The sound of Mike's voice was refreshing, and she could almost see the fussy, well-dressed man and his pleasant expression. She wished she could chat with him and catch up with things, but there wasn't time for that.

"I'm fine, Mike. But I'm in a hurry. I've got to catch a plane shortly. I need a favor."

"Name it," Mike said.

"My partner, Bill Jeffreys, is going through a rough time right now after our last case."

She could hear a note of genuine concern in Mike's voice.

"Oh dear, I heard about that. Terrible thing, the death of that young protégé of yours. Is it true that your partner has been put on leave? Something to do with shooting the wrong man?"

"That's right. He needs your help. And he needs it right away. He's drinking, Mike. I've never seen him this bad."

There was a short silence.

"I'm not sure I understand," Mike said. "Hasn't he been assigned a therapist?"

"Yeah, but he's not doing Bill any good."

Now there was a note of caution in Mike's voice.

"I don't know, Riley. I'm generally not comfortable taking patients who are already under someone else's care."

Riley felt a flash of worry. She didn't have time to deal with Mike's ethical scruples right now.

"Mike, they've assigned him to Dr. Leo."

Another silence fell.

I'll bet that did the trick, Riley thought. She knew perfectly well that Mike despised the celebrity therapist with all his heart.

Finally Mike said, "When can Bill come in?"

"What are you doing right now?"

"I'm in my office. I'll be tied up for a couple of hours but I can be available after that."

"Great. He can get there by then. But please let me know if he doesn't show up."

"I'll do that."

As they ended the call, coffee was trickling into the carafe. Riley poured a cup and went back to Bill's bedroom. He wasn't there. But the door to the adjoining bathroom was closed, and Riley could hear Bill's electric razor on the other side.

Riley rapped on the door.

"Yeah, I'm decent," Bill said.

Riley opened the door and saw that Bill was shaving. She set the coffee down on the edge of the sink.

"I made you an appointment with Mike Nevins," she said.

"For when?"

"Right now. As soon as you can get out of here and drive there. I'll text you his office address. I've got to go."

Bill looked surprised. Of course, Riley hadn't told him anything about being in a hurry.

"I've got a case in Iowa," Riley explained. "The plane's waiting right now. Don't skip out on Mike Nevins. I'll find out about it, and there will be hell to pay."

Bill grumbled, but then said, "OK, I'll get there."

Riley turned to leave. Then she thought of something she wasn't sure she should bring up.

Finally she said, “Bill, Shane Hatcher’s still on the loose. There are agents posted around my house. But I got a threatening text from him, and nobody knows about it except you. I don’t *think* he’d attack my family, but I can’t be sure. I wonder if maybe ...”

Bill nodded.

“I’ll keep an eye on things,” he said. “I need to do something useful.”

Riley gave him a quick hug and left the apartment.

As she walked toward her car, she checked her watch again.

If she didn’t run into any traffic, she’d make it to the airstrip in time.

Now she had to start thinking about her new case, but she wasn’t particularly worried about it.

This one probably wouldn’t take long.

After all, how could a single small-town murder demand much in the way of time and effort?

CHAPTER NINE

Even as she walked across the tarmac toward the plane Riley started psyching herself up for her new case. But there was one thing she needed to do before she got too wrapped up in it.

She sent a text to Mike Nevins.

Text me when Bill shows up. Text me if he doesn't.

She breathed a sigh of relief when Mike responded immediately.

Will do.

Riley told herself that she'd done all she could do for Bill right now, and it was up to him to make the most of her help. If anybody could help Bill deal with the things that were tormenting him, Riley was sure that Mike could.

She climbed the steps into the cabin, where Jenn Roston was already seated and working on her laptop computer. Jenn glanced up and nodded as Riley sat down across the table from her.

Riley nodded back.

Then Riley looked out the window during takeoff and as the plane climbed to cruising altitude. She didn't like the chilly silence between her and Jenn. She wondered if maybe Jenn didn't like it either. These flights were normally a good time to talk over details of a case. But there was really nothing to say about this one yet. The body had just been found that morning, after all.

Riley took a magazine out of her bag and tried to read, but she couldn't focus her attention on the words. Having Jenn sit across from her quietly like that was too distracting. Instead, Riley just sat there pretending to read.

The story of my life these days, she thought.

Pretending and lying were becoming all too routine.

Finally Jenn looked up from her computer.

"Agent Paige, I meant what I said at the meeting with Meredith," she said.

"Pardon?" Riley asked, looking up from her magazine.

"About being honored to work with you. It's been a dream of mine. I've followed your work ever since I started at the academy."

For a moment, Riley didn't know what to say. Jenn had said much the same thing to her before. But again, Riley couldn't tell from Jenn's expression whether she was sincere.

"I've heard great things about you," Riley said.

As noncommittal as it sounded, at least it was true. Under different circumstances, Riley would have been thrilled at the chance to work with a smart new agent.

Riley added with a weak smile, "But I wouldn't get my expectations up if I were you – not for this case."

"Right," Jenn said. "It's probably not even a case for the BAU. We're liable to fly back to Quantico tonight. Well, there will be others."

Jenn turned her attention back to her computer. Riley wondered whether she was working on the Shane Hatcher files. And of course, she worried anew that she shouldn't have given Jenn that thumb drive.

But as she sat there thinking about it, she realized something. If Jenn had really meant to double-cross her by asking for that information, wouldn't she have used it against her already?

She remembered what Jenn had said to her yesterday.

"I'm pretty sure we want exactly the same thing – to put an end to Shane Hatcher's criminal career."

If that was true, Jenn really was Riley's ally.

But how could Riley be sure? She sat there considering whether she should broach the subject. She hadn't told Jenn about the threat she had received from Hatcher.

Was there really any reason not to?

Might Jenn actually be able to help her in some way? Maybe, but Riley still didn't feel ready to take that step.

Meanwhile, it seemed downright weird that her new partner still called her Agent Paige while insisting that Riley call her by her first name.

"Jenn," she said.

Jenn looked up from her computer.

"I think you should call me Riley," Riley said.

Jenn smiled a little and turned her attention back to her computer.

Riley set her magazine aside and stared out the window at the clouds below. The sun was shining brightly, but Riley didn't find it cheerful.

She felt terribly alone. She missed having Bill around to trust and confide in.

And she missed Lucy so much that she ached inside.

*

When the plane taxied into the Des Moines International Airport, Riley was able to check her cell phone. She was pleased to see that she'd gotten a message from Mike Nevins.

Bill's here with me right now.

It was one less thing to worry about.

A police car was waiting outside the plane. Two cops from Angier introduced themselves at the base of the boarding steps. Darryl Laird was a gangly young man in his twenties, and Howard Doty was a much shorter man in his forties.

Both had stunned expressions on their faces.

"We're sure glad you're here," Doty told Riley and Jenn as the two cops escorted them to the car.

Laird said, "This whole thing is just ..."

The younger man shook his head without finishing his thought.

These poor guys, Riley thought.

They were just regular small-town cops. Murders were surely few and far between in a small Iowa town. Maybe the older cop had handled one or two homicides at one time or other, but Riley guessed that the younger one hadn't been through anything like this before.

As Doty started to drive, Riley asked the two cops to tell her and Jenn whatever they could about what had happened.

Doty said, "The girl's name was Katy Philbin, seventeen years old. A student at Wilson High. Her parents own the local pharmacy. Nice girl, everybody liked her. Old George Tully came across her body just this morning when he and his boys were getting ready to do the spring planting. Tully's got a farm just a short way out of Angier."

Jenn asked, "Any idea how long she'd been buried there?"

"You'll have to ask Chief Sinard about that. Or the medical examiner."

Riley thought back to what little Meredith had been able to tell them about the situation.

"What about the other girl?" she asked. "The one who went missing earlier?"

"Holly Struthers is her name," Laird said. "She was ... uh, I guess she *is* a student at our other high school, Lincoln. She's been missing for about a week. The whole town had been hoping she'd just turn up sooner or later. But now ... well, I guess we've got to keep on hoping."

"And praying," Doty added.

Riley felt an odd chill when he said that. She couldn't begin to guess how often she'd heard people say that they were praying that a missing person would turn up safe and sound. She never had the impression that prayer helped one way or the other.

Does it even make people feel better? she wondered.

She couldn't imagine why or how.

It was a bright, clear afternoon when the car left Des Moines and headed out onto a wide highway. Soon Doty exited onto a two-lane road that stretched over the slightly rolling countryside.

Riley felt a strange, gnawing feeling in her stomach. It took her a few moments to realize that her feeling had nothing to do with the case – at least not directly.

She often felt this way whenever she had a job to do in the Midwest. She didn't normally suffer from a fear of open spaces – agoraphobia, she thought it was called. But vast plains and prairies stirred up a unique kind of anxiety in her.

Riley didn't know which was worse – the sheer flat plains she'd seen in states like Nebraska, stretching out as far as the eye could see, or monotonous rolling prairie like this, the same farmhouses, towns, and fields seeming to appear over and over again. Either way, she found it unsettling, even a little nauseating.

Despite the Midwest's reputation as a land of wholesome, all-American values, it somehow didn't surprise her that people committed murder here. As far as she was concerned, the countryside alone would be enough to drive a person crazy.

Partly to get her mind off the landscape, Riley took out her cell phone to text her whole family as a group – April, Jilly, Liam, and Gabriela.

Got here safely.

She thought for a moment, then added ...

Miss you all already. But I'll probably be back before U know it.

*

After about an hour on the two-lane highway, Doty turned the car off onto a gravel road.

As he kept on driving, he said, "We're coming up on George Tully's land now."

Riley looked around. The landscape looked exactly the same – huge stretches of unplanted fields interrupted by gullies, fences, and lines of trees. She did notice a single large house in the midst of it all, standing next to a ramshackle barn. She figured that must be where Tully lived with his family.

It was an odd-looking house that appeared to have been added onto and cobbled together over the years, probably for quite a few generations.

Soon a medical examiner's vehicle came into sight, parked on the shoulder of the road. Several other cars were parked nearby. Doty parked right behind the examiner's van, and Riley and Jenn followed him and his younger partner out onto a recently tilled field.

Riley saw three men standing over a dug up spot. She couldn't see what had been found there, but she did glimpse a bit of brightly colored clothing fluttering in the spring breeze.

That's where she was buried, she realized.

And at that moment, Riley was hit by a strange gut feeling.

Gone was any sense that she and Jenn would have nothing to do here.

They had work to do – a girl was dead and they wouldn't stop until the killer was found.

CHAPTER TEN

Two people were standing by the freshly revealed body. Riley headed straight toward one of them, a brawny man about her own age.

“Chief Joseph Sinard, I assume,” she said, offering her hand.

He nodded and shook her hand.

“Folks around here just call me Joe,”

Sinard indicated an obese, bored-looking man in his fifties who was standing beside him, “This is Barry Teague, the county medical examiner. You two are the FBI folks we’ve been expecting, I guess.”

Riley and Jenn produced their badges and introduced themselves.

“Here’s our victim,” Sinard said.

He pointed down into the shallow hole, where a young woman lay carelessly splayed, wearing a bright orange sundress. The dress was hitched up over her thighs, and Riley could see that her underwear had been removed. She wasn’t wearing any shoes. Her face was unnaturally pale, and her open mouth still had dirt in it. Her eyes were wide open. The soiled body was dull in color, no longer the shade of any living human being.

Riley shuddered a little. She seldom felt any emotion when seeing a dead body – she’d seen far too many of them over the years. But this girl reminded her too much of April.

Riley turned toward the medical examiner.

“Have you come to any conclusions, Mr. Teague?”

Barry Teague crouched down next to the hole, and Riley crouched next to him.

“It’s bad – real bad,” he said in a voice that expressed no emotion at all.

He pointed to the girl’s thighs.

“See those bruises?” he asked. “Looks to me like she was raped.”

Riley didn’t say so, but she felt sure that he was correct. Judging from the smell, she also guessed that the girl had died the night before last, and that she’d been buried here for most of that time.

She asked the ME, “What do you think was the cause of death?”

Teague let out an impatient-sounding growl.

“Don’t know,” he said. “Maybe if you federal folks let me haul the body out of here and do my job, I might be able to tell you.”

Riley bristled inside. The man’s resentment of the FBI’s presence was palpable. Were she and Jenn Roston going to face a lot of local resistance?

She reminded herself that it had been Chief Sinard who called in the request. At least she could count on Sinard’s cooperation.

She told the ME, “You can take her away now.”

She got to her feet and looked around. She saw an elderly man some fifty feet away, leaning against a tractor and staring straight toward the body.

“Who’s that?” she asked Chief Sinard.

“George Tully,” Sinard said.

Riley remembered that George Tully was the owner of this land.

She and Jenn walked over to him and introduced themselves. Tully seemed barely to notice their presence. He kept staring toward the body as Teague’s team carefully got ready to move it.

Riley said to him, “Mr. Tully, I understand that you found the girl.”

He nodded dully, still not taking his eyes off the body.

Riley said, “I know this is hard. But could you please tell me what happened?”

Tully spoke in a vague, distant-sounding voice.

“Not much to tell. Me and the boys came out this morning early for planting. I noticed something odd about the soil there. The look of it bothered me so I started to dig ... and then there she was.”

Riley sensed that Tully wasn't going to be able to tell her much.

Jenn said, “Do you have any idea when the body might have been buried here?”

Tully shook his head mutely.

Riley looked around for a moment. The field seemed to have been recently tilled.

“When did you till this field?” she asked.

“Day before last. No, the day before that. We were just getting started seeding it today.”

Riley turned this over in her mind. It seemed consistent with her guess that the girl had been killed and buried the night before last.

Tully squinted as he continued to stare ahead.

“Chief Sinard told me her name,” he said. “Katy – her last name was Philbin, I think. Odd, I didn't recognize that name. I didn't recognize her either. Time was ...”

He paused for a moment.

“Time was when I knew pretty much all the families in town, and their kids too. Times have changed.”

There was a numb, aching sadness in his voice.

Riley could feel his pain now. She felt sure he'd lived on this land all his life, and so had his parents and grandparents and great-grandparents, and he'd hoped to pass the farm down to his own children and grandchildren.

He'd never imagined something like this could possibly happen here.

She also realized something else – that Tully had been standing in exactly this same spot for hours, staring with horrified disbelief at the poor girl's body. He'd found the body in the early morning, reported it, and then hadn't been able to make himself move from this spot. Now that the body was being taken away, maybe he'd leave soon.

But Riley knew that the horror wouldn't leave him.

His words echoed through her head ...

“Times have changed.”

He must have felt as though the world had gone mad.

And maybe it has, Riley thought.

“We're terribly sorry this happened,” Riley told him.

Then she and Jenn headed back toward the excavated spot.

Teague's team now had the covered body up on a gurney. They were awkwardly moving it over the tilled soil toward the medical examiner's vehicle.

Teague approached Riley and Jenn. He spoke in that seemingly perpetual monotone of his.

“In answer to your question, how'd she die ... I got a better look, and she'd been bludgeoned, hit more than once. So that's it.”

Without another word he turned and walked away to join his team.

Jenn let out a scoff of annoyance.

“Well, it sounds like the examination is done as far as he's concerned,” she said. “He's a real sweetheart.”

Riley shook her head in dismayed agreement.

Then she walked toward Chief Sinard and asked, “Was anything else found with the body? A handbag? Cell phone?”

“No,” Sinard said. “Whoever did it must have kept those.”

“Agent Roston and I need to meet with the girl's family as soon as possible.”

Chief Sinard frowned a little.

“That’s going to be pretty rough,” he said. “Her dad, Drew, was just out here a little while ago to identify the body. He was in pretty bad shape when he left.”

“I understand,” Riley said. “But it’s really necessary.”

Chief Sinard nodded, took a key out of his pocket, and pointed to a nearby car.

“I figure you two are going to need your own transportation,” he said. “You can use my car as long as you’re here. I’ll drive on ahead in a police vehicle and show you where the Philbins live.”

Riley let Jenn take the keys and drive. Soon they were following Sinard’s police car toward the town of Angier.

Riley asked her new partner, “What are your thoughts at this point?”

Jenn drove in silence for a moment as she seemed to mull the question over.

Then she said, “We know that the victim was seventeen years old – within the age range of about half of the victims of this kind of crime. It’s still an unusual case. Most victims of serial sexual predators are prostitutes. This one may fall into the ten percent who are victims of acquaintances of one kind or another.”

Jenn paused again.

Then she added, “More than half of these kinds of murders are by strangulation. But blunt force trauma is the second most frequent cause of death. So in that sense this murder may not be atypical. Still, we’ve got a lot to learn. The most important question is whether we’re dealing with a serial killer.”

Riley nodded grimly in agreement. Jenn wasn’t saying anything she didn’t already know, but whatever her misgivings might be about her new partner, at least she was well informed. And they were both facing the possibility of a terrible answer to that last question, both hoping the answer was “no.”

In a matter of minutes they were following Sinard into Angier and driving down Main Street. Riley saw nothing to distinguish it from other Main Streets she’d seen throughout the Midwest – bland and characterless rows of shops, some of them old and some of them new. She detected no hint of charm or quaintness. Riley had much the same feeling about the town as she’d had during the drive across the rolling prairie – a sense of something dark lurking behind the veneer of Midwestern wholesomeness.

She almost gave voice to her thoughts. But she quickly reminded herself that it wasn’t Bill who was at her side, but a young woman she barely knew and still didn’t know if she could trust.

Would Jenn Roston share Riley’s feelings, or even want to hear them?

Riley had no way of knowing, and it bothered her.

It was hard not having a partner she could talk to freely, expressing ideas as they came whether they made sense or not. She missed Bill more with every passing minute – and Lucy as well.

The victim’s family lived in an older but well-kept brick bungalow on a quiet street with large trees in the yard. The curb and the driveway were crowded with parked vehicles. Riley guessed the Philbins had a lot of visitors at the moment.

Sinard stopped his marked patrol car in the street and got out. He gestured Jenn toward a small parking space and stood giving directions to help her squeeze the car into place. Once the car was parked, Riley and Jenn got out and walked toward the house. Chief Sinard was already on his way to the front door, his patrol car still double-parked in the street.

Riley wondered – were they going to meet an innocent grieving family and many sincere and well-meaning friends and loved ones?

Or were they about to encounter people who might be capable of murder?

Either way, Riley always dreaded this kind of visit.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

For several long moments, Riley couldn't put her finger on what struck her as odd about the house where Katy Philbin had lived. As soon as she and Jenn walked in through the front door she had felt a tinge of unease.

As Riley had expected, the living room was crowded with people – well-wishing friends and neighbors, most of them women. In typical small-town style, the community was pulling together to help a family in a time of crisis.

So why did the scene strike her as somehow strange?

Then Riley realized – everything seemed uncannily organized and proper. All the people appeared to be wearing their Sunday best. They had brought food and had arranged it on the dining room table, and everybody was either tending to assigned tasks or eating and talking in hushed voices.

It reminded Riley of many funeral receptions she'd been to, the kind of event that might take place after a burial. It hardly seemed possible that Katy Philbin's desecrated body had been found just this morning. How had this orderly gathering come together so spontaneously and quickly?

It's that kind of town, she reminded herself.

Riley felt weirdly out of place in this world where everybody seemed to know just what to do at any given moment and for any occasion. It had been a long, long time since she'd lived in this kind of community – not since she'd been a child, really. And she was far from comfortable about being here in this kind of setting.

All this neighborly activity seemed too rehearsed, too automatic, for Riley's liking. After all, the girl's death hinted that something evil lurked beneath this veneer of rural propriety and decency. She couldn't shake off an irrational feeling that all this kindness and good will was an enormous lie.

Riley and Jenn followed close behind Chief Sinard. He was saying kind things to everybody as he moved among them, and he obviously knew everybody by name.

Sinard struck Riley as truly the perfect small-town police chief. He also had the ruddy complexion of a man who had been exposed to all the weather that the Midwest had to offer. Riley felt sure he'd lived in this part of the country – perhaps this very town – all his life.

Riley remembered that his brother was Forrest Sinard, the FBI's executive assistant director. She'd met Forrest Sinard a few times, and he'd struck her as witty and urbane, hardly the rural type at all. She wondered how two brothers had wound up following such different paths in their lives.

A man and woman seated in the back of the room were the center of everyone's attention. Chief Sinard introduced Riley and Jenn to Katy's parents, Drew and Lisa Philbin.

Lisa seemed barely aware of the two agents' presence.

"Why not?" she kept asking her husband. "Why can't I?"

"It's best not to, honey," Drew kept saying, holding her hands tightly. "Believe me, it's best."

"If not now, when?"

"I don't know. Soon maybe. Not yet."

Riley understood what was going on right away. She remembered Chief Sinard mentioning that Drew had been to George Tully's field to identify his daughter's body. Now his wife wanted to see the body too, but Drew wanted to spare her the horror – at least for the time being.

Lisa looked all around in tearful confusion.

"She's my daughter, and I'm her mother," she said, choking back a sob. "Katy needs me. Where is she?"

Riley felt a pang of sympathy.

Denial, she thought.

It was going to take a while before the reality of Lisa's daughter's death sank in.

Meanwhile, Riley guessed that she and Jenn ought to address most of their questions to Drew.

She said, “Mr. Philbin, we’re terribly sorry for your loss, and we hate to disturb you. But my colleague and I need to ask you a few questions.”

Still holding his wife’s hands tightly, Drew simply nodded.

“When did you notice that your daughter had gone missing?” Riley asked.

Drew knitted his brow as if trying to remember.

Shock, Riley thought.

Although he had accepted the reality of his daughter’s death, Riley knew that he was still struggling with confusion. She worried whether he might find it difficult to answer even the simplest questions.

“Last night, I think,” he said. “No, the night before last.”

Lisa appeared to be emerging from her fog of denial at least a little. She said, “Yes, it was the night before last. She was out late for a club meeting at her school. We expected her late, but she didn’t come home at all.”

“Did you report her missing?” Jenn asked.

Lisa and Drew looked at each other uncertainly.

“We did – didn’t we?” Lisa asked her husband.

Drew stammered, “Y-yes. We called Chief Sinard ... I can’t remember exactly ...”

Riley looked at Chief Sinard, who said, “It was Lisa who called me. She called last night. I put out a local alert online.”

Riley noticed that Jenn seemed to react to this information with suspicion. They knew that Katy had almost certainly been killed Wednesday night. She hadn’t come home, but her parents hadn’t reported her missing until last night, Thursday night.

Jenn asked Lisa, “You mean you waited a full day? Didn’t you know that another girl had already gone missing?”

Lisa’s eyes darted among Jenn’s, Riley’s, and Chief Sinard’s faces.

She replied, “We did hear about that. But we didn’t actually know her. And she just ran away, didn’t she? It was ... it had ... nothing to do with us ... with Katy ... Did it?”

Riley knew there was nothing she could say in reply. After all, as far as anybody knew at this point, Holly really had run away and might turn up at any time.

But that didn’t stop her partner from asking questions.

Speaking rather sharply, Jenn said, “I’m afraid I don’t understand. Why wait so long? Didn’t you start worrying when she didn’t show up Wednesday night?”

Riley started to cut her partner off, but she told herself that Jenn’s suspicion was understandable. At this point, every person they met – especially male – might be Katy’s killer. That might even include Drew Philbin.

But Riley also worried that Jenn might let her suspicion get the best of her. She was definitely not as skillful at questioning as Lucy had been. Even Bill had been better at putting others at ease. Riley knew that she herself tended to be blunt sometimes and she had depended on her partners to be friendlier.

Lisa seemed to be on the verge of panic.

She stammered, “I ... we ... this isn’t ...”

Drew gently interrupted his wife.

“What Lisa means to say is that this has happened before. I don’t mean that Katy was ever gone for *this* long. But she stayed out until the wee hours of the morning once before without calling home. We thought she was doing something like that again.”

Lisa nodded and chimed in, “And we *did* call other people yesterday morning – her ex-boyfriend, some of her friends, even a couple of her teachers.”

“But not Chief Sinard?” Jenn asked.

Lisa looked shaken and ashamed.

“We just ... we didn’t think ...”

Before Jenn could prod Lisa and Drew with more questions, Riley touched her on the shoulder to quiet her. She ignored the sidewise glance that Jenn gave her. Riley had a pretty good idea why the couple might not have called the police chief right away, but now was no time to get into it.

Riley asked the couple, “Did Katy mention being frightened of anything or anybody recently? Was anything making her uneasy?”

Lisa and Drew looked thoughtful for a moment.

“Not exactly,” Lisa said. “But she hadn’t been herself lately. She’d been quiet, stayed in her room a lot, and she seemed ... I don’t know, sad or upset about something. She wouldn’t tell me what it was all about.”

Drew shook his head.

“Lisa’s right,” he said. “She was behaving oddly. She used to be so happy and enthusiastic about everything – school, sports, friends.”

Lisa said, “We kept waiting for her to pull out of it. Whenever I asked her what was the matter, she said it was nothing.”

Lisa paused for a moment. Then she said, “I think she changed when she broke up with Dustin.”

Riley’s attention quickened.

“Her boyfriend?” Riley asked.

“That’s right,” Drew said. “Dustin Russo.”

“Did she say what the breakup was about?” Riley asked.

Lisa shrugged slightly.

“No. She wasn’t telling us much of anything around then.”

Riley asked, “Did anything about Dustin’s behavior worry the two of you?”

“Not really,” Drew said. “I mean, he’s a kid. He’s just a regular teenage kid.”

“Did Katy keep a diary?”

“If she did, it would be on her laptop. We never snooped.”

“Of course,” Riley said. “But we’ll need to go over it.”

Drew was silent for a moment, then said, “Anything that might help. It’s upstairs, in ...”

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