

A RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY--BOOK #11



ONCE
BURIED

BLAKE PIERCE

Блейк Пирс Once Buried

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Аннотация

A serial killer is killing victims with rapid speed, and in each crime scene, he leaves an unusual signature: an hourglass.

Its sand is designed to fall for 24 hours – and when its empty, a new victim appears.

Amidst intense media pressure, and in a frantic race against time, FBI Special Agent Riley Paige is summoned, with her new partner, to crack the case. Still reeling from the fallout with Shane, trying to sort out her family life, and to help Bill get back on his feet, Riley's plate is already full. And as she enters the darkest canals of this twisted killer's mind, this just may be the case that sets her over the edge.

A dark psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, ONCE BURIED is book #11 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 Buried

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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 seven books (and counting); of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six 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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- ONCE TAKEN (Book #2)
- ONCE CRAVED (Book #3)
- ONCE LURED (Book #4)
- ONCE HUNTED (Book #5)
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Prologue

Courtney Wallace felt a familiar burning in her lungs and her thighs. She slowed her jog down to a walk, then stopped, bent over with her hands on her knees, and gasped as she regained her breath.

It was a good, bracing feeling – a much better way to wake up than a cup of hot coffee, although in just a little while she'd have coffee with her breakfast. She still had plenty of time to shower and eat before she had to go to work.

Courtney loved the glow of early morning sunlight low among the trees and the lingering dampness of morning dew still in the air. Soon it would be a hot May day, but now the temperature was perfect, especially here in the gorgeous Belle Terre Nature Preserve.

She liked the solitude as well. She had seldom encountered another jogger along this trail – and never at this time of morning.

In spite of her satisfaction with her surroundings, a feeling of disappointment began to creep over her while she got her breathing back under control.

Her live-in boyfriend, Duncan, had promised yet again to come jogging with her – and yet again he had refused to wake up. He probably wouldn't get up until long after she'd gone to work at her own office job, maybe not until afternoon.

Is he ever going to snap out of this? she wondered.

And when was he going to get another job?

She broke into a gentle trot, hoping to shake off her negative thoughts. Soon she broke into a full run, and that invigorating burning in her lungs and legs seemed to sweep her worry and disappointment away.

Then the ground gave out from under her.

She was falling – a weird, suspended moment that somehow felt agonizingly slow.

She crashed and crumpled with a brutal thump.

The sunlight was gone, and her eyes had to adjust.

Where am I? she wondered.

She saw that she was at the bottom of a narrow pit.

But how had she gotten here?

She felt a terrible pain shooting up her right leg.

She looked down and saw that her ankle was bent at an unnatural angle.

She tried to move her leg. The pain sharpened and she cried out. She tried to stand up, but her leg collapsed beneath her. She could actually feel the broken bones rasping against one another. Nausea rose in her throat and she nearly blacked out.

She knew she needed help and reached into her pocket for her cell phone.

It wasn't there!

It must have fallen out.

It had to be here somewhere. She groped about to find it.

But she was partially entangled in a sort of rough, heavy,

loosely woven blanket along with soil and leaves. She couldn't find the phone.

It began to dawn on her that she had fallen into a trap – a hole with the debris-strewn cloth stretched over to hide it.

Was it somebody's idea of a practical joke?

If so, it wasn't the least bit funny.

And how was she going to get out of here?

The walls of the hole were straight, with no footholds or handholds. Unable to even stand up, she would never be able to get out of here on her own.

And no one else was likely to come along this trail soon, maybe not for hours.

Then she heard a voice directly above her.

"Hey! Did you have a bit of an accident?"

She breathed a little easier at the sound.

She looked up and saw that a man was standing above her. His figure was silhouetted against pale light, so she couldn't make out his face.

Still, she could barely believe her luck. After so many mornings of seeing no one on this trail, this morning someone just happened to come by when she desperately needed help.

"I think my ankle is broken," she called up to the man. "And I've lost my phone."

"That sounds bad," the man said. "How did it happen?"

What kind of question is that? she wondered.

Although there seemed to be a smile in his voice, Courtney

wished she could see his face.

She said, "I was jogging, and... there was this hole, and..."

"And what?"

Courtney was feeling more than a little impatient now.

She said, "Well, obviously, I fell in."

The man fell quiet for a moment. Then he said, "It's a big hole.

Didn't you see it?"

Courtney let out a groan of exasperation.

"Look, I just need help getting out of here, OK?"

The man shook his head.

"You shouldn't come jogging in strange places where you don't know the path."

"I *do* know this path!" Courtney shouted.

"Then how did you fall in this hole?"

Courtney was dumbfounded. Either the man was an idiot or he was toying with her.

"Are you the dick that dug this hole?" she snapped. "If so, it's not funny, damn it. Get me out of here!"

She was shocked to realize that she was weeping.

"How?" the man asked.

Courtney reached up, stretching her arm as far as it would go.

"Here," she said. "Reach down and take my hand and pull me up."

"I'm not sure I can reach that far."

"Sure you can."

The man laughed. It was a pleasant, friendly laugh. Even so,

Courtney still wished she could see his face.

“I’ll take care of everything,” he said.

He stepped away and out of sight.

Then she heard a rattling of metal and squeaking, grinding sounds coming around from behind her.

The next thing she knew, she felt a huge weight crashing down on her.

She gasped and sputtered until she grasped that the man had just dumped a load of dirt on her.

She felt her hands and legs getting cold – signs of panic, she realized.

Don’t panic, she told herself.

Whatever was going on, she had to stay calm.

She saw that the man was standing with a wheelbarrow tilted over her. A few remaining clods of dirt tumbled out of the wheelbarrow onto her head.

“What are you doing?” she yelled.

“Relax,” the man said. “Like I said, I’ll take care of everything.”

He rolled the wheelbarrow away. Then she heard a dull, drum-like pounding against metal again and again.

It was the sound of the man shoveling more dirt into the wheelbarrow.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, opened her mouth, and let out a long, piercing shriek.

“Help!”

Then she felt a heavy clump of dirt hitting her directly in her face. Some of it got into her mouth, and she choked and gagged and spit it out.

His voice still sounding friendly, the man said...

"I'm afraid you're going to have to yell a lot louder than that."

Then with a chuckle he added...

"I can barely hear you myself."

She let out another shriek, shocked at the loudness of her own voice.

Then the man dumped the new wheelbarrow full of dirt onto her.

She couldn't scream again now. Her throat was clogged with dirt.

She was overcome by an eerie sense of déjà vu. She'd experienced this before – this inability to run from danger or even to scream.

But those experiences had only been nightmares. And she'd always woken up from them.

Surely this was just another nightmare.

Wake up, she told herself again and again. *Wake up, wake up, wake up...*

But she couldn't wake up.

This was not a dream.

This was real.

Chapter One

Special Agent Riley Paige was working at her desk at the BAU building in Quantico when an unwelcome memory swept over her...

A dark-skinned man was staring at her with glassy eyes.

He had a bullet wound in his shoulder, and a much more dangerous wound in the abdomen.

In a weak, bitter voice, he told Riley...

"I order you to kill me."

Riley's hand was on her weapon.

She ought to kill him.

She had every good reason to kill him.

Even so, she didn't know what to do...

A woman's voice snapped Riley out of her reverie.

"You look like you've got something on your mind."

Riley looked up from her desk and saw a young African-American woman with short straight hair standing in her office doorway.

It was Jenn Roston, who had been Riley's new partner on her most recent case.

Riley shook herself a little.

"It's nothing," she said.

Jenn's dark brown eyes were filled with concern.

She said, "Oh, I'm pretty sure it's not nothing."

When Riley didn't reply, Jenn said, "You're thinking about Shane Hatcher, aren't you?"

Riley nodded silently. The memories were coming pretty often these days – memories of her terrible confrontation with the wounded man up at her dead father's cabin.

Riley's relationship with the escaped convict had been rooted in a weird, twisted bond of loyalty. He had been at large for five months, and she hadn't even tried to curtail his freedom – not until he began to murder innocent people.

Now it was hard for Riley to believe that she had let him go free for so long.

Theirs had been an unsettling, illegal, and very, very dark relationship.

Of all the people Riley knew, Jenn knew best just how dark it had been.

Finally Riley said, "I just keep thinking – I should have killed him right then and there."

Jenn said, "He was wounded, Riley. He posed no threat to you."

"I know," Riley said. "But I keep thinking I let my loyalty get in the way of my judgment."

Jenn shook her head.

"Riley, we've talked about this. You already know what I think about it. You did the right thing. And you don't have to take my

word for it. Everybody else here feels the same way.”

Riley knew that it was true. Her colleagues and superiors had heartily congratulated her for bringing Hatcher in alive. Their goodwill was a welcome change. As long as Riley had been in Hatcher’s thrall, everybody here had been justifiably suspicious of her. Now that the cloud of suspicion had lifted, her colleagues’ faces were friendly again, and she was greeted with renewed respect.

Riley truly felt at home here again.

Then Jenn grinned and added, “Hell, you even did things by the book for once in your life.”

Riley chuckled. Certainly she had followed correct procedure in how she had apprehended Hatcher – which was more than she could say for many of her actions during the case she and Jenn had just solved together.

Riley said, “Yeah, I guess you got a real crash course in my... unconventional methods.”

“I sure did.”

Riley chuckled uneasily. She’d ignored even more rules than usual. Jenn had covered for her loyally – even when she’d broken into a suspect’s house without a warrant. Jenn could have reported her actions if she’d chosen to. She could have gotten Riley fired.

“Jenn, I really appreciate—”

“Don’t even mention it,” Jenn said. “It’s all in the past. Whatever comes next is all that matters.”

Jenn's smile broadened as she added, "And I don't expect you to act like a Girl Scout. You'd better not expect me to either."

Riley laughed again, more comfortably this time.

She found it hard to believe that she had recently distrusted Jenn, had even considered her a true nemesis.

After all, Jenn had done much, much more for Riley than be discreet about her actions.

"Have I thanked you for saving my life?" Riley asked.

Jenn smiled.

"I've kind of lost count of how many times," she said.

"Well, thank you again."

Jenn said nothing. Her smile faded. A far-off look came over her.

"Did you want something, Jenn?" Riley asked. "I mean, why did you stop by?"

Jenn just kept staring down the hallway for a moment.

Finally she said, "Riley, I don't know whether I should tell you..." Her voice trailed off.

It was easy for Riley to see that something was troubling her. She wanted to reassure her, to say something like...

"You can tell me anything."

But that might be presumptuous.

Finally Jenn seemed to shiver a little.

"Never mind," she said. "It's nothing for you to worry about."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

Without another word, Jenn disappeared down the hall, leaving Riley with a distinctly uneasy feeling. She'd long sensed that Jenn harbored secrets of her own – perhaps some very dark ones.

Why won't she trust me? Riley wondered.

It seemed that one or the other of them was always a little distrustful. That didn't bode well for them working together as partners.

But there was nothing Riley could do about it – at least not yet.

She glanced at her watch. She was almost late for an appointment with her longtime partner, Bill Jeffreys.

Poor Bill was on leave these days, suffering from PTSD after a terrible incident during their last case together. Riley felt a pang of sadness as she remembered it.

She and Bill had been working together with a promising young agent named Lucy Vargas.

But Lucy had been killed in the line of duty.

Riley missed Lucy every day.

But at least she didn't feel guilty about her death.

Bill did.

Early this morning, Bill had called Riley and asked her to meet him at the Marine base that made up the largest part of the Quantico facility.

He hadn't told her why, which worried her. She hoped it was nothing serious.

Riley anxiously got up from her desk and headed out of the

BAU building.

Chapter Two

Bill felt a tingle of worry as he led Riley toward the Marine target range.

Am I ready for this? he wondered.

It seemed almost a stupid question. After all, it was only target practice.

But this was no ordinary target practice.

Like him, Riley was wearing a camouflage uniform and carrying an M16-A4 rifle loaded with live ammunition.

But unlike Bill, Riley had no idea what they were about to do.

“I wish you’d tell me what this is all about,” Riley said.

“It’s going to be a new experience for both of us,” he said.

He’d never tried this new kind of range shooting before. But Mike Nevins, the psychiatrist who had been helping him with his PTSD, had recommended it for him.

“It’ll be good therapy,” Mike had said.

Bill hoped Mike was right. And he hoped it would take the edge off his nerves to try it out with Riley.

Bill and Riley took positions next to each other among upright four-by-four wooden posts, facing across a wide grassy field toward a paved area. On the pavement were vertical barriers marked with bullet holes. A few moments ago, Bill had talked to a guy in a control booth and everything should be ready now.

Now he spoke to that same guy through a little microphone

in front of his lips.

“Random targets. Go.”

Suddenly, human-sized figures appeared from behind the barriers, all of them moving about in the paved area. They were wearing the uniforms of ISIS-style fighters and appeared to be armed.

“Hostiles!” Bill called out to Riley. “Shoot!”

Riley was too startled to shoot, but Bill fired one shot and missed. Then he fired another shot that hit one of the figures. The figure bent completely over and stopped moving. The other figures turned to avoid the gunfire, some of them moving faster, others hiding behind the barriers.

Riley said, “What the hell!”

She still hadn’t taken a shot.

Bill laughed.

“Stop,” he said into the microphone.

Suddenly, all the figures were motionless.

“Today we’re shooting at fake guys on wheels?” Riley asked with a laugh.

Bill explained, “They’re autonomous robots, mounted on Segway scooters. That guy I talked to in the booth a minute ago is punching in programs for them to follow. But he doesn’t control their every movement. In fact, he doesn’t really control them at all. They ‘know’ what to do. They’ve got laser scanners and navigation algorithms so they can avoid each other and the barriers.”

Riley's eyes were wide with amazement.

"Yeah," she said. "And they know what to do when the shooting starts – run, or hide, or both."

"Want to try it again?" Bill asked.

Riley nodded, starting to look enthusiastic.

Again Bill said into the microphone, "Random targets. Go."

The figures began moving as before, and Riley and Bill fired single shots at them. Bill hit one of the robots, and so did Riley. Both of those robots stopped and bent over. The other robots scattered, some gliding about capriciously, others hiding behind barriers.

Riley and Bill kept firing, but the shooting was getting harder. The robots that stayed on the move darted in unpredictable patterns at varying speeds. The ones who hid behind the barriers kept popping out, taunting Riley and Bill to shoot at them. It was impossible to tell from which side of the barrier they might appear. Then they either scurried around in the open or took shelter again.

Despite all this seeming chaos, it only took about half a minute for Riley and Bill to take out all eight of the robots. They were all bent over and motionless among the barriers.

Riley and Bill lowered their weapons.

"That was weird," Riley said.

"Want to stop?" Bill asked.

Riley chuckled.

"Are you kidding? Absolutely not. What's next?"

Bill swallowed, suddenly feeling nervous.

“We’re supposed to take out hostiles without killing a civilian,” he said.

Riley looked at him sympathetically. He understood her concern. She knew perfectly well why this new exercise made him feel uneasy. It reminded him of the innocent young man he had mistakenly shot last month. The boy had recovered from his wound, but Bill still couldn’t shake off his guilt.

Bill was also haunted because a brilliant young agent named Lucy Vargas had been killed in the same incident.

If only I’d been able to save her, he thought yet again.

Bill had been on official leave ever since, wondering if he’d ever be able to get back to work. He’d completely fallen apart, lapsing into alcohol and even contemplating suicide.

Riley had helped him through it – in fact, she had probably saved his life.

Bill felt like he was getting better now.

But was he ready for this?

Riley kept eyeing him with concern.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” she asked.

Again, Bill remembered what Mike Nevins had said.

“It’ll be good therapy.”

Bill nodded at Riley.

“I think so,” he said.

They resumed their positions and raised their weapons. Bill spoke into the microphone. “Hostiles and civilian.”

The same actions as before began to unfold – only this time, one of the figures was a female draped in a blue hijab. It certainly wasn't hard to distinguish her from the hostiles in their drab, brown outfits. But she was weaving among the others in seemingly random patterns.

Riley and Bill began to pick off the hostiles to the same effect as before – some of the male figures dodged the bullets, while others took shelter behind the barriers, only to dart out at unpredictable moments.

The female figure also moved as if frightened by the gunfire, hurrying to and fro frantically, but somehow never bothering to hide behind a barrier. Her simulated panic only made it harder not to accidentally hit her.

Bill felt cold sweat forming on his forehead as he fired one round after another.

Soon he and Riley had shot all the hostiles, and the woman in the hijab stood alone unscathed.

Bill breathed a slow sigh of relief and lowered his weapon.

“How are you doing?” Riley asked, a note of worry in her voice.

“Pretty good, I guess,” Bill said.

But his palms felt damp against the weapon, and he was shaking a little.

“Maybe that's enough for now,” Riley said.

Bill shook his head.

“No,” he said. “We've got to try the next program.”

“What’s that?”

Bill gulped hard.

“It’s a hostage situation. The civilian will be killed unless you and I take out two hostiles simultaneously.”

Riley squinted at him doubtfully.

“Bill, I don’t know...”

“Come on,” Bill said. “It’s only a game. Let’s give it a try.”

Riley shrugged and raised her weapon.

Bill spoke into the microphone, “Hostage situation. Go.”

The robots came back to life. The female figure stayed in the open, while the hostiles disappeared behind the barriers.

Then two hostiles appeared from behind the barriers, hovering menacingly around the female figure, who wobbled back and forth with seeming anxiety.

Bill knew that the trick was for him and Riley to fire at both hostiles as soon as they had a clear shot.

It was up to him to call that moment.

As he and Riley carefully aimed their weapons, Bill said...

“I’ll take the one on the left, you the guy on the right. Fire when I say ‘Go.’”

“Got it,” Riley said quietly.

Bill carefully monitored the movements and positions of the two hostiles. He realized that this was going to be hard – much harder than he’d expected.

The very second one of the hostiles drifted away, the other hostile placed himself dangerously close to the hostage.

Are we ever going to get a clear shot? he wondered.

Then, for just a fleeting moment, the two hostiles both drifted about a foot or so in opposite directions away from the hostage.

“Go!” Bill barked.

But before he could pull the trigger, he was seized by a rush of images...

He was dashing toward an abandoned building when he heard a shot ring out.

He drew his weapon and ran inside, where he saw Lucy lying prone on the floor.

He saw a young man moving toward her.

Instinctively, Bill fired at the man and hit him.

The man spun around before he fell – and only then did Bill see that his hands were empty.

He was unarmed.

The man had only been trying to help Lucy.

Mortally wounded, Lucy lifted herself up on her elbow and fired six rounds at her real attacker...

...the man Bill should have shot.

A shot rang out from Riley’s rifle, snapping Bill out of his flashback.

The images had come and gone in a mere fraction of a second. One of the hostiles tilted over, dead from Riley’s shot.

But Bill himself stood frozen. He couldn’t pull the trigger.

The surviving hostile turned menacingly toward the woman, and a recorded shot rang out over a loudspeaker.

The woman buckled over and stopped moving.

Bill finally fired his weapon and hit the surviving hostile – but too late for the hostage, who was already dead.

For a moment, the situation seemed horribly real.

“Jesus,” he said. “Oh, Jesus, what did I let happen?”

Bill stepped forward, almost as if he wanted to rush to the woman’s aid.

Riley stepped in front of him to stop him.

“Bill, it’s OK! It’s only a game! It’s not real!”

Bill stopped in his tracks, shaking all over and trying to calm himself.

“Riley, I’m sorry, it’s just that... it all came flooding back for a second and...”

“I know,” Riley said comfortingly. “I understand.”

Bill slumped over and shook his head.

“Maybe I’m not ready for this,” he said. “Maybe we’d better quit for the day.”

Riley patted him on the shoulder.

“No,” she said. “I think you’d better see it through.”

Bill took a few long, slow breaths. He knew that Riley was right.

He and Riley resumed their positions, and Bill again said into the microphone...

“Hostage situation. Go.”

The same action resumed again, with two hostiles lurking dangerously close to the hostage.

Bill breathed slowly, in and out, as he peered through his sight.

It's only a game, he told himself. It's only a game.

Finally, the moment he was waiting for arrived. Both of the hostiles had moved ever so slightly away from the hostage. It was still a dangerous shot, but Bill and Riley had to take it.

“Go!” he said.

This time he fired instantly, and he heard the sound of Riley's shot a fraction of a second later.

Both of the hostiles buckled over and stopped moving.

Bill lowered his weapon.

Riley patted him on the back.

“You did it, Bill,” she said, smiling. “I'm enjoying this. What else can we do with these bots?”

Bill said, “There's a program where we can advance toward them as we shoot.”

“Let's give it a try.”

Bill spoke into his microphone.

“Close quarters.”

All eight of the hostiles began to move, and Bill and Riley advanced toward them step by step, firing in small bursts. A couple of robots fell, and the others scurried about, becoming harder to hit.

As Bill fired away, he realized that something was missing from this simulation.

They don't shoot back, he thought.

Also, his relief at saving the hostage felt strangely hollow. After all, he and Riley had merely saved the life of a robot.

It didn't change the reality of what had happened last month.

It certainly didn't bring Lucy back to life.

His guilt still haunted him. Was he ever going to be able to shake it off?

And was he ever going to be able to get back to work?

Chapter Three

After their target practice, Riley was still worried about Bill. True, he'd recovered quickly after freezing up that once. And he'd actually seemed to enjoy himself when they started firing at close quarters.

He'd even seemed cheerful when he left Quantico to go back to his apartment. Still, he wasn't the same old Bill who had been her partner for so many years – and who had long since become her best friend.

She knew what he was most worried about.

Bill was afraid that he might not ever be able to come back to work.

She wished she could reassure him with kind, simple words – something like...

“You’re just going through a rough stretch. Happens to all of us. You’ll be over it sooner than you think.”

But glib reassurances weren't what Bill needed right now. And the truth was, Riley didn't really know whether it was true.

She'd suffered her own spells of PTSD, and knew how hard recovery could be. She would just have to help Bill work through that awful process.

Although Riley went back to her office, she actually had little to do at BAU today. She didn't currently have an assignment, and these slow days had been welcome after the intensity of the last

case in Iowa. She wrapped up the few details that needed her attention and left.

As Riley drove home, she was feeling contented at the thought of dinner with her family. She was especially pleased that she had invited Blaine Hildreth and his daughter to join them tonight.

Riley was delighted that Blaine was part of her life. He was a handsome, charming man. And like her, he was fairly recently divorced.

He was also, as it turned out, remarkably brave.

It was Blaine who had shot and badly wounded Shane Hatcher when he had threatened Riley's family.

Riley would always be grateful to him for that.

She had spent one night with Blaine so far, at his home. They'd been fairly discreet about it – his daughter, Crystal, had been away visiting her cousins during spring break. Riley smiled at the memory of their passionate lovemaking.

Was tonight going to end the same way?

* * *

Riley's live-in housekeeper, Gabriela, had fixed a delicious meal of *chiles rellenos* from a family recipe that she'd brought from Guatemala. Everybody was thoroughly enjoying the steaming, lusciously stuffed bell peppers.

Riley was feeling deep satisfaction with a very good dinner and wonderful company.

“Not too *picante*?” Gabriela asked.

It wasn't too hot and spicy for American taste buds, of course, and Riley was sure that Gabriela knew it. Gabriela always exercised restraint with her original Central American recipes. She was obviously fishing for compliments, which came quickly and easily.

“No, it's perfect,” Riley's fifteen-year-old daughter, April, said.

“The best ever,” said Jilly, the thirteen-year-old girl that Riley was in the process of adopting.

“Just amazing,” said Crystal, April's best friend.

Crystal's father, Blaine Hildreth, didn't say anything right away. But Riley could tell by his expression that he was enchanted by the dish. She also knew that Blaine's appreciation was partly professional. Blaine owned an upscale but casual restaurant here in Fredericksburg.

“How do you do it, Gabriela?” he asked after a few bites.

“*Es un secreto*,” Gabriela said with a mischievous grin.

“A secret, eh?” Blaine said. “What kind of cheese did you use? I can't place it. I can tell it's not Monterey Jack or Chihuahua. Manchego, maybe?”

Gabriela shook her head.

“I will never tell,” she said with a chuckle.

As Blaine and Gabriela continued to banter about the recipe, partly in English and partly in Spanish, Riley caught herself wondering if she and Blaine might...

She blushed a little at the idea.

No, not going to happen tonight.

There could hardly be any graceful, discreet segue with everybody here.

Not that there was anything wrong with things as they were.

Being surrounded by people she cared deeply about was pleasure enough for this particular evening. But as she watched her family and friends enjoying themselves, a new concern began to tug at Riley's mind.

One person at the table had barely said a word so far. That was Liam, the newcomer to Riley's household. Liam was April's age, and the two teenagers had been dating at one time. Riley had rescued the tall, gangly kid from an abusive, drunken father. He'd needed a place to live and right now that meant sleeping on the sofa bed in Riley's family room.

Liam was normally talkative and outgoing. But something seemed to be troubling him tonight.

Riley asked, "Is anything wrong, Liam?"

The boy didn't seem to even hear her.

Riley spoke just a little louder.

"Liam."

Liam looked up from his meal, which he had barely touched so far.

"Huh?" he said.

"Is anything wrong?"

"No. Why?"

Riley squinted uneasily. Something was wrong, all right. Liam was seldom monosyllabic like this.

“I just wondered,” she said.

She made a mental note to talk to Liam alone later on.

* * *

Gabriela capped off the meal with a delicious dessert of flan. Riley and Blaine enjoyed after-dinner drinks while the four kids entertained themselves in the family room, and finally Blaine and his daughter went on home.

Riley waited until April and Jilly went to their rooms for the night. Then she went alone to the family room. Liam was sitting quietly on the still-closed sofa, staring off into space.

“Liam, I can tell something’s wrong. I wish you’d tell me about it.”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Liam said.

Riley crossed her arms and said nothing. She knew from dealing with the girls that it was sometimes best to wait kids out.

Then Liam said, “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Riley was startled. She was used to adolescent moodiness from April and Jilly, at least from time to time. But it wasn’t typical of Liam at all. He was always agreeable and obliging. He was also a dedicated student, and Riley appreciated his influence on April.

Riley continued to wait in silence.

Finally Liam said, “I got a call from Dad today.”

Riley felt a sinking in the pit of her stomach.

She couldn’t help remembering that terrible day when she’d rushed over to Liam’s house to save him from being badly beaten by his father.

She knew she shouldn’t be surprised. But she didn’t know what to say.

Liam said, “He says he’s sorry about everything. He says he misses me.”

Riley’s worry deepened. She had no legal custody over Liam. Right now, she was acting as a sort of impromptu foster parent, and she had no idea exactly what her future role in his life would be.

“Does he want you to come back home?” Riley asked.

Liam nodded.

Riley couldn’t bring herself to ask the obvious question...

“What do you want?”

What would she do – what *could* she do – if Liam said he wanted to go back?

Riley knew that Liam was a gentle, forgiving boy. Like many abuse victims, he was also prone to deep denial.

Riley sat down beside him.

She asked, “Have you been happy here?”

Liam made a small choking sound. For the first time, Riley realized that he was near tears.

“Oh, yes,” he said. “This has been... I’ve just been... so

happy.”

Riley felt her own throat catch a little. She wanted to tell him he could stay here for as long as he wished. But what could she do if his father demanded that he come back? She'd be powerless to stop it from happening.

A tear trickled down Liam's cheek.

“It's just that... since Mom went away... I'm all Dad's got. Or at least I was until I left. Now he's all alone. He says he's stopped drinking. He says he won't hurt me anymore.”

Riley almost blurted out...

“Don't believe him. Don't ever believe him when he says that.”

Instead, she said, “Liam, you must know that your dad is very ill.”

“I know,” Liam said.

“It's up to him to get the help he needs. But until he does... well, it's going to be very hard for him to change.”

Riley fell silent for a moment.

Then she added, “Just always remember that it's not your fault. You know that, don't you?”

Liam gulped down a sob and nodded.

“Have you ever gone back to see him?” Riley asked.

Liam shook his head silently.

Riley patted his hand.

“I just want you to promise me one thing. If you *do* go to see him, don't go by yourself. I want to be there with you. Do you promise?”

“I promise,” Liam said.

Riley reached for a nearby box of tissues and offered one to Liam, who wiped his eyes and blew his nose. Then the two of them sat in silence for a few long moments.

Finally Riley said, “Do you need me for anything else?”

“No. I’m OK now. Thank you for... well, you know.”

He smiled at her weakly.

“Pretty much everything,” he added.

“You’re very welcome,” Riley said, returning his smile.

She left the family room, walked to the living room, and sat alone on the couch.

Suddenly, a sob rose up in her own throat, and she started to cry. She was startled to realize how shaken she’d been by her conversation with Liam.

But when she thought about it, it was easy enough to understand why.

I’m so out of my depth, she thought.

After all, she was still trying to get Jilly’s adoption settled. She’d rescued the poor girl from her own share of horrors. When Riley had found her, Jilly had been trying to sell her body out of sheer desperation.

So what did Riley think she was doing, bringing another teenager into the house?

She suddenly wished Blaine was still here to talk to.

Blaine always seemed to know what to say.

She had enjoyed the lull between cases for a while, but little by

little, worries had started to creep in – worries especially about her family, and today about Bill.

It hardly felt like any kind of vacation.

Riley couldn't help but wonder...

Is something wrong with me?

Was she somehow just incapable of enjoying a quiet life?

Anyway, she knew she could be sure of one thing.

This lull wouldn't last. Somewhere, some monster was committing some heinous deed – and it would be up to her to stop him.

Chapter Four

Riley was awakened early the next morning by the sound of her phone buzzing.

She groaned aloud as she shook herself awake.

The lull is over, she thought.

She looked at her phone and saw that she was right. It was a text message from her team chief at the BAU, Brent Meredith. It was a call to meet with him, and it was written in his typical terse style...

BAU 8:00

She looked at the time and realized she'd have to hurry to make it to the hastily planned appointment. Quantico was only a half-hour drive from home, but she needed to get out of here fast.

It took Riley just minutes to brush her teeth, comb her hair, get dressed, and rush downstairs.

Gabriela was already making breakfast in the kitchen.

"Is coffee ready?" Riley asked her.

"*Sí*," Gabriela said, and poured her a hot cup.

Riley sipped the coffee eagerly.

"You must leave without breakfast?" Gabriela asked her.

"I'm afraid so."

Gabriela handed her a bagel.

"Then take this with you. You must have something in your

stomach.”

Riley thanked Gabriela, gulped down some more of the coffee, and rushed out to her car.

During the short drive to Quantico, a peculiar feeling came over her.

She actually began to feel better than she had during the last few days, even slightly euphoric.

It was partly an adrenaline boost, of course, as her mind and body prepared to embark upon a new case.

But it was also something rather unsettling – a feeling that things were somehow getting back to normal.

Riley sighed at the realization.

She wondered – what did it mean that hunting monsters felt more normal to her than spending time with people she loved?

It can't be... well, normal, she thought.

Worse, it reminded her of something that her father, a brutal and bitter retired Marine officer, had told her before he died.

“You're a hunter. What folks call normal – it would kill you if you tried living it too long.”

Riley wanted with all her heart for it not to be true.

But at times like now, she couldn't help but worry – were the roles of wife, mother, and friend impossible for her to fill?

Was it hopeless to even try?

Was “the hunt” the only thing she really had in life?

No, definitely not the only thing.

Surely not even the most important thing in her life.

Firmly, she put the unpleasant question out of her mind.

When she arrived at the BAU building, she parked and hurried inside and straight to Brent Meredith's office.

She saw that Jenn was already there, looking a lot more bright-eyed and awake than Riley felt. Riley knew that Jenn, like Bill, had an apartment in the town of Quantico, so she'd been in less of a rush to get here. But Riley also attributed some of Jenn's early-morning freshness to her youth.

Riley had been much the same as Jenn when she was younger – ready and eager to spring into action at a moment's notice, at any time of day or night, and able to go without sleep for extended intervals when the job demanded it.

Were those days slipping behind her?

It wasn't a pleasant thought, and it didn't brighten Riley's already uneasy mood.

Sitting at his desk, Brent Meredith cut a formidable figure as always, with his black, angular features, his broad frame, and his perpetual down-to-business attitude.

Riley sat down, and Meredith wasted no time getting to the point.

“There was a murder this morning. It happened on the public beach at the Belle Terre Nature Preserve. Are either of you familiar with the place?”

Jenn said, “I've been there a few times. A great place for hiking.”

“I've been there too,” Riley said.

Riley remembered the nature preserve pretty well. It was on the Chesapeake Bay, just a little more than a two-hour drive from Quantico. It had several hundred forested acres and a wide public beach on the bay. It was a popular area for outdoor types.

Meredith drummed his fingers on his desk.

“The victim was Todd Brier, a Lutheran pastor in nearby Sattler. He’d been buried alive on the beach.”

Riley shuddered a little.

Buried alive!

She’d had nightmares about it, but she had never actually worked on a case involving this particular type of grisly murder.

Meredith continued, “Brier was found at about seven this morning, and it looked like he’d only been dead for about an hour.”

Jenn asked, “What makes this an FBI case?”

Meredith said, “Brier’s not the first victim. Yesterday another body was found nearby – a young woman named Courtney Wallace.”

Riley suppressed a sigh.

“Don’t tell me,” she said. “Also buried alive.”

“You’ve got it,” Meredith said. “She was killed on one of the hiking trails at the same nature preserve, apparently also early in the morning. She was discovered later in the day when a hiker came across the disturbed earth and called park services.”

Meredith leaned back in his chair and swiveled slightly back and forth.

He said, "So far, the local cops don't have any suspects or witnesses. Other than the locations and the MO, they don't have much of anything. Both victims were young, healthy people. There hasn't been time to find out if they were connected in any way, other than that they were both out there early in the morning."

Riley's mind clicked away as she tried to make sense of what she'd just heard. So far, she had too little to go on.

She asked, "Have the local cops closed off the area?"

Meredith nodded.

"They've closed the forested area near that trail and half of the beach to the public. I've told them not to move the body on the beach until my people get there."

"What about the woman's body?" Jenn asked.

"It's at the morgue in Sattler, the nearest city. The Tidewater District medical examiner is at the beach right now. I want the two of you to get down there as fast as you can. Take an FBI vehicle, something conspicuous. I'm hoping that if the FBI is visibly on the scene, it will at least slow this perpetrator down. My guess is that he isn't done killing yet."

Meredith glanced back and forth at Riley and Jenn.

"Any questions?" he asked.

Riley did have a question, but she didn't know whether she should ask it.

Finally she said, "Sir, I'd like to make a request."

"Well?" Meredith said, leaning back in his chair again.

“I’d like Special Agent Jeffreys to be assigned to this case.”
Meredith’s eyes narrowed.

“Jeffreys is on leave,” he said. “I’m sure that you and Agent Roston here can handle this between the two of you.”

“I’m sure we can,” Riley said. “But...”

She hesitated.

“But what?” Meredith said.

Riley swallowed hard. She knew that Meredith didn’t much like it when agents asked for personal favors.

She said, “I think he needs to get back to work, sir. I think it would do him good.”

Meredith scowled and said nothing for a moment.

Then he said, “I won’t officially assign him to the case. But if you want him to work with you on an informal basis, I’ve got no objection.”

Riley thanked him, trying not to be too effusive lest he change his mind. Then she and Jenn requisitioned an official FBI SUV.

As Jenn started to drive south, Riley got out her cell phone and texted Bill.

I’m working on a new case with Roston. Chief says it’s OK for U to join us. I want you to.

Riley waited for a few moments. Her heart beat a little faster when she saw that the message was marked “read.”

Then she typed...

Can we count U in?

Again the message was marked “read,” but there was no response.

Riley’s spirits sank.

Maybe this isn’t a good idea, she thought. Maybe it’s still too soon.

She wished Bill would reply, if only to tell her no.

Chapter Five

As Jenn drove the SUV south toward their destination, Riley kept eyeing the text messages she'd sent on her cell phone.

Minutes passed, and Bill still didn't reply.

Finally she decided to give him a call.

She punched in his number. To her frustration, she got his voice mail.

At the sound of the beep, she simply said, "Bill, call me. Now."

As Riley set the phone down in her lap, Jenn glanced over at her from behind the wheel.

"Is anything wrong?" Jenn asked.

"I don't know," Riley said. "I hope not."

Her worry kept mounting during the drive. She remembered a text she'd received from Bill while she'd been working on her most recent case in Iowa...

Just so you know. Been sitting here with a gun in my mouth.

Riley shuddered at the memory of the desperate phone call that had followed, when she'd managed to talk him out of committing suicide.

Was it happening again?

If so, what could Riley do to help?

A sudden shrill, piercing noise chased these thoughts from

Riley's head. It took a second for her to realize that Jenn had turned on the siren upon running into a patch of slow traffic.

Riley took the siren as a stern reminder...

I've got to get my head in the game.

* * *

It was about ten-thirty when Riley and Jenn arrived in the Belle Terre Nature Preserve. They followed a road to the beach until they found a couple of parked police cars and a medical examiner's van. Beyond the vehicles on a grassy rise was a barrier of police tape to keep the public away from the beach.

The beach wasn't immediately visible as Riley and Jenn got out of the van. But Riley saw gulls flying overhead, felt a crisp breeze on her face, smelled salt in the air, and heard the sound of surf.

Riley was dismayed but hardly surprised that a small group of reporters had already gathered in the parking area beyond the crime scene. They crowded around Riley and Jenn, asking questions.

"We've had two murders in two days. Is there a serial killer at work?"

"You've released the name of yesterday's victim. Have you identified this new victim?"

"Have you contacted the victim's family?"

"Is it true that both victims were buried alive?"

Riley cringed at that last question. Of course, she wasn't surprised that word had gotten out about how the victims had died. Reporters could have learned that much from listening to local police scanners. But she had no doubt that the media was going to sensationalize these murders for all they were worth.

Riley and Jenn pushed past the reporters without commenting. Then they were greeted by a couple of local cops, who escorted them past the police tape over the grassy rise onto the beach. Riley could feel sand seeping into her shoes as she walked.

In a moment, the murder scene came into view.

Several men surrounded a hole dug in the sand where the body still remained. Two of them strode toward Riley and Jenn as they approached. One was a stocky, red-haired man in a uniform. The other, a slender man with curly black hair, was wearing a white shirt.

"I'm glad you could get here so soon," the red-haired man said when Riley and Jenn introduced themselves. "I'm Parker Belt, the Sattler police chief. This is Zane Terzis, the Tidewater District medical examiner."

Chief Belt led Riley and Jenn over to the hole and they looked down at the half-uncovered body.

Riley was more than used to seeing corpses in various states of mutilation and decomposition. Even so, this one jolted her with a unique kind of horror.

He was a blond man, about thirty years old, and he was wearing a jogging outfit suitable for a cool summer morning's

run along the beach. His arms remained sprawled in a statue-like state of rigor mortis from his desperate attempts to dig himself out. His eyes were shut tight, and his wide-open mouth was filled with sand.

Chief Belt stood next to Riley and Jenn.

Belt said, “He still had a wallet with plenty of identification – not that we really needed it. I recognized him the second Terzis and his men uncovered his face. His name is Todd Brier, and he’s a Lutheran pastor in Sattler. I didn’t go to his church – I’m a Methodist. But I knew him. We were good friends. We went fishing together from time to time.”

Belt’s voice was thick with sorrow and shock.

“How was the body found?” Riley asked.

“A guy came by walking a dog,” Belt said. “The dog stopped here, sniffing and whining, then started digging, and right away a hand appeared.”

“Is the guy who found the body still around?” Riley asked.

Belt shook his head.

“We sent him home. He was badly shaken up. But we told him he needed to be available for questions. I can put you in touch with him.”

Riley looked up from the body over to the water, which was some fifty feet away. The waters of the Chesapeake Bay were a deep rich blue, with white-topped waves lapping softly at the wet sand. Riley could see that the tide was going out.

Riley asked, “This was the second murder?”

“It was,” Belt replied grimly.

“Has anything like this ever happened here before these two?”

“Right here in Belle Terre, you mean?” Belt said. “No, nothing like it at all. This is a peaceful preserve for birds and wildlife. Local people use this beach, mostly families. From time to time we have to arrest some would-be poacher or settle an argument among visitors. We also have to chase away transients from time to time. That’s about as serious as it gets.”

Riley stepped around the hole to look at the body from a different angle. She saw a patch of blood on the back of the victim’s head.

“What do you make of this wound?” she asked Terzis.

“It looks like he was struck by some hard object,” the ME said. I’ll study it better when we get the body to the morgue. But from the looks of it, I’d say it was probably enough to daze him, just long enough so he couldn’t put up a fight while the killer was burying him. I doubt that he was ever completely unconscious. It’s pretty obvious that he struggled hard.”

Riley shuddered.

Yes, that much was obvious.

She said to Jenn, “Take some pictures and also send them to me.”

Jenn immediately took out her cell phone and started snapping photos of the hole and the corpse. Meanwhile, Riley walked slowly around the hole checking the beach in all directions. The killer hadn’t left a lot of clues. The sand around the hole had

obviously been disturbed by the killer when he'd been digging, and there was a trail of vague footprints where the jogger had approached.

Vague, too, were any footprints left by the killer. The dry sand didn't hold the shape of a shoe. But Riley could see where the marsh grass she'd come through had been broken down by someone other than the investigative team.

She pointed and said to Belt, "Have your guys scour that grass carefully to see if any fibers might have gotten caught there."

The chief nodded.

A feeling began to creep over Riley – a familiar feeling that she sometimes got at a crime scene.

She hadn't felt it often during her most recent cases. But it was a welcome feeling, one that she knew she could use as a tool.

It was an uncanny sense of the killer himself.

If she allowed herself to let that feeling sweep over her, she was likely to get some insights into just what had happened here.

Riley moved a few steps away from the group gathered at the scene. She glanced at Jenn and saw that her partner was watching her. Riley knew that Jenn was aware of her reputation for getting into killers' minds. Riley nodded, and saw Jenn swing into action, asking questions of her own, distracting the others on the scene and giving Riley a few moments to concentrate her skills.

Riley closed her eyes and tried to picture the scene as it must have looked at the time of the murder.

Images and sounds came to her remarkably easily.

It was dim outside, and the beach was shadowy, but there were traces of light in the sky across the water from where the sun would later rise, and it wasn't too dark to see.

The tide was up, and the water was probably only an easy stone's throw away, so the sound of the surf was loud.

Loud enough so he could barely hear himself digging, Riley realized.

At that moment, Riley had no trouble stepping into a strange mind...

Yes, he was digging, and she could feel the strain of his muscles as he threw shovels of sand as far away as he could, feel the mixture of sweat and sea spray on his face.

The digging wasn't easy. In fact, it was a bit frustrating.

It wasn't easy to dig a hole in beach sand like this.

Sand had a way of trickling back in, partially refilling the space where he dug.

He was thinking...

It won't be very deep. But it doesn't have to be deep.

All the while he kept glancing up at the beach, looking for his prey. And sure enough, he soon appeared, jogging along contentedly not far away.

And at the perfect time, too – the hole was just as deep as it needed to be.

The killer pushed the shovel into the sand and raised up his hands and waved.

“Come over here!” he shouted to the jogger.

Not that it mattered what he shouted – over the sound of the surf, the jogger wouldn’t be able to pick out his actual words, just a muffled yell.

The jogger stopped at the sound and looked his way.

Then he walked over to the killer.

The jogger was smiling as he approached, and the killer was smiling back at him.

Soon they were within earshot of each other.

“What’s up?” the jogger yelled over the surf.

“Come here and I’ll show you,” the killer yelled back.

The jogger unwarily walked over to where the killer was standing.

“Look down there,” the killer said. “Look really close.”

The jogger bent over, and with a swift, deft movement, the killer picked up the shovel and hit him in the back of the head, knocking him into the hole...

Riley was yanked out of her reverie by the sound of Chief Belt’s voice.

“Agent Paige?”

Riley opened her eyes and saw that Belt was looking at her with a curious expression. He hadn’t been distracted long by Jenn’s questions.

He said, “You seemed to leave us for a few moments there.”

Riley heard Jenn chuckle from nearby.

“She does that sometimes,” Jenn told the chief. “Don’t worry, she’s hard at work.”

Riley quickly reviewed the impressions she’d just gotten – all very hypothetical, of course, and hardly a moment-by-moment sense of what had actually happened.

But she felt very sure of one detail – that the jogger had come over at the killer’s invitation – and had approached him without fear.

This gave her a small but crucial insight.

Riley said to the police chief, “The killer is charming, likeable. People trust him.”

The chief’s eyes widened.

“How do you know?” he asked.

Riley heard laughter from someone approaching behind her.

“Trust me, she knows what she’s doing.”

She whirled around at the sound of the voice.

Her spirits brightened at what she saw.

Chapter Six

Chief Belt stepped toward the man who was approaching.

He said, “Mister, this area is closed. Couldn’t you see the barrier?”

“It’s OK,” Riley said. “This is Special Agent Bill Jeffreys. He’s with us.”

Riley hurried over to Bill and led him just far enough away so that they wouldn’t be heard by the others.

“What happened?” she said. “Why didn’t you answer my messages?”

Bill smiled sheepishly.

“I was just being an idiot. I...” His voice faded and he looked away.

Riley waited for his reply.

Then he finally said, “When I got your texts, I just didn’t know whether I was ready. I called Meredith for details, but I still didn’t know if I was ready. Hell, I didn’t know if I was ready when I started driving down here. I didn’t know if I was ready until just now when I saw...”

He pointed to the body.

He added, “Now I know. I’m ready to get back to work. Count me in.”

His voice was firm and his expression looked like he really meant it. Riley breathed a huge sigh of relief.

She led Bill back over to the officials clustered around the body in the hole. She introduced him to the chief and the medical examiner.

Jenn already knew Bill and she looked glad to see him, which pleased Riley. The last thing Riley needed was for Jenn to feel marginalized or resentful.

Riley and the others told Bill what little they knew so far. He listened with a look of keen interest.

Finally Bill said to the ME, "I think it's OK to take away the body now. That is, if it's OK with Agent Paige."

"It's fine with me," Riley agreed. She was happy that Bill seemed like his old self now and eager to assert some authority.

As the ME's team began to extract the body from the hole, Bill surveyed the area for a moment.

He asked Riley, "Have you checked out the site of the earlier murder?"

"Not yet," she replied.

"Then we should do that," he said.

Riley said to Chief Belt, "Let's go have a look at your other crime scene."

The chief agreed. "It's a couple of miles into the nature preserve," he added.

They all managed to push past the reporters again without commenting. Riley, Bill, and Jenn got into the FBI SUV, and Chief Belt and the ME took another car. The chief led them away from the beach, along a sandy road into a wooded area. When

the road ended, they parked their cars. Riley and her colleagues followed the two officials on foot along a trail leading through the trees.

The chief kept the group to one side of the trail, pointing to some distinct footprints here in the firmer soil.

“Just your everyday sneakers,” Bill commented.

Riley nodded. She could see those prints going in both directions. But she felt sure they wouldn’t offer much information except for the killer’s shoe size.

However, some interesting marks were interspersed with the footprints. Two wobbly lines were dug into the soil.

“What do you make of these lines?” Riley asked Bill.

“Tracks from a wheelbarrow, coming and going,” Bill said. He glanced back over his shoulder toward the road and added, “My guess is the killer parked about where we’re parked now and brought his tools along this path.”

“That’s what we figured too,” Belt agreed. “And he left again this way.”

Soon they came to a spot where their path intersected a narrower one. In the middle of the smaller path was a long, deep hole. It was about the width of the path itself.

Chief Belt pointed to where the new path emerged from the surrounding trees. “The other victim seems to have come jogging along from that direction,” he said. “The hole was camouflaged, and she fell into it.”

Terzis added, “Her ankle was badly broken, probably from the

fall. So she was helpless when the killer started piling dirt back in on her.”

Riley shuddered again at the thought of that kind of horrible death.

Jenn said, “And all this happened yesterday.”

Terzis nodded and said, “I’m pretty sure the time of death was identical to the murder on the beach – probably around six o’clock in the morning.”

“Before the actual sunrise,” Belt added. “It would have been quite dim. A jogger who came along here after dawn saw how the dirt had been disturbed and called us.”

While Jenn started taking more photos, Riley scanned the area. Her eyes fell on some flattened brush that had been crisscrossed by the wheelbarrow tracks. She could see where the killer had piled up dirt about fifteen feet away from the trail. The trees were fairly thick beside these pathways, so a runner wouldn’t have seen either the killer or the dirt as she’d come running in this direction.

Now the hole had been re-excavated by the police, who had piled the dirt right next to it.

Riley remembered that Meredith had mentioned this victim’s name back at Quantico, but she couldn’t recall it at the moment.

She said to Chief Belt, “I take it you were able to identify the victim.”

“That’s right,” Belt said. “She still had plenty of ID on her, just like Todd Brier did. Her name was Courtney Wallace. She

lived in Sattler, but I didn't know her personally. So I can't tell you anything much about her just yet, except she was young, probably in her early twenties.”

Riley knelt down beside the hole and looked inside. Right away, she could see exactly how the killer had set his trap. At the bottom of the hole was a heavy, loosely woven blanket of erosion cloth, with leaves and debris tangled up in it. It had been spread out over the hole, unnoticeable to an unwary jogger, especially in the dim, pre-dawn light.

She made a mental note to call in a BAU forensics team to go over both of these sites. Maybe they could trace the origin of the erosion cloth.

Meanwhile, Riley was getting just a trace of the same sensation she'd had at the beach, of slipping into the killer's mind. The feeling wasn't nearly as vivid this time. But she could imagine him perched right where she was kneeling now, looking down at his helpless prey.

So what was he doing in those moments before he began to bury her alive?

She reminded herself of her earlier impression – that he was charming and likeable.

At first he probably feigned surprise at finding the young woman at the bottom of this hole. He may have even given the woman the impression that he'd help her get out.

She trusted him, Riley thought. If only for a moment.

Then he'd begun to tease her.

And before long, he began dumping wheelbarrows full of dirt down on her.

She must have screamed when she realized what was happening.

So how did he respond to the sound of her screaming?

Riley sensed that his sadism fully emerged. He paused from his task to throw a single shovelful of dirt in her face – not so much to stop her from screaming, but to torment her.

Riley shivered all over.

She felt relief as that feeling of connection began to slip away.

Now she could get back to looking at the crime scene with a more objective eye.

The shape of the hole seemed odd to her. The end where she was standing was dug in a pointed wedge shape. The other end reflected that same shape, only inverted.

It looked like the killer had gone to a certain amount of trouble about it.

But why? Riley wondered. *What could it mean?*

Just then, she heard Bill's voice call out from somewhere behind her.

"I've found something. You'd all better come over here for a look."

Chapter Seven

Riley whirled around to see what Bill was yelling about. His voice was coming from behind the trees off to one side of the path.

“What is it?” Chief Belt called out.

“What did you find?” Terzis echoed.

“Just come here,” Bill yelled back.

Riley got to her feet and headed in his direction. She could see broken-down brush where he had left the path.

“Are you coming?” Bill called out, starting to sound a little impatient.

Riley could tell by his tone of voice that he meant business.

Followed by Belt and Terzis, she waded through the thicket until they reached the small clearing where Bill was standing. Bill was looking down at the ground.

He'd found something, all right.

Another piece of erosion cloth was stretched over the ground, loosely held in place by small pegs at the corners.

“Good God,” Terzis murmured.

“Not another body,” Belt said.

But Riley knew that it had to be something different. For one thing, the hole was much smaller than the other, and square in shape.

Bill was putting on plastic gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints

on whatever he was about to find. Then he knelt down and gently pulled the erosion cloth away.

All Riley could see was a circular piece of dark, polished wood.

Bill carefully took hold of the wooden circle with both hands and pulled it upward.

Everybody except Bill gasped at what he slowly brought out of the hole.

“An hourglass!” Chief Belt said.

“Biggest one I ever saw,” Terzis added.

And indeed, the object was over two feet tall.

“Are you sure it’s not some kind of trap?” Riley warned.

Bill rose to his feet with the object, keeping it perpendicular, handling it as delicately as he might handle an explosive device. He set it upright on the ground next to the hole.

Riley knelt and examined it closely. The thing didn’t seem to have any wires or springs. But was anything hidden beneath that sand? She tilted the thing to one side and didn’t see anything odd.

“It’s just a big hourglass,” she muttered. “And hidden just like the trap on the trail.”

“Not an hourglass, exactly,” Bill said. “I’m pretty sure it measures a longer period of time than an hour. It’s what’s called a sand timer.”

The object struck Riley as startlingly beautiful. The two globes of glass were exquisitely shaped, connected together by a narrow opening. The round wooden top and bottom pieces were

connected by three wooden rods, carved into decorative patterns. The top was carved into a ripple pattern. The wood was dark and well-polished.

Riley had seen sand timers before – much smaller versions for cooking that counted off three or five or twenty minutes. This one was much, much bigger, over two feet tall.

The bottom globe was partially filled with tan sand.

There was no sand in the upper globe.

Chief Belt asked Bill, “How did you know something was here?”

Bill was crouching beside the sand timer, examining it attentively. He asked, “Did anyone else notice something odd about the shape of the pit on the trail?”

“I did,” Riley said. “The ends of the hole were dug in kind of a wedge-shaped manner.”

Bill nodded.

“It was roughly the shape of an arrow. The arrow pointed to where the path curved away and some of the bushes were broken down. So I just went where it was pointing.”

Chief Belt was still staring at the sand timer with amazement.

“Well, we’re lucky you found it,” he said.

“The killer wanted us to look here,” Riley muttered. “He wanted us to figure this out.”

Riley glanced at Bill, then at Jenn. She could tell they were thinking just what she was thinking.

The sand in the timer had run out.

Somehow, in a way they didn't yet understand, that meant that they weren't lucky at all.

Riley looked at Belt and asked, "Did any of your men find a timer like this at the beach?"

Belt shook his head and said, "No."

Riley felt a grim tingle of intuition.

"Then you didn't look hard enough," she said.

Neither Belt nor Terzis spoke for a moment. They looked as though they couldn't believe their ears.

Then Belt said, "Look, something like this would surely have stood out. I'm sure there wasn't anything like it in the immediate area."

Riley frowned. This thing that had been placed so carefully just had to be important. She felt sure that the cops had somehow overlooked another sand timer.

For that matter, so had she and Bill and Jenn when they'd been on the beach. Where could that one be?

"We've got to go back and look," Riley said.

Bill carried the enormous timer over to the SUV. Jenn opened the back, and she and Bill put the object inside, making sure that it was braced and steadied against any sharp or sudden movement. They covered it with a blanket that was in the SUV.

Riley, Bill, and Jenn got into the SUV and followed the police chief's car back toward the beach.

The number of reporters gathered in the parking area had increased, and they were getting more aggressive. As Riley and

her colleagues made their way through them and past the yellow tape, she wondered how much longer they would be able to ignore their questions.

When they reached the beach, the body was no longer in the hole. The ME's team had already loaded it into their van. The local cops were still combing the area for clues.

Belt called out to his men, who gathered around him.

"Has anybody seen a sand timer around here?" he asked. "It would look like a big hourglass, at least two feet tall."

The cops looked perplexed by the question. They shook their heads and said no.

Riley was starting to feel impatient.

It must be around here somewhere, she thought. She walked to the top of a nearby grassy rise and looked around. But she could see no hourglass, not even disturbed sand that would indicate something freshly buried.

Or was her intuition playing tricks on her? It sometimes happened.

Not this time, she thought.

In her gut, she felt sure of it.

She walked back and stood looking down at the hole. It was very different from the one in the woods. It was shallower, more shapeless. The killer couldn't have formed the dry beach sand into a pointer if he'd tried.

She turned all around and gazed in every direction.

All she saw was sand and the surf.

The tide was low. Of course the killer could have made some kind of wet sand-sculpture arrow, but it would have been seen right away. If it hadn't been destroyed, it would still be visible.

She asked the others, "Have you seen anyone else anywhere near here – aside from the man with the dog who found the body?"

The cops shrugged and looked at each other.

One of them said, "Nobody except Rags Tucker."

Riley's eyes widened.

"Who's he?" she asked.

"Just an eccentric old beachcomber," Chief Belt said. "He lives in a little wigwam over there."

Belt pointed farther along the beach where the shoreline curved away from the area where they stood.

Riley was getting a little angry now.

"Why didn't anybody mention him before?" she snapped.

"There wasn't much point," Belt said. "We talked to him when we first got here. He didn't see anything having to do with the murder. He said he'd been asleep when it happened."

Riley let out a groan of irritation.

"We're going to pay this guy a visit," she said.

Followed by Bill, Jenn, and Chief Belt, she started walking along the sand.

As they walked, Riley said to Belt, "I thought you'd closed off the beach."

"We did," Belt said.

“Then what the hell is anybody still doing here?” Riley asked.

“Well, like I said, Rags sort of lives here,” Belt said. “There didn’t seem to be any point in kicking him out. Besides, he’s got no place else to go.”

After they rounded the curve, Belt led them up across the sand to a grassy rise. The group waded through the soft sand and tall grass to the top of the rise. From there Riley could see a little makeshift wigwam about a hundred yards away.

“That’s ol’ Rags’s house,” Belt said.

As they approached, Riley saw that it was covered with plastic bags and blankets. Here behind the rise, it was safely out of reach whenever the tide was high. The wigwam was surrounded by blankets covered with what looked like a crazy assortment of objects.

Riley said to Belt, “Tell me about this Rags Tucker character. Doesn’t Belle Terre have rules against vagrancy?”

Belt chuckled a little.

He said, “Well, yeah, but Rags isn’t exactly your typical vagrant. He’s colorful, and people like him, visitors especially. And he’s not a suspect, believe me. He’s the most harmless guy in the world.”

Belt pointed to the things out on the blanket.

“He’s got kind of a goofy business going with all that stuff he’s got. He picks up junk off the beach, and people come around to buy stuff, or to exchange stuff they don’t want anymore. Mostly it’s just an excuse for folks to hang around and talk to him.

He does this all summer, for as long as the weather here is comfortable. He manages to put together enough money to rent a cheap little apartment in Sattler for the winter. Then when the weather's good again, he comes back here."

As they got nearer, Riley could see the objects more clearly. It really was a bizarre collection that included driftwood, conch shells, and other natural objects, but also old toasters, broken TVs, old lamps, and other items that visitors had undoubtedly brought for him.

When they got to the edge of the outstretched blankets, Belt called out, "Hey, Rags. I wonder if we could talk to you some more."

A raspy voice answered from inside the wigwam.

"I told you before, I didn't see anybody. Haven't you caught the creep yet? I sure don't like the idea of a killer on my beach. I'd have already told you if I knew anything."

Riley stepped toward the wigwam and called out, "Rags, I need to talk to you."

"Who're you?"

"FBI. I'm wondering if maybe you'd run across a large sand timer. You know, like an hourglass."

There was no reply for a few moments. Then a hand inside the wigwam pulled aside a sheet that covered the opening.

Inside was a scrawny man sitting cross-legged, his big eyes staring at her.

And sitting right in front of him was a huge sand timer.

Chapter Eight

The man in the wigwam just stared up at Riley with wide gray eyes. Riley's attention snapped back and forth from the vagrant to the big sand timer in front of him. She found it hard to decide which was the most startling.

Rags Tucker had long grayish hair and a beard that hung down to his waist. His tattered, loosely fitting clothes suited his name.

Naturally she wondered...

Is this guy a suspect?

She found that hard to believe. His limbs were thin and spindly, and he seemed hardly robust enough to have carried out either one of these arduous murders. He fairly exuded a sense of harmlessness.

Riley also suspected that his scruffy appearance was something of a pose. He didn't smell bad, at least from where she stood, and his clothes looked clean in spite of all their wear and tear.

As for the sand timer, it looked much like the one they'd found back near the path. It was more than two feet tall, with wavy ridges carved on the top and three skillfully carved rods holding the frame together.

It wasn't identical to the other one, though. For one thing, the wood wasn't as dark – more of a reddish brown. Although the carved patterns were similar, they didn't look like exact replicas

of the designs they'd seen on the first sand timer.

But those small variations weren't the most important differences between the two.

The greatest contrast was in the sand that marked passing time. In the timer that Bill had found among the trees, all of the sand was in the bottom globe. But in this timer, most of the sand was still in the top globe.

This sand was in motion, trickling slowly into the globe below. Riley felt sure of one thing – that the killer had meant them to find this timer, as surely as he'd meant them to find the other one.

Tucker finally spoke. "How'd you know I had it?" he asked Riley.

Riley produced her badge.

"I'll ask the questions, if you don't mind," she said in a non-threatening voice. "How did you get it?"

Tucker shrugged.

"It was a gift," he said.

"From whom?" Riley asked.

"From the gods, maybe. It dropped from the sky, the best I can figure. When I first looked outside this morning, I saw it right away, over there on the blankets with my other stuff. I brought it inside and went back to sleep. Then I woke up again, and I've been just sitting here watching it for a while."

He stared hard at the sand timer.

"I've never *watched* time actually pass before," he said. "It's a unique experience. Sort of feels like time is passing slowly and

fast at the same time. And there's a feeling of inevitability about it. You can't turn back time, as they say."

Riley asked Tucker, "Was the sand running like this when you found it, or did you turn it over?"

"I kept it just like it was," Tucker said. "Do you think I'd dare change the flow of time? I don't mess with cosmic matters like that. I'm not that stupid."

No, he's not stupid at all, Riley thought.

She felt that she was beginning to understand Rags Tucker better with each bit of their conversation. This addled and ragged beachcomber persona of his was carefully cultivated for the entertainment of visitors. He'd turned himself into a local attraction here at Belle Terre. And from what Chief Belt had told her about him, Riley knew that he made a modest living at it. He had established himself as a local fixture and gained unspoken permission to live exactly where he wanted to be.

Rags Tucker was here to entertain and to be entertained.

It dawned on Riley that this was a delicate situation.

She needed to get that sand timer away from him. She wanted to do that quickly and without raising a fuss about it.

But would he be willing to give it to her?

Although she knew the laws about search and seizure perfectly well, she wasn't at all sure about how they applied to a vagrant living in a wigwam on public property.

She'd much rather take care of this without getting a warrant. But she had to proceed carefully.

She told Tucker, “We think it may have been left here by whoever committed the two murders.”

Tucker’s eyes widened.

Then Riley said, “We need to take this timer with us. It could be important evidence.”

Tucker shook his head slowly.

He said, “You’re forgetting the law of the beach.”

“What’s that?” Riley said.

“‘Finders keepers.’ Besides, if this really is a gift from the gods, I’d better not part with it. I don’t want to violate the will of the cosmos.”

Riley studied his expression. She could tell that he wasn’t crazy or delusional – although he might sometimes act like it. That was just part of the show.

No, this particular vagrant knew exactly what he was doing and saying.

He’s doing business, Riley thought.

Riley opened her wallet, took out a twenty-dollar bill, and offered it to him.

She said, “Maybe this will help sort things out with the cosmos.”

Tucker grinned ever so slightly.

“I don’t know,” he said. “The universe is getting pretty pricy these days.”

Riley felt like she was getting the hang of the man’s game, and also how she could play along.

She said, “It’s always expanding, huh?”

“Yeah, ever since the Big Bang,” Tucker said. He rubbed his fingers together and added, “And I hear it’s going through a new inflationary phase.”

Riley couldn’t help but admire the man’s shrewdness – and his creativity. She figured she’d better settle a deal with him before the conversation got too deep for her to make any sense out of.

She took another twenty-dollar bill out of her wallet.

Tucker snatched both twenties out of her hand.

“It’s yours,” he said. “Take good care of it. I’ve got a feeling there’s something really powerful about that thing.”

Riley found herself thinking that he was right about that – probably more right than he could know.

With a grin, Rags Tucker added, “I think you can handle it.”

Bill put on his gloves again and approached the timer to pick it up.

Riley told him, “Be careful, keep it as steady as you can. We don’t want to interfere with how fast it’s running.”

As Bill picked up the timer, Riley said to Tucker, “Thanks for your help. We might come back to ask more questions. I hope you’ll be available.”

Tucker shrugged and said, “I’ll be here.”

As they turned to go, Chief Belt asked Riley, “How much time do you think is left before all the sand runs into the bottom?”

Riley remembered that the ME had said both murders had taken place around six o’clock in the morning. Riley looked at her

watch. It was now nearly eleven. She did a little math in her head.

Riley said to Belt, “The sand will run out in about nineteen hours.”

“What happens then?” Belt asked.

“Somebody dies,” Riley said.

Chapter Nine

Riley couldn't get Rags Tucker's words out of her mind.

"There's a feeling of inevitability about it."

She and her colleagues were making their way back along the beach toward the crime scene. Bill was carrying the sand timer, and Jenn and Chief Belt flanked him to help him keep the timer steady. They were trying to avoid affecting the flow of sand in the timer. And of course that falling sand was what Rags had been talking about.

Inevitability.

Even as she shuddered at the thought, she realized that was exactly the effect the killer had in mind.

He wanted them to feel a tightening knot of inevitability about his upcoming murder.

It was his way of psyching them out.

Riley knew that they mustn't let themselves get too rattled, but she worried that it wasn't going to be easy.

As she trudged through the sand, she took out her cell phone and called Brent Meredith.

When he answered, she said, "Sir, we've got a serious situation on her hands."

"What is it?" Meredith asked.

"Our killer is going to strike every twenty-four hours."

"Jesus," Meredith said. "How do you know?"

Riley was on the verge of explaining everything to him, but thought better of it. It would be better if he could actually see both of the timers.

“We’re on our way back to the SUV,” Riley said. “As soon as we’re there, I’ll call you for a video conference.”

Riley ended the call just as they got back to the crime scene. Belt’s cops were still scrounging through the marsh grass searching for clues. The cops’ mouths dropped open at the sight of Bill carrying the enormous timer.

“What the hell’s that?” one of the cops asked.

“Evidence,” Belt said.

It occurred to Riley that the last thing they wanted right now was for reporters to get a look at the timer. If that happened, rumors would really start flying, making the situation worse than it already was. And there would surely be reporters still lurking in the parking area. They already knew that two people had been buried alive. They weren’t going to give up on that story.

She turned to Chief Belt and asked, “Could I borrow your jacket?”

Belt took off his jacket and handed it to her. Riley carefully draped it over the sand timer, covering it completely.

“Come on,” Riley said to Bill and Jenn. “Let’s try to get this to our vehicle without attracting too much attention.”

However, when she and her two colleagues stepped outside the tape barrier, Riley saw that more reporters had arrived. They crowded around Bill, demanding to know what he was carrying.

Riley felt a jolt of alarm as they pressed against Bill, who was trying to keep the sand timer as steady as he could. The jostling alone might be enough to interfere with the sand flow. Worse still, someone might knock the timer out of Bill's hands.

She said to Jenn, "We've got to keep them clear of Bill."

She and Jenn pushed their way into the group, ordering them to back away.

The reporters obeyed surprisingly easily and stood around gawking.

Riley quickly realized...

They probably think this is a bomb.

After all, that possibility had occurred to her and her colleagues back in the woods when Bill had uncovered the first sand timer.

Riley cringed at the thought of the headlines that might soon appear, and the panic that might follow.

She said sharply to the reporters, "It's not an explosive device. It's just evidence. And it's delicate."

She was answered by a renewed chorus of voices asking what it was.

Riley shook her head and turned away from them. Bill had made his way to the SUV, so she and Jenn hurried to catch up with him. They got inside and carefully secured the new sand timer next to the other one, which was strapped in place and covered with a blanket.

The reporters quickly regrouped and surrounded the van,

yelling questions again.

Riley let out a groan of frustration. They'd never get anything done with prying people all around them.

Riley got behind the wheel and slowly began to drive. An especially determined reporter tried to block her way, standing directly in front of the vehicle. She let out a blast of the vehicle's siren, sending the startled guy scurrying off. Then she drove the SUV away, leaving the gaggle of reporters behind.

After driving about half a mile, Riley found a fairly secluded place where she could park the vehicle.

Then she told Jenn and Bill, "First things first. We need to dust the sand timers for fingerprints right away."

Bill nodded and said, "There's a kit in the glove compartment."

As Jenn and Bill started to work, Riley got out her computer tablet and made a video call to Brent Meredith.

To her surprise, Meredith's wasn't the only face that appeared on her screen. There were eight other faces, including a babyish, freckle-faced visage that Riley was anything but happy to see.

It was Special Agent in Charge Carl Walder, Meredith's superior at the BAU.

Riley suppressed a groan of discouragement. She'd been at odds with Carl Walder many times. In fact, he'd suspended and even fired her on several occasions.

But why was he in on this call?

With a barely disguised growl, Meredith said, "Agent Paige,

Chief Walder has been kind enough to join us for this conversation. And he's put together a team to help us on this case."

When Riley saw the annoyed expression on Meredith's face, she understood the situation perfectly.

Carl Walder had been monitoring the case all morning. As soon as he found out that Riley had asked for a videoconference with Meredith, he'd summoned his own group of agents to join in. Right now they were all sitting in their separate offices and cubicles at the BAU with their computers set up for conferencing.

Riley couldn't help but scowl. Poor Brent Meredith must have felt like he'd been ambushed. Riley was sure that Walder was grandstanding, as usual. And by bringing in a team of his own, he was brazenly signaling his lack of confidence in Riley's professionalism.

Fortunately, some of the people Walder had brought in were people she'd worked with and trusted. She saw Sam Flores, a nerdish and brilliant lab technician, and Craig Huang, a promising young field agent she'd helped mentor.

Even so, the last thing she needed right now was a team of people to manage and organize. She knew she'd function best working with just Bill and Jenn.

Looking quite pleased with himself, Carl Walder spoke.

"I hear you've got some information for us, Agent Paige. Encouraging news, I hope."

Riley swallowed her anger. She was sure he already knew

otherwise.

“I’m afraid not, sir,” she said.

She held her tablet so the group could see the sand timers that Bill and Jenn were deftly dusting for prints.

Riley said, “As you can see, Agents Jeffreys and Roston are here working with me. We found a sand timer at each of the two murder scenes. The one that’s empty was hidden near the first body. We found the one that’s still running not far away from where the second victim was buried. We estimate that it’s going to run out at about six o’clock tomorrow morning.”

Riley could hear audible gasps and saw the shock on all the faces on the screen – except for Walder’s.

“What do you think it means?” Walder asked blandly.

Riley managed not to sneer with contempt. Walder was obviously the only person in the group who hadn’t figured it out instantly.

Riley said, “It means, sir, that someone else is going to die when the glass runs out. And whoever it is will be buried alive, just like the first two victims.”

Walder’s eyes widened.

“That can’t happen,” he said. “I order you not to let it happen.”

Riley’s exasperation was rising. As usual, Walder was giving perfectly pointless orders – as if anybody here needed to be told that a third murder had to be prevented.

Walder turned his own computer to display the clock on his office wall.

He said, "It's now one o'clock. We're not going to let the clock run out. And we're not giving the media enough time to cause a panic. They're already moving on this story. I expect you to apprehend the killer before six o'clock tonight. And now I'll leave you to your work."

Carl Walder abruptly disappeared from the screen. Riley could see relief on all the other faces. She also knew that they were thinking exactly what she was thinking. Walder had made just enough of an appearance to throw his weight around and seem to be in charge. Taking any real leadership responsibility wasn't his style.

And what about his six o'clock deadline?

Well, obviously, he wanted the case wrapped up before he went home to dinner. That way he could take full credit for solving it without a lot of trouble for himself.

Anyway, now they could get down to business.

Riley asked, "First of all, are there any questions?"

"What have you got in the way of a profile on the killer?"

Craig Huang asked.

"Not much just yet," Riley said. "I've got a gut-level feeling about him. I suspect that he's personally quite charming, and that people might actually trust him when they first meet him."

Riley turned to Bill and Jenn, who were still dusting the timer and listening to the conversation.

"Do either of you have anything to add?" Riley asked them.

Jenn said, "The killer must be physically robust."

“That’s right,” Bill said. “These killings involved a lot of digging and carrying, and one of the victims was physically assaulted. He might not be especially big, but he’s in pretty good shape.”

Sam Flores, the technician, spoke up.

“I see that Agents Jeffreys and Roston are dusting for prints. Any luck with that yet?”

Bill and Jenn had almost finished dusting the first timer.

“None at all,” Bill said. “It looks like the killer wiped it down carefully before leaving it.”

Riley felt a flash of discouragement. If the killer had taken such care with the first timer, he’d surely done the same with the second. The only prints they’d find on it would be Rags Tucker’s.

Sam said, “Could you give me a better look at the timers?”

Riley moved the tablet all around the timers so Sam could look at them more carefully.

Sam said, “Those are some pretty distinctive markings. Both timers are carved in the same style, but there are some interesting variations. Do you think they might be some kind of code?”

“That’s a good thought,” Riley said. “We’ll take close-ups and send them to you. You can do some research, see if the marks mean anything. But I want you to do something before that, while the rest of us are talking. See if you can locate any hourglass makers in this general area.”

“I’ll do that,” Sam said.

She could hear his fingers clicking on his keyboard.

Riley thought hard and fast, trying to decide how to deal with the others.

She said, “Agent Engel, I want you to get in touch with Parker Belt, the chief of police in Sattler. Get as much information as you can about the victims and their families, also the people who discovered the bodies. Share whatever you find out with the others here.”

All the people on the screen were dutifully taking notes now.

Riley continued, “Agent Whittington, pay a visit to the first victim’s family. Agent Craft, do the same with the second victim’s family. Agent Geraty, see if you can interview the people who found the bodies. Agent Ridge, get in touch with the district ME and see if he’s got any new information about how the victims died.”

She thought for a moment.

Then she said, “Agent Huang, you’re the point man for the team. Stay in touch with everybody and keep track of their progress. Also see what you can do about handling the media. This whole thing is liable to get out of control if we’re not careful.”

Huang asked, “Shouldn’t we close off the whole park to visitors, especially around the time in question?”

“Good idea,” Riley said. “Call Chief Belt and get that underway. Also help him send out a general warning to the community.”

Riley breathed a little easier now that she’d assigned jobs to

everybody.

Meanwhile, Sam Flores had finished his search.

He said, “I’ve found an hourglass maker with a workshop near Colonial Williamsburg. His name is Ellery Kuhl. I’ll email you the address.”

“Good work,” Riley said. “Flores, I also need you to search for any similar murders that have been committed anywhere else recently – live burials, I mean. Now get started, everybody. The clock is running out. Literally.”

She ended the meeting and said to Bill and Jenn, “Stop dusting for prints and take lots of detailed pictures and send them to Sam Flores. I’ll drive us to Colonial Williamsburg.”

As she started to drive, she remembered something else that Rags Tucker had said.

“You can’t turn back time, as they say.”

She glanced at her watch and saw that the meeting had taken about a half hour.

She hoped it hadn’t been a waste of time. It was thirty minutes they weren’t going to get back.

And it could mean the difference between life and death.

Chapter Ten

Riley could feel her anxiety rising as she drove toward Williamsburg. During the hour-long trip, she found herself obsessing about every passing second.

It was still early afternoon on the very first day of this investigation. Although she always worked as fast as she could to stop a killer, the pressure of time had never before been so relentless.

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