

A RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY--BOOK #14

ONCE DORMANT



BLAKE PIERCE

A Riley Paige Mystery

Блейк Пирс

Once Dormant

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2018

Пирс Б.

Once Dormant / Б. Пирс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,
2018 — (A Riley Paige Mystery)

ISBN 978-1-64-029477-6

“A masterpiece of thriller and mystery! The author did a magnificent job developing characters with a psychological side that is so well described that we feel inside their minds, follow their fears and cheer for their success. The plot is very intelligent and will keep you entertained throughout the book. Full of twists, this book will keep you awake until the turn of the last page.” --Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos (re Once Gone) ONCE DORMANT is book #14 in the bestselling Riley Paige mystery series, which begins with the #1 bestseller ONCE GONE (Book #1)—a free download with over 1,000 five star reviews! After lying dormant for 10 years, an elusive serial killer strikes again, leaving few clues—and the only way for FBI Special Agent Riley Paige to catch him in the present is to solve the riddles of the past. Women are turning up dead, and in this dark psychological thriller, Riley Paige realizes she is in a race against time. The murders of the past were too perplexing to be solved back then. Can Riley solve them 10 years cold? And connect the dots to the present-day crimes? When Riley finds her personal life in crisis, playing cat and mouse with a brilliant psychopath may just be too much for her. Especially since there is something that is just not sitting right with this case... An action-packed thriller with heart-pounding suspense, ONCE DORMANT is book #14 in a riveting new series—with a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night. Book #15 in the Riley Paige series will be available soon.

ISBN 978-1-64-029477-6

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Содержание

PROLOGUE	8
CHAPTER ONE	10
CHAPTER TWO	13
CHAPTER THREE	17
CHAPTER FOUR	20
CHAPTER FIVE	24
CHAPTER SIX	27
CHAPTER SEVEN	30
CHAPTER EIGHT	34
CHAPTER NINE	37
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	39

Blake Pierce

Once Dormant. A Riley Paige Mystery—Book 14

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes fifteen books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting); of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising three books (and counting); of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising two books (and counting); of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising three books (and counting); and of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising three 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

Gareth Ogden stood on the wide beach looking out over the Gulf of Mexico. The tide was out and the Gulf was calm—the water flat and the waves low. He saw a few seagulls silhouetted against the darkening sky and heard their tired cries over the sound of the waves.

He took a puff of his cigarette and thought with a bitter smile ...

The gulls sound like they hate this weather too.

He wasn't sure why he'd even bothered to walk down here from his house. He used to enjoy the sounds and smells of the beach in the evening. Maybe it was just his age, but he found it hard to enjoy much of anything in this muggy heat. Summers were getting hotter than they ever used to. Even after dusk like this, the breeze off the water offered no relieving coolness, and the humidity was suffocating.

He finished his cigarette and ground it into the sand with his foot. Then he turned away from the water to walk back across the waterfront drive toward his house, a weather-beaten structure that looked out over the old road and the desolate beach.

As he trudged across the stretch of sand, Gareth thought of all the repairs he'd had to do on the house after the last hurricane, just a few years back. He'd had to rebuild the big front porch and stairs, and replace a lot of siding and roof shingles, but he'd been lucky that there was no serious structural damage. Amos Crites, who owned the houses on either side of Gareth's, had been faced with almost complete rebuilding.

That goddamn storm, he thought, swatting at a mosquito.

Property values had plummeted since then. He wished he could sell the house and get the hell out of Rushville, but nobody would pay enough for it.

Gareth had lived in this town all his life, and he sure didn't feel like it had done him any favors. As far as he was concerned, Rushville had been going downhill for a long time—at least ever since the interstate had passed it by. He could remember how it had been a thriving little summer tourist town before then, but those days were long gone.

Gareth made his way through an opening in the slatted wooden sand fencing and walked onto the beachfront road. As he felt the soles of his shoes absorb heat from the pavement, he looked up at his house. Its first-floor windows were lit up and friendly ...

Almost like somebody lives there.

Although "living" hardly seemed the word for Gareth's own lonely existence. And thoughts of happier days—when his wife, Kay, was still alive and they were raising their daughter, Cathy—only made him feel more depressed.

As he walked along the sidewalk leading up to his house, Gareth glimpsed something through the screen door—a shadow moving around inside.

Who might that be? he wondered.

He wasn't surprised that some visitor had let himself in. The front door was standing wide open and the screen door was unlatched. Gareth's friends were pretty much free to come and go as they liked.

"It's a free country," he liked to tell them. *"Or so goes the rumor."*

As he climbed the long crooked stairs up to his porch, Gareth figured the visitor might be Amos Crites. Maybe Amos had come over from where he lived on the other side of town to check out his properties along the beach. Gareth knew that nobody had rented either house for August, a notoriously hot and sticky month around here.

Yeah, I'll bet that's who it is, Gareth thought as he crossed the porch.

Amos often stopped by like that to bitch and moan about things in general, and Gareth was glad to chime in with grumbling of his own. He supposed maybe he and Amos were a bad influence on each other that way ...

But hey, what are friends for?

Gareth stood outside the doorway, shaking some sand off his sandals.

“Hey, Amos,” he called out. “Grab yourself a beer from the fridge.”

He expected Amos to call back ...

“Already got it.”

But no reply came. Gareth guessed that maybe Amos was back in the kitchen, just now getting a beer. Or maybe he was just crankier than usual. That was fine with Gareth ...

Misery loves company, as they say.

Gareth opened the screen door and walked inside.

“Hey, Amos, what’s up?” he called out.

A flash of movement caught his peripheral vision. He turned and glimpsed a shadowy form silhouetted against the living room lamp.

Whoever it was rushed at Gareth too fast for him to ask any questions.

The figure raised an arm, and Gareth glimpsed a flash of steel. Something unspeakably hard crashed against his forehead, and then an explosion burst through his brain like shattering glass.

Then there was nothing.

CHAPTER ONE

Morning sunlight was glistening on the waves as Samantha Kuehling drove the police car along the waterfront drive.

Sitting next to her in the passenger seat, her partner, Dominic Wolfe, said ...

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Sam didn’t reply.

Neither she nor Dominic yet knew just what “it” really was.

But the truth was, she pretty much believed whatever it was already.

She’d known fourteen-year-old Wyatt Hitt all his life. He could be ornery, just like any boy that age, but he wasn’t a liar. And he’d sounded downright hysterical when he’d called the police station a little while ago. He hadn’t made much sense, but he’d been pretty clear about one thing ...

Something happened to Gareth Ogden.

Something bad.

Beyond that, Sam didn’t know a single thing. And Dominic didn’t either.

As she parked the car in front of Gareth’s house, she saw that Wyatt was sitting at the bottom of the stairs that led up to the porch. Beside him was a cloth bag of undelivered newspapers.

When Sam and Dominic got out of the car and walked over to him, the towheaded kid didn’t even look at them. He just kept staring straight ahead. Wyatt’s face was even paler than usual, and he was shivering, even though it was already getting to be a hot morning.

He’s in shock, Sam realized.

Dominic said to him, “Tell us what happened.”

Wyatt sat upright at the sound of Dominic’s voice and looked back at him with glazed eyes. Then Wyatt stammered in a hoarse, frightened voice made worse by the changes of adolescence.

“He—he’s in there, up in the house. Mr. Ogden, I mean.”

Then he stared off toward the Gulf again.

Sam and Dominic looked at each other.

She could tell by Dominic’s alarmed expression that this was starting to get real for him.

Sam shuddered as she thought ...

I’ve got a feeling it’s about to get awfully real for both of us.

She and Dominic climbed the steps and walked across the porch. When they looked through the screen door, they saw Gareth Ogden.

Dominic staggered backward from the door.

“Jesus Christ!” he yelled.

Ogden was lying on his back on the floor, his eyes and mouth wide open. He had some kind of open, bleeding wound on his forehead.

Then Dominic wheeled back toward the stairs and yelled down at Wyatt ...

“What the hell happened? What did you do?”

Feeling a bit surprised not to share Dominic’s panic, Sam touched his arm and quietly said, “He didn’t do anything, Dom. He’s just a kid. He’s just a paperboy.”

Dominic shook her hand off and stormed back down the stairs. He hauled poor Wyatt to his feet.

“Tell me!” Dominic yelled. “What did you do? Why?”

Sam dashed down the stairs behind Dominic. She grabbed the hysterical cop and forcefully pulled him onto the lawn.

“Leave him alone, Dom,” Sam said. “Let me handle this, OK?”

Dominic’s face looked as pale as Wyatt’s now, and he too was shivering with shock.

He nodded mutely, and Sam walked back over to Wyatt and helped him sit down again.

She crouched in front of him and touched him on the shoulder.

She said, "It's going to be OK, Wyatt. Just take a few slow breaths."

Poor Wyatt couldn't follow her instructions. Instead, he seemed to be hyperventilating and sobbing at the same time.

Wyatt managed to choke out, "I—I came by to deliver his newspaper and I found him in there."

Sam squinted at Wyatt, trying to make sense of this.

"Why did you go all the way up on Mr. Ogden's porch?" she asked. "Couldn't you just throw the paper up there from the yard?"

Wyatt shrugged and said, "He gets—got mad when I do that. It made too much noise, he said, it woke him up. So he told me I had to come all the way up onto the porch—and I had to leave the paper between the screen door and the front door. Otherwise it would blow away, he said. So I always went up there and I was about to open the screen when I saw—"

Wyatt gasped and groaned with shock for a moment, then added ...

"So I called you on my cell phone."

Sam patted him on the shoulder.

"It's going to be OK," she said. "You did the right thing, calling the police. Now you wait right here."

Wyatt looked at his bag. "But these papers—I've still got to deliver them."

Poor kid, Sam thought.

He was obviously terribly confused. On top of that, some kind of misplaced guilt seemed to be kicking in as well. Sam guessed that this was a natural reaction.

"You don't have to do anything," she said. "You're not in trouble. Everything's going to be OK. Now just wait here, like I said."

She got up from the step and looked for Dominic, who was still standing dumbly in the yard with his mouth hanging open.

Sam was starting to feel a little angry.

Doesn't he know he's supposed to be a cop?

She said to him, "Dom, come on. We've got to go up there and have a look at things."

Dom just stood there as if he were deaf and had no idea that she'd spoken.

She spoke more sharply. "Dominic, come with me, damn it."

Dominic nodded dumbly, then followed her up the stairs and across the porch into the house.

Gareth Ogden was lying spread-eagle on the floor, wearing sandals and shorts and a T-shirt. The wound in his forehead looked strangely precise and symmetrical. Sam stooped down to get a better look.

Still standing, Dominic stammered, "D-don't touch anything."

Sam almost growled ...

"What do you think I am, an idiot?"

What kind of cop didn't know better than to be careful around this kind of a crime scene?

But she looked up at Dominic and saw that he was still pale and trembling.

What if he faints? she thought.

She pointed to a nearby armchair and said, "Sit down, Dom."

Dominic mutely did as he was told.

Sam wondered ...

Has he ever seen a dead body before?

Her own experiences were limited to the open-casket funerals of her grandparents. Of course, this was completely different. Even so, Sam felt strangely calm and under control—almost as if she'd been preparing to deal with something like this for a long time.

Dominic obviously wasn't feeling the same way.

She peered closely at the wound in Ogden's forehead. It looked a little bit like that big sinkhole that had collapsed under a country road near Rushville last year—a weird, gaping cavity that didn't belong there.

Weirder still, the skin seemed to be intact—not torn, but stretched into the exact shape of the object that had bashed against it.

It took only a moment for Sam to realize what that object must have been.

She said to Dominic, “Somebody hit him with a hammer.”

Apparently feeling less squeamish now, Dominic got up from the chair and knelt beside Sam and looked closely at the corpse.

“How do you know it was a hammer?” he asked.

Half-realizing it sounded like a sick joke, Sam said ...

“I know my tools.”

In fact, it was true. When she was a little girl, her dad taught her more about tools than most of the boys in town learned in their whole lives. And the indentation of Ogden's wound was the exact shape of the round tip of a perfectly ordinary hammer.

The wound was too big to be made by, say, a ball peen hammer.

Besides, it would have taken a heavier hammer to strike such a deadly single blow.

A claw hammer or a rip hammer, she figured. One or the other.

She said to Dominic, “I wonder how the killer got in here.”

“Oh, I can tell you that,” Dominic said. “Ogden didn't bother to lock his front door much, even when he was gone. He sometimes left it wide open at nights. You know how the folks who live here along the waterfront drive are—dumb and trusting.”

Sam found it sad to hear the words “dumb” and “trusting” in the same sentence like that.

Why shouldn't folks be able to leave their houses unlocked in a town like Rushville?

There'd been no violent crime here for years.

Well, they won't be so trusting now, she thought.

Sam said, “The question is, who did this?”

Dominic shrugged and said, “Whoever it was, Ogden sure as hell looks like he was taken by surprise.”

Studying the wild look on the corpse's face, Sam silently agreed.

Dominic added, “My guess is it was a total stranger, not somebody from around here. I mean, Ogden was mean, but nobody in town hated him *that* much. And nobody around here's got the makings of a killer. It was probably some drifter who's already come and gone. We'll be damned lucky to catch him.”

The thought made Sam's stomach sink.

They couldn't let something like this just happen right here in Rushville.

We just can't.

Besides, she had a strong suspicion that Dominic was wrong.

The killer wasn't just some drifter passing through.

Ogden had been murdered by someone who lived right around here.

For one thing, Sam knew for a fact that this wasn't the first time something had happened right here in Rushville.

But she also knew that now was no time to start speculating.

She said to Dominic, “You call Chief Crane. I'll call the county medical examiner.”

Dominic nodded and took out his cell phone.

Before she reached for hers, Sam wiped some sweat off her brow.

It was already getting to be a hot day ...

And it's going to get a whole lot hotter.

CHAPTER TWO

Riley Paige took a long, deep breath of the cool ocean air.

She was sitting on the high porch of a beach house where she, her boyfriend Blaine, and their three teenaged daughters had already spent a week. Down on the wide sandy beach, more summer vacationers were scattered about and others were out in the water. Riley could see April, Jilly, and Crystal playing in the surf. There was a lifeguard on duty, but even so, Riley was glad she had a good view of the girls.

Blaine was lounging in the wicker recliner next to her.

He said, “So are you glad you accepted my invitation to come out here?”

Riley squeezed his hand and said, “Very glad. I could really get used to this.”

“I certainly hope so,” Blaine said, squeezing her hand back. “When was the last time you took a vacation like this?”

The question took Riley slightly aback.

“I really have no idea,” she said. “Years, I guess.”

“Well, you’ve got some catching up to do,” Blaine said.

Riley smiled and thought ...

Yeah, and another whole week to do it in.

They’d all had a wonderful time so far. A well-to-do friend of Blaine’s had offered him the use of his place at Sandbridge Beach for two weeks in August. When Blaine invited them to go along, Riley had realized that she owed it to April and Jilly to spend more time away from work, having fun with them.

Now she thought ...

I owed it to myself, too.

Maybe, if she got enough practice in this summer, she’d even get used to pampering herself.

When they’d arrived, Riley had been startled at how elegant this place was, an attractive house raised on pilings and with a wonderful view of the beach from this porch. There was even an outdoor pool in the back.

They’d gotten here just in time to celebrate April’s sixteenth birthday. Riley and the girls had spent that day shopping fifteen miles away in Virginia Beach, and they’d visited the aquarium there. Since then they’d barely left this place—and the girls seemed to be anything but bored.

Blaine gently let go of Riley’s hand and got up from his chair.

Riley grumbled, “Hey, where do you think you’re going?”

“To finish getting dinner ready,” Blaine said. Then with an impish grin he added, “Unless you’d rather go out to eat.”

Riley laughed at his little joke. Blaine owned a quality restaurant back in Fredericksburg, and he himself was a master chef. He’d been making wonderful seafood dinners ever since they’d gotten here.

“That’s out of the question,” Riley said. “Now go straight to the kitchen and get to work.”

“OK, boss,” Blaine said.

He gave her a quick kiss and went on inside. Riley watched the girls romping in the surf for a few moments, then started to feel a little restless and considered going inside to help Blaine with dinner.

But of course, he’d only tell her to come back out here and leave the cooking to him.

So instead, Riley picked up the paperback spy novel she’d been reading. She was too mentally fuzzy right now to make much sense of the elaborate plot, but she was enjoying reading it anyway.

After a little while she felt her whole body twitch, and she realized that she’d dropped the book at her side. She’d fallen asleep for a few minutes—or had it been longer?

Not that it really mattered.

But the afternoon light was waning, and the waves were curling a bit higher. The water looked a little more threatening now that the relentless tide was coming in.

Even with the lifeguard still on duty, Riley felt uneasy. She was about ready to stand up and wave and call out to the girls to tell them it was time to get out of the water, but they seemed to have already come to the same conclusion on their own. They were up on the beach building a sandcastle.

Riley breathed a little easier at their good judgment. At times like now, when the ocean took on a more ominous hue, it occurred to Riley that it wasn't really a place where humans could ever quite belong. Some denizens of the deep were capable of terrible violence—at least as brutal and cruel as the human monsters she hunted and fought as a BAU investigator.

Riley shuddered as she remembered how she'd sometimes had to protect her family against those human monsters. They had been formidable enough. She knew better than to imagine she could ever contend with the monsters of the deep.

Riley's last case had been a full month ago—a string of violent knife murders of rich and powerful men, perpetrated in posh and elegant homes down in Georgia. Since then her professional life had been unusually quiet—and somewhat boring, really.

She'd been updating records, attending meetings, and giving advice to other agents about their cases. But she'd enjoyed giving a couple of lectures to students at the FBI Academy. As a seasoned and even rather celebrated investigator, Riley was a popular lecturer, at least when she was available.

Seeing those young, aspiring faces in the classroom reminded her of her own early idealism, back when she was a trainee in the Academy. Then, she'd been hopeful about the prospect of ridding the world of evildoers. She was a lot less hopeful now, but she was still doing her best.

What else can I do? she asked herself.

It was the only work she knew, and she knew she was very good at her job.

She heard Blaine's voice calling out ...

"Riley, dinner is ready. Get the kids."

Riley stood up and waved, shouting "Dinner!" at the top of her lungs.

The girls turned away from their sandcastle, which had become quite elaborate, and they dashed toward the house. They ran underneath the porch where Riley was sitting and to the back of the house, where they could take a quick shower by the swimming pool.

Before she went inside herself, Riley stood by the railing and saw that the girls' sandcastle was already getting nibbled away by the rising tide. Riley couldn't help but feel a tiny bit of sadness about that, but she reminded herself that was normal for castles made of sand.

She'd hardly spent any time at the beach when she was younger. She just hadn't had that kind of a childhood. But from watching the girls playing during the last few days, she knew that part of the fun of building sandcastles was knowing they'd get washed away.

A healthy life lesson, I guess.

She stood watching the sandcastle vanishing into the water for a few moments. When she heard the three girls galloping up the stairs in back, she walked along the porch around the house to meet them.

One was Blaine's sixteen-year-old daughter, Crystal, who was April's best friend. Another was Riley's newly adopted fourteen-year-old daughter, Jilly.

As the three giggling girls started making a dash to their bedroom to change out of their bathing suits for dinner, Riley noticed a small cut on Jilly's thigh.

She gently took Jilly by the arm and said, "How did this happen?"

Jilly glanced at the cut and said, "I dunno. Just got clumsy, I guess. Bumped it into a thorn or something else kind of sharp."

Riley stooped to examine the cut. It wasn't at all bad, and it was already beginning to scab over. Still, it struck Riley as odd somehow. She remembered Jilly having a similar cut on her forearm

the day they'd come out here. Jilly had said that April's cat, Marbles, had scratched her. April had denied it.

Jilly drew back from her—a little defensively, Riley thought.

"It's nothing, Mom, OK?"

Riley said, "There's a first aid kit in the bathroom. Put some disinfectant on it before you come to dinner."

"OK, I'll do that," Jilly said.

Riley watched as Jilly ran after April and Crystal to the bedroom.

Nothing to worry about, Riley told herself.

But it was hard not to worry. Jilly had been living with them only since January. When Riley had been working on a case in Arizona, she'd rescued Jilly from desperate circumstances. After some legal and personal struggles, Riley had finally been able to adopt Jilly just a month ago, and Jilly seemed happy with her new family.

And besides ...

It's just a little cut—nothing to worry about.

Riley went to the kitchen to help Blaine set the table and put dinner on. The girls soon joined them, and they all sat down to dinner—delicious fried flounder filets served with tartar sauce. Everybody was happy and laughing. By the time Blaine served cheesecake for dessert, a warm, pleasant feeling was coming over Riley.

We're like a family, she thought.

Or maybe that wasn't quite right. Maybe, just maybe ...

We really are a family.

It had been a long time since Riley had felt like that.

As she finished her dessert, she thought again ...

I could really get used to this.

*

After supper, the girls went back to their bedroom to play games before going to sleep. Riley joined Blaine on the porch, where they sipped glasses of wine as they watched night setting in. The two of them were quiet for a long time.

Riley basked in that quietness, and she sensed that Blaine did too.

She couldn't remember having shared many easy, comfortable, silent moments like this with her ex-husband, Ryan. They'd pretty much always either been talking or deliberately not talking. And when they hadn't been talking, they'd simply inhabited their own separate worlds.

But Blaine felt very much a part of Riley's world right now ...

And a beautiful world it is.

The moon was bright, and as the night grew darker, stars were appearing in huge clusters—almost unbelievably bright out here away from the lights of the city. The dark waves of the Gulf reflected the light of the moon and the stars. Far away, the horizon grew blurry and finally disappeared so that the sea and the sky seemed to blend seamlessly together.

Riley shut her eyes and listened for a moment to the sound of the surf.

There were no other noises at all—no voices, no TV, no city traffic.

Riley sighed a long, deep, happy sigh.

As if answering her sigh, Blaine said ...

"Riley, I've been wondering ..."

He paused. Riley opened her eyes and looked over at him, feeling just a twinge of apprehension. Then Blaine continued ...

"Do you feel like we've known each other for a long time, or just a short time?"

Riley smiled. It was an interesting question. They'd known each other for about a year now, and they'd declared themselves exclusive about three months ago. During all that time they'd become very comfortable together.

They and their families had also been through moments of harrowing danger, and Blaine had shown amazing resourcefulness and courage.

Through it all, Riley had come to care about him, trust him, and admire him.

"It's hard to say," she said. "Both, I guess. It seems like a long time because of how close we've gotten. It seems like a short time because ... well, because I'm sometimes so amazed at how fast we've gotten so close."

Another silence fell—a silence that told Riley that Blaine felt exactly the same way.

Finally Blaine said ...

"What do you think ... should happen next?"

Riley looked into his eyes. His gaze was earnest and inquisitive.

Riley smiled and said the first thing that popped into her head. "Why, Blaine Hildreth—are you proposing to me?"

Blaine smiled and said, "Come on inside. I've got something to show you."

CHAPTER THREE

Riley felt a bit breathless now. A whole world of future possibilities seemed to be opening up in front of her, and she didn't have any idea how to think about them.

She didn't know what to say, so she just picked up her glass of wine and followed Blaine off the porch into the dining room.

Blaine went to a cabinet and took out a large roll of paper. When they'd arrived, Riley had noticed him unpacking the roll from the car along with beach stuff, but she hadn't bothered to ask him what it was.

He unrolled the sheet on the dining room table, putting cups on the corners to hold it down. It looked like some kind of elaborate ground plan.

"What is this?" Riley asked.

"Don't you recognize it?" Blaine said. "It's my house."

Riley looked at the drawings more carefully, feeling slightly puzzled.

She said, "Um ... it looks awfully big to be your house."

Blaine chuckled and said, "That's because a whole wing of it hasn't been built yet."

Riley felt positively dizzy as Blaine began to explain the drawings. He showed how the new wing would include bedrooms for April and Jilly. And of course there would be an entire apartment for Gabriela, Riley's live-in housekeeper, who could work for them all once everything was built. The new design even included a small office for Riley. She hadn't had a home office since Jilly had moved in and they'd needed it for a bedroom.

Riley was both overwhelmed and amused.

When he finished explaining things, she said ...

"So—is this your way of asking me to marry you?"

Blaine stammered, "I—I guess it is. I realize it's not very romantic. No ring, no kneeling."

Riley laughed and said, "Blaine, if you kneel, I swear to God I'll slap you silly."

Blaine stared at her with surprise.

But Riley almost meant it. She was having a flashback to Ryan proposing to her so many years ago when they'd been young and poor—Ryan a struggling lawyer and Riley an FBI intern. Ryan had gone through the whole ritual, kneeling and offering her a ring that he really couldn't afford.

It had seemed plenty romantic back then.

But things had turned out so badly for them, the memory seemed sour to Riley now.

Blaine's much less traditional proposal seemed perfect by comparison.

Blaine put his arm around Riley's shoulders and kissed her on the neck.

"You know, marriage would have practical advantages," he said. "We wouldn't have to sleep in separate bedrooms when the kids were around."

Riley felt a tingle of desire at his kiss and his suggestion.

Yes, that would be an advantage, she thought.

Intimate moments had been scarce. The two of them had relegated themselves to separate bedrooms even during this lovely vacation.

Riley sighed deeply and said, "It's a lot to think about, Blaine. A lot for both of us to think about."

Blaine nodded. "I know. That's why I don't expect you to jump up and down with joy yelling 'yes, yes, yes' at the top of your lungs. I just want you to know ... it's been on my mind, and I hope it's been on your mind too."

Riley smiled and admitted, "Yes, it has been on my mind."

They looked into each other's eyes for a few moments. Again, Riley found herself enjoying the quietness between them. But of course, she knew they couldn't leave all those questions milling through both their minds unanswered.

Finally Riley said, "Let's go back outside."

They refilled their glasses and went out onto the porch and sat down again. The night was getting lovelier by the minute.

Blaine reached over and took Riley's hand. "I know it's a big decision. We've got a lot to think over. For one thing, we've both been married before. And ... well, we're not getting any younger."

Riley silently thought ...

All the more reason to make a commitment.

Blaine continued, "Maybe we should start by listing all the reasons why this might not be a good idea."

Riley laughed and said, "Oh, Blaine—do we have to?"

But she knew perfectly well he was right.

And I might as well be the one to start, she decided.

She took a long, slow breath and said, "To begin with, we've got more than each other to think about. We're already both parents, with three teenagers between us. If we get married we'll also be stepparents—me to your girl, you to my two girls. That's quite a commitment right there."

"I know," Blaine said. "But I love the idea of being a father to April and Jilly."

Riley's throat tightened with emotion at the sincerity in his voice.

"I feel the same way about Crystal," she said. Then with a chuckle she added, "My girls have already got a cat and a dog. I hope that's OK."

Blaine said, "That's fine. I won't even ask for a pet deposit."

Their laughter rang musically through the night air.

Then Riley said, "OK, it's your turn."

Blaine sighed deeply and said, "Well, we've both got exes."

Echoing his sigh, Riley said, "That we do."

She shuddered as she remembered her only encounter with Blaine's ex-wife, Phoebe. The woman had been physically attacking poor Crystal in a drunken rage until Riley pulled her off.

Blaine had told Riley that his marriage to Phoebe had been a mistake of his youth, before he'd had any idea that she was bipolar and a danger to herself and others.

Seeming to guess Riley's thoughts, Blaine said ...

"I never hear from Phoebe anymore. She's living with her sister, Drew. I do communicate with Drew from time to time. She says Phoebe is in recovery and doing better, but she doesn't give any thought to Crystal and me anymore. I'm sure she's out of our lives for good."

Riley swallowed hard and said ...

"I wish I could say the same for Ryan."

Blaine squeezed Riley's hand and said, "Well, he is April's father. He's going to want to keep being part of your lives. Jilly's too. I can understand that."

"You're being too fair to him," Riley said.

"Really? Why?"

Riley thought ...

How can I begin to explain?

Ryan's one attempt to reconcile and move back in with her had ended disastrously—especially for Jilly and April, who learned the hard way they couldn't rely on him to be any kind of a father.

Meanwhile, Riley had no idea how many girlfriends had come and gone in Ryan's life.

She took a sip of her wine and said, "I don't think we'll see much of Ryan. And I think that's just as well."

Riley and Blaine fell silent for a few moments. As they stared out into the night, Riley's worries about Phoebe and Ryan slipped out of her mind, and again she basked in the wonderful warmth and comfort of Blaine's simple companionship.

The quiet was broken by the sounds of footsteps and chattering and giggling as the girls came running out of their room. Then it sounded like they were doing something in the kitchen—getting a late-night snack, Riley guessed.

Meanwhile, Riley and Blaine started talking quietly about different issues—how their very different careers might or might not mesh, how Riley would have to sell the townhouse she'd bought just a year ago, how they would manage their finances, and similar things.

As they talked, Riley found herself thinking ...

We started off trying to list reasons why getting married isn't a good idea.

Instead, it seemed like a better and better idea with each passing second.

And the really beautiful thing was—neither of them had to say so aloud.

I might as well have said yes, she thought.

She certainly felt as though they were seriously engaged to be married.

And she really liked that feeling.

Their conversation was broken when April came rushing out onto the porch with Riley's cell phone in hand.

The phone was buzzing.

Handing the phone to Riley, April said ...

“Hey, Mom—you left your phone in the kitchen. You've got a call.”

Riley stifled a sigh. She couldn't imagine that the call was from anyone she'd want to hear from right now. Sure enough, she saw that the caller was her boss, Special Agent Brent Meredith.

Her spirits faded as she realized ...

He wants me back at work.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Riley answered the call, she heard Meredith's familiar gruff voice.

"How's your vacation going, Agent Paige?"

Riley managed to keep from saying ...

"It was going fine until just now."

Instead she replied, "It's lovely. Thanks."

She got up from the chair and wandered along the porch a little ways.

Meredith let out a hesitant growl, then said ...

"Listen, we've been getting some peculiar phone calls from a female police officer in Mississippi—a little beachside town called Rushville. She's working on a murder case. A local man got his head bashed in with a hammer and ..."

Meredith paused again, then said ...

"She's got some idea that they're dealing with a serial killer."

"Why?" Riley asked.

"Because something similar happened in Rushville—some ten years ago."

Riley's squinted with surprise.

She said, "That's kind of a long time between murders."

"Yeah, I know," Meredith said. "I talked to her chief, and he said there was nothing to it. He said she's just some bored small-town cop looking for excitement. The thing is, though, she keeps calling and she doesn't really sound like a crazy person so maybe ..."

Again Meredith fell silent. Riley looked inside the house and saw that Blaine was helping the girls get something to eat in the kitchen. They all looked so happy. Riley's heart sank at the thought of having to cut things short.

Then Meredith said, "Look, I guess I was just thinking, if you're tired of vacationing and feeling homesick for work, maybe you could go down to Mississippi and—"

Riley was startled to hear her own voice interrupt him sharply.

"No," she said.

Another silence fell, and Riley's heart jumped up into her throat.

Oh, my God, she thought.

I just said no to Brent Meredith.

She couldn't remember ever having done that before—and for very good reason. Meredith was known to have a sharp dislike for that word, especially when there was a job to do.

Riley braced herself for a fierce dressing-down. Instead, she heard a gravelly sigh.

Meredith said, "Yeah, I should have figured. It's probably nothing anyway. I'm sorry I bothered you. Keep on enjoying your vacation."

Meredith ended the call, and Riley stood on the porch looking at the phone.

Meredith's words rattled through her head ...

"I'm sorry I bothered you."

That didn't sound like the chief at all.

Apologies of any sort just weren't his style.

So what was he really thinking?

Riley had a feeling that Meredith didn't believe what he'd just said ...

"It's probably nothing anyway."

Riley suspected that something about the female cop's story had piqued Meredith's interest, and he more than half believed there really was a serial killer down in Mississippi. But because he didn't have any tangible evidence to go on, he didn't feel as though he could just haul off and order Riley to take the case.

As Riley kept staring at the phone she found herself thinking ...

Should I maybe call him back?

Should I go to Mississippi and check this out, at least?

Her thoughts were interrupted by April's voice.

"So what's going on? Is vacation over?"

Riley looked and saw that her daughter was standing nearby on the porch, looking at her with a sour expression.

"Why do you think that?" Riley asked.

April sighed and said, "Come on, Mom. I saw who the call was from. You've got to run off on another case, don't you?"

Riley looked into the kitchen and saw that Blaine and the other two girls were still putting snacks together. But Jilly was eyeing Riley uneasily.

Riley suddenly wondered ...

What the hell was I just thinking?

She smiled at April and said ...

"No, I don't have to go anywhere. As a matter of fact ..."

Then smiling more broadly she added ...

"I said no."

April's eyes widened. Then she dashed back into the kitchen shouting ...

"Hey, guys! Mom said no to a case!"

The other two girls started yelling "Yay!" and "Way to go!" while Blaine gazed at Riley happily.

Then some lighthearted bickering started as Jilly said to her sister ...

"I told you. I told you she'd say no."

April retorted, "No, you didn't. You were even more worried than I was."

"Was not," Jilly said. "You owe me ten dollars."

"We never made a bet about it!"

"Did too!"

The two girls punched each other playfully, giggling and laughing as they argued.

Riley laughed as well and said, "OK, kids. Break it up. No arguing. Don't spoil a perfect vacation. Let's all have something to eat."

She joined the chattering, laughing group for an evening snack.

As they ate, she and Blaine kept looking at each other lovingly.

They really were a couple with three teenaged children to raise.

Riley wondered ...

When was the last time I had a night this wonderful?

*

Riley was barefoot, walking on a stretch of beach as the morning light gleamed on the waves. The gulls were calling and the breeze was cool and gentle.

It's going to be a beautiful day, she thought.

But even so, something seemed deeply wrong.

It took her a moment to realize ...

I'm alone.

She looked up and down the beach and saw no one as far as she could see.

Where are they? she wondered.

Where were April and Jilly and Crystal?

And where was Blaine?

A strange dread started to rise up in her, and also a terrifying thought ...

Maybe I dreamed the whole thing.
Yes, maybe last night had never happened.
None of it.
Those loving moments with Blaine as they planned their future together.
The laughter of her two daughters—and also Crystal, who was about to become her third daughter.
Her warm, rich feeling of belonging—a feeling she'd spent her whole life seeking and craving.
All just a dream.
And now she was alone—as alone as she'd ever been in her life.
Just then she heard laughing and chattering behind her.
She spun around and saw them ...
Blaine, Crystal, April, and Jilly were all running around throwing a beach ball to one another.
Riley breathed a deep sigh of relief.
Of course it was real, she thought.
Of course I didn't just imagine it.
Riley laughed with joy and broke into a run to join them.
But then something hard and invisible stopped her dead in her tracks.
It was some kind of a barrier that separated her from the people she loved most.
Riley walked along the barrier, running her hands along it, thinking ...
Maybe there's a way around it.
Then she heard a familiar rasp of laughter.
"Give it up, girl," a voice said. "That life's not for you."
Riley turned around and saw someone standing just a few feet away from her.
It was a man in the full-dress uniform of a Marine colonel. He was tall and gangly, his face worn and wrinkled from years of anger and alcohol.
He was the last human being in the world Riley wanted to see.
"Daddy," she murmured with despair.
He chuckled grimly and said, "Hey, you don't have to sound so goddamn sad about it. I thought you'd be glad to be reunited with your own flesh and blood."
"You're dead," Riley said.
Daddy shrugged and said, "Well, as you already know, that doesn't stop me from checking in from time to time."
Riley dimly realized that this was the truth.
This wasn't the first time she'd seen her father since his death last year.
And this wasn't the first time she'd been puzzled by his presence. Just how she could be talking to a dead man made no real sense to her.
But she did know one thing for sure.
She wanted nothing to do with him.
She wanted to be among people who didn't make her hate herself.
She turned and started to walk toward Blaine and the girls, who were still playing with the beach ball.
Again she was stopped by that invisible barrier.
Her father laughed. "How many times have I got to tell you? You've got no business with them."
Riley's whole body shook—whether with rage or heartbreak, she wasn't sure.
She turned toward her father and yelled ...
"Leave me alone!"
"Are you sure?" he said. "I'm all you've got. I'm all you are."
Riley snarled, "I'm nothing like you. I know what it means to love and be loved."
Her father shook his head and shuffled his feet in the sand.

"It's not that I don't sympathize," he said. "It's a damn crazy useless life you've got—seeking justice for people who're already dead, exactly the people who don't need justice anymore. Just like it was for me in 'Nam, a stupid war there was no way to win. But you've got no choice, and it's time to make peace with it. You're a hunter, like me. I raised you that way. We don't know anything else—neither one of us."

Riley locked eyes with him, testing her will against his.

Sometimes she could best him, making him blink.

But now wasn't one of those times.

She blinked and looked away.

Her father sneered at her and said, "Hell, if you want to be alone, that's fine with me. I'm not exactly enjoying your company either."

He turned and walked away down the beach.

Riley turned around, and this time she saw them all walking away—April and Jilly hand in hand, Blaine and Crystal heading their own separate way.

As they started to disappear in the morning missed, Riley pounded on the barrier and tried to shout ...

"Come back! Please come back! I love you all!"

Her lips moved but made no sound at all.

*

Riley eyes snapped open and she found herself lying in bed.

A dream, she thought. I should have known it was a dream.

Her father sometimes came to her in dreams.

How else could he visit her, being dead?

It took her another moment to realize that she was crying.

The overwhelming loneliness, the isolation from the people she loved most, the words of warning from her father ...

"You're a hunter, like me."

Small wonder she'd woken up in such distress.

She reached for a tissue and managed to calm her sobbing. But even then, that lonely feeling wouldn't go away. She reminded herself that the kids were sleeping in another room, and Blaine was in another.

But it seemed hard to believe somehow.

Alone in the dark, she felt as though any other people were far away, on the other side of the world.

She thought about getting up and tiptoeing down the hall and joining Blaine in his room, but ...

The kids.

They were staying in separate bedrooms because of the kids.

She tugged the pillow around her head and tried to go to sleep again, but she couldn't stop thinking ...

A hammer.

Someone in Mississippi got killed with a hammer.

She told herself it wasn't her case, and she'd said no to Brent Meredith.

But even as she finally drifted back to sleep, those thoughts wouldn't go away ...

There's a killer out there.

There's a case to be solved.

CHAPTER FIVE

When she walked into the Rushville police station first thing in the morning, Samantha had a feeling she was going to be in trouble. Yesterday she'd made a few phone calls that perhaps she shouldn't have made.

Maybe I should learn to mind my own business, she thought.

But somehow, minding her own business didn't come easily to her.

She was always trying to fix things—sometimes things that couldn't be fixed, or things that other people didn't want to have fixed.

As usual when she showed up for work, Sam saw no other cops around, just the chief's secretary, Mary Ruckle.

Her fellow officers teased her a lot for that ...

"Good old reliable Sam," they'd say. *"Always the first to get here, the last to get out."*

Somehow, they never seemed to mean that in a nice way. But she always reminded herself that it was natural for "good old reliable Sam" to get picked on. She was the youngest and newest cop on the Rushville force. It didn't help any that she was also the only female on the force.

For a moment Mary Ruckle didn't seem to notice Sam's arrival. She was busily doing her nails—her usual occupation during most of a workday. Sam couldn't understand the appeal of doing one's nails. She always kept hers plain and clipped short, which was maybe one of the many reasons people thought of her as, well ...

Unladylike.

Not that Mary Ruckle was what Sam would consider attractive. Her face was all tight and mean, as if it were all pinched together by a clothespin on the bridge of her nose. Still, Mary was married with three children, and few people in Rushville foresaw that kind of life for Sam.

Whether Sam actually wanted that kind of life, she didn't really know. She tried not to think too much about the future. Maybe that was why she focused so hard on every bit of whatever came in front of her on any given day. She couldn't actually imagine a future for herself, at least not among the choices that seemed to be available.

Mary puffed on her nails and looked up at Sam and said ...

"Chief Crane wants to talk to you."

Sam nodded with a sigh.

Just like I expected, she thought.

She walked on into the chief's office and found Chief Carter Crane playing Tetris on his computer.

"Just a minute," he grumbled upon hearing Sam walk into the room.

Probably distracted by Sam's arrival, he quickly lost the game he was playing.

"Damn," he said, staring at the screen.

Sam braced herself. He was probably already pissed off with her. Blowing a game of Tetris wasn't going to improve his mood.

The Chief turned around in his swivel chair and said ...

"Kuehling, sit."

Sam obediently sat down in front of his desk.

Chief Crane steepled his fingertips together and stared at her for a moment, trying as usual to look like the big shot he imagined himself to be. And as usual, Sam wasn't impressed.

Crane was about thirty, and he was blandly pleasant-looking in a way that Sam thought would better suit an insurance man. Instead, he had risen to the post of police chief due to the power vacuum that Chief Jason Swihart had left when he went suddenly away two years ago.

Swihart had been a good chief and everybody had liked him, including Sam. Swihart been offered a great job with a security company way over in Silicon Valley, and he'd understandably moved on to greener pastures.

So now Sam and the other cops were answerable to Chief Carter Crane. As far as Sam was concerned, he was a mediocrity in a department full of mediocrities. Sam would never admit it aloud, but she felt sure she had better brains than Crane and all the other local cops put together.

It'd be nice to have a chance to prove it, she thought.

Finally Crane said, "I got an interesting phone call last night—from a certain Special Agent Brent Meredith in Quantico. You'd never believe what he told me. Oh, but then again, maybe you would."

Sam groaned with annoyance and said, "Come on, Chief. Let's get right to the point. I called the FBI late last afternoon. I talked to several people before I finally got connected with Meredith. I thought somebody ought to call the FBI. They should be down here helping us out."

Crane smirked and said, "Don't tell me. It's because you still think Gareth Ogden's murder the night before last was the work of a serial killer who lives right here in Rushville."

Sam rolled her eyes.

"Do I need to explain it all over again?" she said. "The whole Bonnett family got killed here one night ten years ago. Somebody bashed in their heads with a hammer. The case was never solved."

Crane nodded and said, "And you think the same killer has come out of the woodwork ten years later."

Sam shrugged and said, "There's pretty obviously some connection. The MO is identical."

Crane suddenly raised his voice a little.

"There's no connection. We went through all this yesterday. The MO is just a coincidence. The best we can tell, Gareth Ogden was killed by some drifter passing through town. We're following every lead we can. But unless he does the same thing somewhere else, we're liable to never catch him."

Sam felt a surge of impatience.

She said, "If he was just a drifter, why wasn't there any sign of a robbery?"

Crane slapped his desk with the palm of his hand.

"Damn it, you don't give up on any of your notions, do you? We don't know that there *wasn't* a robbery. Ogden was dumb enough to leave his front door open. Maybe he was also dumb enough to leave a wad of money lying on his coffee table. The killer saw it and decided to help himself to it, bashing in Ogden's head in the process."

Cradling his fingertips together again, Crane added ...

"Now doesn't that sound more plausible than some psychopath who's spent ten long years ... doing what, exactly? Hibernating, maybe?"

Sam took a long, deep breath.

Don't get started with him again, she told herself.

There was no point in explaining all over again just why Crane's theory bugged her. For one thing, what about the hammer? She herself had noticed that Ogden's hammers were all still neatly stowed in his tool chest. So did the killer lug around a hammer with him as he drifted from town to town?

It was possible, sure.

It also struck her as a little bit ridiculous.

Crane growled sullenly and added, "I told that Meredith guy that you were bored and overly imaginative and to forget all about it. But frankly, the whole conversation was embarrassing. I don't like it when people go over my head. You had no business making those phone calls. Asking for help from the FBI is my job, not yours."

Sam was grinding her teeth, struggling to keep her thoughts to herself.

She managed to say in a quiet voice ...

“Yes, Chief.”

Crane breathed what sounded like a sigh of relief.

“I’m going to let this slide and not take any disciplinary action this time around,” he said. “The truth is, I’d be much happier if none of the guys found out any of this happened. Have you told anybody else here about your shenanigans?”

“No, Chief.”

“Then keep it that way,” Crane said.

Crane turned and started a new game of Tetris as Sam left his office. She went to her desk and sat down and brooded silently.

If I can’t talk to somebody about this, I’m liable to explode, she thought.

But she’d just promised not to bring it up with the other cops.

So who did that leave?

She could think of exactly one person ... the one who was the reason she was here, trying to do this job ...

My dad.

He’d been an active duty cop here when the Bonnett family had been murdered.

The fact that the case wasn’t solved had haunted him for years.

Maybe Dad could tell me something, she thought.

Maybe he’d have some ideas.

But Sam’s heart sank as she realized that wouldn’t be such a good idea. Her father was in a local nursing home and was suffering from bouts of dementia. He had his good days and his bad days, but bringing up a case from his past would almost certainly upset and confuse him. Sam didn’t want to do that.

Right now she had nothing much to do until her partner, Dominic, showed up for their morning beat. She hoped he’d get here soon, so they could make a round of the area before the heat got too oppressive. Today was expected to break some records.

Meanwhile, there was no point in worrying about things she couldn’t do anything about—not even the possibility that a serial killer might be right here in Rushville, getting ready to strike again.

Try not to think about it, she told herself.

Then she scoffed and murmured aloud ...

“Like *that’s* going to happen.”

CHAPTER SIX

Riley's cell phone buzzed while Blaine was driving them all back to Fredericksburg. She was surprised and unsettled to see who the call was from.

Is this some kind of emergency? she wondered.

Gabriela never called her just to chat, and she had made a point of not calling at all during their two weeks at the beach. She'd only sent an occasional text to let Riley know that everything was all right at home.

Riley's concern grew when she took the call and heard a note of alarm in Gabriela's voice ...

"*Señora* Riley—when will you be home?"

"In about half an hour," Riley said. "Why?"

She heard Gabriela inhale sharply, then say ...

"*He's* here."

"Who's here?" Riley asked.

When Gabriela didn't answer immediately, Riley understood ...

"Oh my God," she said. "Ryan's there?"

"*Sí*," Gabriela said.

"What does he want?" Riley asked.

"He does not say. But he says it is something important. He is waiting for you."

Riley almost asked Gabriela to put Ryan on the phone. But then it occurred to her—whatever Ryan wanted was probably nothing she'd want to discuss on the phone right now. Not with everybody else right there in the car.

Instead Riley said, "Tell him I'll be home soon."

"I will," Gabriela said.

They ended the call and Riley sat staring out the SUV window.

After a moment Blaine said, "Um ... did I hear you say something about ...?"

Riley nodded.

Sitting behind them listening to music, the girls hadn't been listening until just now.

"What?" April asked. "What's going on?"

Riley sighed and said, "It's your father. He's at home waiting for us."

Both April and Jilly gasped aloud.

Then Jilly said, "Couldn't you tell Gabriela to just make him go away?"

Riley was tempted to say she'd really like to, but it wouldn't be fair to unload that task on Gabriela.

Instead she said ...

"You know I can't do that."

April and Jilly both moaned with dismay.

Riley could well understand how her two daughters felt. Ryan's last unannounced visit to their house had been unpleasant for everybody—Ryan included. His attempt to charm his way back into the girls' lives had backfired. April had been cool toward him, and Jilly had been downright rude.

Riley hadn't been able to blame either one of them.

One too many times, Ryan had built up their hopes that he could still act like a father. He'd dashed those hopes yet again, and the girls had wanted nothing to do with him.

What does he want now? Riley wondered, sighing again.

Whatever it was, she hoped it wasn't going to sour everybody's good feelings about the vacation they'd just had. It had been a lovely two weeks, despite Riley's dream about her father. Since then she had done her best to put Agent Meredith's call out of her mind.

But now the news about Ryan seemed to trigger her dark thoughts again.

*A hammer, she thought.
Someone was killed with a hammer.*

She reminded herself sternly that she'd done the right thing by saying no to Chief Meredith. Besides, he hadn't called her again about it, which surely meant that he wasn't very concerned about it after all.

*It was probably nothing, she thought.
Just a case for the locals to take care of.*

*

Everybody's anxiety mounted as Blaine pulled his SUV up in front of Riley's townhouse. An expensive Audi was parked out in front. It was Ryan's car, of course—but Riley couldn't remember whether it was the same car he'd had the last time he'd been here. He liked to keep up on the latest models, no matter how expensive.

Once they were parked, Blaine stammered awkwardly. He wanted to help Riley and her two daughters carry their bags back into the house, but ...

"Is it going to be awkward?" Blaine asked Riley.

Riley stifled a groan.

Of course, she thought.

Blaine and Ryan had rarely met, but those encounters had hardly been friendly—at least on Ryan's part. Blaine had done his best to be pleasant, but Ryan had been sullen and hostile.

Riley and April and Jilly could easily carry their bags inside in a single trip. They didn't really need Blaine's help, and Riley didn't want Blaine to feel uncomfortable, and yet ...

Why the hell should Blaine feel uncomfortable in my own house?

Telling Blaine and Crystal to go away was no solution to this problem.

Riley said to Blaine, "Come on in."

The group carried all the bags into the house. Gabriela met them at the door, along with Jilly's small, big-eared dog, Darby. The dog bounced around them with delight, but Gabriela didn't look nearly so happy.

As they put the bags down in the entry area, Riley saw Ryan sitting in the living room. Riley was alarmed to see that he was flanked by two suitcases ...

Is he planning to stay?

April's black and white kitten, Marbles, lay comfortably in his lap.

Ryan looked up from petting Marbles.

He smiled weakly and said in a rather pathetic voice ...

"A kitten and a dog! Wow, all this is new!"

With a gasp of annoyance, April snatched Marbles out of Ryan's lap.

Ryan looked hurt, of course. But again, Riley understood well how April felt.

As April and Jilly both headed toward the stairs, Riley said ...

"Hold on, girls. Don't you have something to say to Blaine and Crystal?"

Looking a little ashamed at their lapse of manners, April and Jilly thanked Blaine and Crystal for the great time they had.

Crystal gave each of the other girls a hug. "Call you tomorrow," she said to April.

"Now take your stuff up with you," Riley told them.

April and Jilly obediently grabbed their bags. Jilly picked up most of their other things, since April was still holding Marbles in one hand. Then they both headed up the stairs, and Darby scampered after them. Seconds later came two banging sounds as they shut their bedroom doors behind them.

Gabriela looked at Ryan with dismay and headed away to her own apartment.

Ryan looked at Blaine and said timidly, “Hi, Blaine. Hope you all had a good vacation.”

Riley’s mouth dropped open with surprise.

He’s trying to be polite, she thought.

Now she knew that something must be terribly wrong.

Blaine gave Ryan a small wave and said, “It was great, Ryan. How have you been?”

Ryan shrugged and said nothing.

Riley was determined not to let Ryan limit her behavior.

She kissed Blaine gently on the lips and said, “Thanks for the wonderful time.”

Blaine blushed, obviously embarrassed by the situation.

“Thank you—and your girls,” he said.

Crystal shook Riley’s hand and thanked her.

Blaine mouthed silently to Riley, “Call me later.”

Riley nodded yes, and Blaine and his daughter headed on out to his SUV.

Riley took a deep breath and turned to face the only other person left in the living room. Her ex-husband stared silently at her with pleading eyes.

What does he want? she wondered yet again.

Usually when Ryan came around, she’d be aware right away that he was still a handsome man—somewhat taller, older, and more athletic than Blaine, and always perfectly groomed and dressed. But this time was somehow different. He looked rumpled and sad and broken. She’d never seen him look this way.

Riley was about to ask him what was wrong when he said ...

“Could we maybe have a drink?”

Riley looked at his face for a moment. It was drawn and sallow. She wondered ...

Has he been drinking lately?

Did he have a few drinks before coming here?

She briefly considered denying his request, but then headed out to the kitchen and poured bourbon on ice for both of them. She brought the drinks out into the living room and sat down in a chair facing him, waiting for him to say something.

Finally, with his shoulders hunched, he said in a hushed voice ...

“Riley—I’m ruined.”

Riley’s mouth dropped open.

What does he mean? she wondered.

CHAPTER SEVEN

As Riley sat there staring at him, Ryan said the words again ...

“I’m ruined. My whole life is ruined.”

Riley was stunned. She couldn’t remember the last time he’d spoken in such a despondent tone. Arrogance and self-confidence were more his style.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

He heaved a long, miserable sigh and said, “Paul and Barrett—they’re forcing me out of the firm.”

Riley could hardly believe her ears.

Paul Vernasco and Barrett Gaynor had been Ryan’s law partners ever since the three of them had founded the firm together. More than that, they’d been Ryan’s most supportive friends.

She asked, “What on earth happened?”

Ryan shrugged and said in a reticent voice, “Something to do with my being a liability to the firm ... I don’t know.”

But Riley could tell by his caginess that he knew exactly why he was being forced out.

And it only took a moment for her to guess the reason.

“Sexual harassment,” she said.

Ryan winced at the words.

“Look, it was all a misunderstanding,” he said.

Riley almost had to bite her tongue to keep from saying ...

“Yeah, I’ll bet it was.”

Avoiding Riley’s eyes, Ryan continued, “Her name is Kyanne, and she’s an associate, and she’s young ...”

As his voice trailed off for a moment, Riley thought ...

Of course she’s young.

They’re always young.

Ryan said, “And I thought everything was mutual. I really did. It started off with some flirtation—on both of our parts, believe me. Then it escalated from there until ... well, she went to Paul and Barrett complaining about a toxic work environment. They tried to handle it with a nondisclosure agreement, but she wouldn’t settle. Nothing would do, I guess, except for me to go.”

He fell quiet again, and Riley tried to grasp all that he was leaving unsaid. It wasn’t hard to put together a possible scenario. Ryan had gotten enthralled with a pretty and vivacious associate, maybe an ambitious young woman with her eye on an eventual partnership.

How far did Ryan go? she wondered.

She doubted that he would have held a promotion over her head in exchange for sexual favors ...

He’s not that kind of a creep, she thought.

And maybe Ryan was also telling the truth about the attraction being mutual, at least at the start. Maybe they’d even had a consensual affair. But at some point things had soured, and the woman, Kyanne, hadn’t liked what was happening between them.

Probably with good reason, Riley figured.

How could Kyanne have helped thinking that her future with the firm was somehow linked to her relationship with Ryan? He was a full partner, after all. He wielded the power in their relationship.

Still, something didn’t add up for Riley ...

She said, “So Paul and Barrett are forcing you out? That’s their solution?”

Ryan nodded, and Riley shook her head with disbelief.

Paul and Barrett weren't exactly Boy Scouts themselves, and Riley had overheard some pretty salacious talk among all three of the partners over the years. She was sure that their behavior had been no better than Ryan's—possibly considerably worse.

She said, "Ryan, you said she wouldn't sign an NDA."

Ryan nodded and took a sip of his drink.

Very cautiously she asked, "How many sexual harassment NDAs have you worked out over the years?"

Ryan winced again, and Riley knew she'd hit upon the truth.

She added, "And Paul and Barrett—how many NDAs have they had to negotiate for themselves?"

Ryan began, "Riley, I'd rather not get into—"

"No, of course you wouldn't," Riley interrupted. "Ryan, you're being scapegoated. You know that, don't you? Paul and Barrett are trying to clean up the firm's image, make it look like they've got some kind of zero-tolerance policy toward harassment. Getting rid of you is their way of doing that."

Ryan shrugged and said, "I know. But what can I do?"

Riley certainly didn't know what to tell him. She didn't want to sympathize with him. He'd been digging this hole for himself for years. Even so, she hated the trick his partners had played on him.

But she knew there was nothing he could do about it now. Besides, something else was worrying her.

Nodding toward the bags, she asked, "What are these for?"

Ryan looked at the bags for a moment.

Then he said in a choked voice, "Riley, I can't go home."

Riley gasped aloud.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "Did you lose the house?"

"No, not yet. It's just that ..."

Ryan's voice faded, then he said ...

"I can't face it alone. I can't live in that house alone. I keep remembering happy times with you and April. I keep thinking about how badly I screwed things up for all of us. The place breaks my heart, Riley."

He took out his handkerchief and wiped his eyes. Riley was shocked. She'd very rarely seen Ryan cry. She almost felt like crying herself.

But she knew she had a serious problem to solve right now.

She said in a gentle voice ...

"Ryan, you can't stay here."

Ryan shriveled like a punctured balloon. Riley wished her words weren't so hurtful. But she had to be honest.

"I've got my own life now," she said. "I've got two girls to raise. And it's a good life. Blaine and I are serious about each other—really serious. In fact ..."

She almost went on to tell him about Blaine's plans to build onto his house.

But no, that would be too much right now.

Instead she said, "You can sell our old house."

"I know," Ryan said, still crying softly. "I plan to. But in the meantime ... I just can't live there."

Riley wished she could do something to comfort him—take his hand, give him a hug, or some other physical gesture of comfort.

It was tempting, and some of her old feeling for him was welling up inside her but ...

Don't do it, she told herself.

Stay cool.

Think of Blaine.

Think of the kids.

Ryan was sobbing pathetically now. In a truly frantic voice he said ...

“Riley, I’m sorry. I want to start all over. I want to be a good husband and a good dad. Surely I can do that if ... we try again.”

Still keeping physical space between them, Riley said ...

“Ryan, we can’t. It’s way too late for that.”

“It’s never too late,” Ryan cried. “Let’s just go away, the two of us, put things back together.”

Riley shuddered deeply.

He doesn’t know what he’s saying, she thought.

He’s having a nervous breakdown.

She also felt pretty sure now that he’d been drinking earlier today.

Then, with a nervous laugh, he said ...

“I’ve got it! Let’s head up to your dad’s cabin! I’ve never even been there, can you believe it? Not once in all these years. We can spend a few days there and—”

Riley interrupted him sharply, “Ryan no.”

He stared at her as if he couldn’t believe his ears.

In a gentler voice Riley said, “I’ve sold the cabin, Ryan. And even if I hadn’t ...”

She fell silent for a moment, then said ...

“Ryan, you’ve got to pull yourself out of this. I wish I could help you, but I can’t.”

Ryan’s shoulders sagged and his sobbing grew quieter. He seemed to be taking Riley’s words to heart.

She said, “You’re a tough, smart, resourceful man. You can come back from all this. I know you can. But I can’t be a part of it. It wouldn’t be good for me—and if you’re honest with yourself, you know it wouldn’t be good for you either.”

Ryan nodded miserably.

“You’re right,” he said, his voice steadier now. “It’s my own mess and I’ve got to fix it. I’m sorry I bothered you. I’ll go home now.”

As he got to his feet, Riley said ...

“Wait a minute. You’re in no condition to drive home. Let me drive you. You can come back and get your car when you’re feeling better.”

Ryan nodded again.

Riley was relieved that they weren’t going to have an argument about it, and that she didn’t have to forcibly take his car keys away from him.

Riley finally dared to take him by the arm as she led him out to her own car. He really did seem to need her physical support.

They were both silent during the drive. When they pulled up to the big, beautiful house they’d once shared, he said, “Riley, there’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you. I ... I think you’ve done really well. And I wish you every happiness.”

Riley felt a lump in her throat.

“Oh, Ryan—” she began.

“No, please listen to me, because this is important. I admire you. You’ve done so many great things. You’ve been a great mother to April, and you’ve adopted Jilly, and you’re starting into a relationship, and I can tell that he’s a great guy. And all the while you’ve been doing your job, stopping bad guys, saving lives. I don’t know how you’ve done it. Your life is all of a piece.”

Riley was deeply startled—and deeply disturbed.

When was the last time Ryan had said anything like this to her?

She simply had no idea what to say.

To her relief, Ryan got out of the car without saying another word.

Riley sat staring at the house as Ryan went on inside. Her heart really went out to him. She couldn't imagine facing that house alone herself—not with all the memories it harbored, both good or bad.

And those words he'd said ...

"Your life is all of a piece."

She sighed and murmured aloud ...

"It's not true."

It was still a struggle for her, raising two girls while working at a consuming and often dangerous job. She was pulled in too many directions, had too many commitments, and she hadn't yet learned to handle it.

Was it always going to be this way?

And how was Blaine going to fit into it all?

Was a successful marriage even possible for her?

She shuddered at the thought that maybe she'd be in Ryan's shoes one day.

Then she pulled away from the house where she had once lived, and drove back home.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Riley was pacing the floor in her living room.

She told herself that she should just relax now, that she'd learned all about relaxing on her recent vacation. But when she thought about that, she found herself remembering what her father had said in her nightmare ...

"You're a hunter, like me."

But she sure didn't feel like a hunter at the moment.

More like a caged animal, she thought.

She'd just gotten home from taking the girls to their first day of school. Jilly was delighted to finally be in the same high school as her sister. The new students and their parents got the customary welcome in the auditorium, then a quick tour of the students' classrooms. April had been able to join Riley and Jilly for the tour.

Although Riley hadn't had a chance to talk at length with each teacher, she'd managed to say hello and introduce herself as Jilly's mother and April as Jilly's sister. Some of Jilly's new teachers had taught April in earlier years, and they had nice things to say about her.

When Riley had wanted to hang around after the orientation, both girls had teased her.

"And do what?" April had asked. *"Go to all of Jilly's classes?"*

Riley had said maybe she would, provoking a moan of despair from Jilly.

"Mo-o-o-m! That would be so uncool!"

April had laughed and said, *"Mom, don't be a chopper."*

When Riley asked what a "chopper" was, April informed her it meant "helicopter parent."

One of those terms I ought to be up on, Riley thought.

Anyway, Riley had respected Jilly's pride and come on home—and now here she was. Gabriela had gone out to meet one of her numerous cousins for lunch, then do some grocery shopping. So Riley was alone in the house, except for a dog and a cat that didn't seem the least bit interested in her.

I've got to snap out of this, she thought.

Riley went to the kitchen and got herself a snack. Then she forced herself to sit down in the living room and turned on the TV. The news was depressing, so she switched to a daytime soap. She had no idea what was going on in the story, but it was diverting, at least for a little while.

But her attention soon wandered, and she found herself thinking about what Ryan had said during his awful visit when she got back from the beach ...

"I can't face it alone. I can't live in that house alone."

Right now, Riley had some idea of how he felt.

Were she and her ex-husband more alike than she wanted to admit?

She tried to convince herself otherwise. Unlike Ryan, she was taking care of her family. Later today, the girls and Gabriela would all be home and they'd have dinner together. Maybe this weekend Blaine and Crystal would join them.

That thought reminded Riley that Blaine had been a little bit reserved toward her ever since the whole thing with Ryan had happened. Riley could understand why. Riley hadn't wanted to talk to Blaine about the visit afterward—it seemed too intimate and personal—and it was only natural that Blaine had felt uncomfortable about it.

She had an urge to phone him right now, but she knew that Blaine was putting in a lot of hours catching up with things at his restaurant now that their vacation was over.

So now here Riley was, feeling terribly alone in her own house ...

Just like Ryan.

She couldn't help feeling a little guilty toward her ex-husband—although she couldn't imagine why. Nothing that was wrong in his life was her fault. Even so, she more than half-wanted to give

him a call, find out how he was doing, maybe commiserate with him a little. But of course, that was an incredibly stupid idea. The last thing she wanted to do was give him any false signals that they might get together again.

As the soap opera characters argued, wept, slapped each other, and jumped in out of bed with each other, something occurred to Riley.

Sometimes her own life at home, her family and relationships, didn't seem any more real to her than what she was watching on TV. The actual presence of her loved ones tended to distract her from her deep-seated sense of isolation. But even just a few hours by herself in the house was enough to painfully remind her of how truly alone she felt inside.

There was an empty place inside her that could only be filled by ...

What, exactly?

By work.

But how meaningful was her work, to herself or to anybody else?

Again she remembered something her father had said in that dream ...

"It's a damn crazy useless life you've got—seeking justice for people who're already dead, exactly the people who don't need justice anymore."

She wondered ...

Is that true?

Is what I do really useless?

Surely not, since she often stopped killers who would certainly have killed again if they could have.

She saved lives in the long run—just how many lives, she couldn't begin to imagine.

And yet, in order for her to even have a job to do, *somebody* had to kill, and *somebody* had to die ...

It always starts with death.

And more often than not, her cases continued to nag at her and haunt her even after they were solved, after the killers were slain or brought to justice.

She turned off the television, which was only irritating her now. Then she sat back and closed her eyes and thought about her most recent case, that of a serial killer down in Georgia.

Poor Morgan, she thought.

Morgan Farrell had been married to a wealthy but abusive man. When he'd been brutally stabbed to death in his sleep, Morgan had been sure she was the one who had killed him, even though she couldn't remember the deed.

She was sure she'd forgotten about it because of pills and alcohol.

And she'd been proud of what she'd thought she'd done. She'd even called Riley by phone to tell her so ...

"I killed the bastard."

Morgan had been innocent, as things turned out. Another deranged woman had killed Morgan's husband—and several other equally abusive husbands.

The woman, who had suffered at her own late husband's hands, had been on a vigilante mission to free other women from that pain. Riley had stopped her just before she could mistakenly kill a man who wasn't guilty of anything except loving his disturbed, delusional wife.

Riley replayed the scene in her mind, after she'd fought the woman to the ground and was putting her in handcuffs ...

"Adrienne McKinney, you're under arrest."

But now Riley wondered ...

What if everything could have ended differently?

What if Riley been able to save the innocent man, explain to the woman the mistake she'd made, and then simply let her go?

She'd have kept on killing, Riley thought.

And the men she killed would have deserved to die.

So what kind of justice had she really carried out that time?

Riley's heart sank, and she remembered again her father's words ...

"It's a damn crazy useless life you've got."

On one hand, she was desperately trying to live the life of a mother raising two daughters, the life of a woman in love with a man she hoped to marry. At times, that life seemed to be actually working out for her, and she knew she would never stop trying to be good at it.

But as soon as she found herself alone, that ordinary life seemed unreal.

On the other hand, she struggled against awful odds to bring down monsters. Her work was intensely important to her, even though it all too often began and ended in pure futility.

Riley felt perfectly miserable now. Despite the early hour, she was tempted to pour herself a stiff drink. As she resisted that temptation, her phone rang. When she saw who the caller was, she breathed a huge sigh of relief.

This was real.

She had work to do.

CHAPTER NINE

During her drive to the BAU building, Riley realized that her feelings were mixed about getting back to work. When Meredith had called her, she'd known by his tone of voice that he wasn't in a good mood.

He hadn't offered any details. He'd just said that he was calling a meeting of her team about some new developments. She'd been relieved to get out of the house and head for Quantico. Now she found herself wondering what Meredith was mad about.

About a week and a half ago, he had suggested that she go down to Rushville, Mississippi, to check on a murder that had just happened there. Riley had told him no.

But he hadn't seemed angry with her then. In fact, he'd been downright apologetic for bothering her.

"I'm sorry I bothered you," he'd said. *"Keep on enjoying your vacation."*

Something had changed since then.

Whatever that change was, it probably meant that she had real work to do. Riley's spirits lifted as she pulled up in front of the big white building that held the Behavioral Analysis Unit. She realized that it felt like coming home.

After she parked her car, Riley opened the trunk and took out her go-bag, which she kept always ready. She knew it was likely that she was about to head out on a new case.

When she walked into the conference room, the meeting was just getting underway. Riley's two partners, Bill Jeffreys and Jenn Roston, were sitting across the table from Special Agent Brent Meredith, the team chief.

As always, Meredith cut a daunting figure, with his big frame and his black, angular features.

But today he looked more intimidating than usual. He glowered at Riley as she took a seat at the table.

Then he snapped, "How was your vacation, Agent Paige?"

His sharp words cut Riley. Instead of responding to Meredith's question, she returned his gaze and said firmly, "I'm ready to get back to work."

Meredith nodded with sullen approval.

Then he said, "Now that we're all here, let's get started."

Glancing among his three colleagues, Meredith added, "I kept thinking about the murder down in Rushville, Mississippi—the one the local cop there called us about. I asked Agent Jeffreys here to do a little research on it. He did, and now he's thinking maybe we should look into it after all. Would you care to explain, Agent Jeffreys?"

"Certainly," Bill said as he stood up walked over to the screen in front of the room. Bill had been Riley's partner and close friend for many years, and Riley was happy to see him here. He was about her age, a solid, striking man with touches of gray in his dark hair.

Bill clicked a remote and a couple of images appeared on the screen. One was of a taciturn-looking man in his fifties. The other was of the same man's corpse stretched out on hardwood floor with a single brutal deep, roundish wound in his forehead.

Pointing to the images, Bill explained ...

"Gareth Ogden was killed in his home in Rushville eleven days ago. The murder took place at about eight-thirty in the evening. He was killed by a single hammer blow to the forehead."

Looking at Riley and Jenn, Meredith added, "This was the murder that the local cop there called the BAU about. She was very insistent, and I wound up talking to her myself. She was concerned about the resemblance of Ogden's killing to the unsolved murders of an entire family that happened in Rushville some ten years ago."

"That's right," Bill said. "I started looking into it, and this is what I found."

Bill clicked the remote again, and a new set of images came up. A man and a woman lay in a blood-drenched bed, their skulls literally pulverized. The other two victims, killed in an identical manner, lay in their own beds—one a teenaged boy, and the other a girl who looked about ten or twelve years old.

Bill explained ...

“While the Bonnett family lay asleep, an intruder crept into their home. First he bludgeoned the daughter, Lisa, to death in her bedroom. After that he crept to the room where her brother, Martin, lay asleep, and killed him too. Finally, he made his way to the parents’ bedroom. He bashed Leona Bonnett’s head in while she slept. Her husband, Cosmo, appears to have been awakened, and a brief struggle ensued before he became the final victim.”

Jenn Roston squinted at the screen and said, “It’s shocking, sure. But if there’s a connection between the murder of the family and Ogden’s death, I’m not sure I see it—aside from the weapon used.”

Riley nodded in approval. Jenn was a young African-American woman who had already proven herself to be a remarkably capable agent during her short time at the BAU. Riley and Jenn had worked together on several cases. Their relationship had been rocky at first but a lot of trust had soon grown between them.

Meredith said, “Explain, Agent Roston.”

Jenn pointed to the grisly images on the screen and said, “The Bonnett murders were remarkably brutal. It looks like each of their heads was repeatedly bashed, blow after blow. The killings were clearly carried out in a rage, for deeply personal reasons. Agent Jeffreys, could you show us those other pictures again?”

Bill clicked the remote, and the pictures of Ogden appeared.

Jenn pointed to the photo of his dead body and said, “Ogden’s murder was swift and clean by comparison. He died from what looked like a single hammer blow to the forehead. No rage was involved. His killing seems coldblooded and ... what’s the word I’m looking for? Almost surgical.”

Riley was intrigued, and what Jenn was saying made sense to her.

“Yes, and murders with a hammer are actually pretty common,” Riley said. “It could be just a coincidence.”

Meredith asked Bill, “How big a town is Rushville?”

Bill said, “It’s just a little town on the Gulf coast, with a population of about sixty-five hundred. That’s part of what bothers me. They normally get virtually no violent crime there—just some aggravated assaults, burglary and thefts, and stolen cars. So if it *is*

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