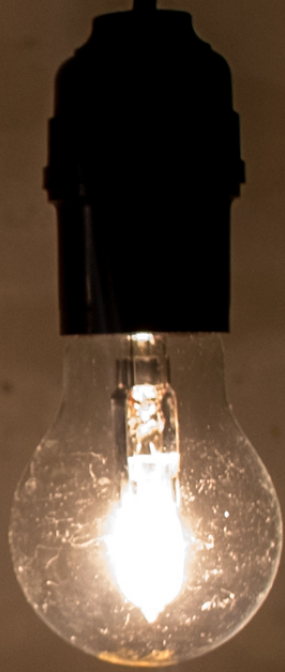


BLAKE PIERCE



ONCE
FORSAKEN

A RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY--BOOK #7

A Riley Paige Mystery

Blake Pierce

Once Forsaken

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2017

Pierce B.

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“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 FORSAKEN is book #7 in the bestselling Riley Paige mystery series, which begins with the #1 bestseller ONCE GONE (Book #1)—a free download with over 700 five star reviews! When Special Agent Riley Paige finally decides to take a well-needed rest from the FBI, a request for help comes from the most unlikely source: her own daughter. April’s best friend is devastated by the death of her sister, a freshman at Georgetown. Worse, she is convinced that the suicide was staged, and that her sister was murdered at the hands of a serial killer. Riley reluctantly looks into the case, only to discover that two other freshman girls at Georgetown recently killed themselves in the same grotesque way—by hanging. As she realizes foul play may be afoot, she brings in the FBI. The case takes Riley deep into the privileged campus of one of the world’s most esteemed universities, into the unsettling world of the wealthy and driven families that pushed their children to succeed. In time she discovers that this case is far more twisted than it seems—and that she just may be up against the most psychotic killer of her career. A dark psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, ONCE FORSAKEN is book #7 in a riveting new series—with a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night. Book #8 in the Riley Paige series will be available soon.

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Blake Pierce

Once Forsaken (A Riley Paige Mystery—Book 7)

Blake Pierce

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

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

Tiffany was all dressed when her mother called out from downstairs.

“Tiffany! Are you ready for church?”

“Almost, Mom,” Tiffany yelled back. “Just a few minutes.”

“Well, hurry up. We’ve got to leave here in five minutes.”

“OK.”

The truth was, Tiffany had finished dressing several minutes ago, right after eating a delicious waffle breakfast downstairs with Mom and Dad. She just wasn’t ready to go anywhere yet. She was really enjoying a bunch of funny animal videos on her cell phone.

So far she’d watched a skateboarding Pekingese, a bulldog climbing a ladder, a cat trying to play a guitar, a big dog that chased its tail whenever someone sang “Pop Goes the Weasel,” and a herd of hundreds of stampeding bunnies.

Right now she was watching one that really made her laugh. A squirrel kept trying to get into a squirrel-proof birdfeeder. No matter how he approached the feeder, it would spin around and send him flying. But the squirrel was determined and wouldn’t give up.

The video kept her giggling until her mother called out again.

“Tiffany! Is your sister coming with us?”

“I don’t think so, Mom.”

“Well, go ask her, please.”

Tiffany sighed. She more than half wanted to yell back ...

“Go ask her yourself.”

Instead, she called back, “OK.”

Tiffany’s nineteen-year-old sister, Lois, hadn’t come down to breakfast. Tiffany was pretty sure she had no intention of going to church. She’d told Tiffany yesterday that she didn’t want to go.

Lois had been doing less and less with the family ever since she’d started college in the fall. She came home most weekends and on holidays and breaks, but either kept to herself or went out with friends, and almost always slept late in the mornings.

Tiffany couldn’t blame her.

Life in the Pennington household was enough to bore a teenager to death. And church bored Tiffany more than almost anything.

With a sigh, she stopped the video and stepped out into the hallway. Lois’s bedroom was upstairs from hers—a luxurious room that took up most of the attic. She even had her own private bathroom up there and a huge closet. Tiffany was still stuck in the smaller second-floor bedroom that had been hers for as long as she could remember.

It didn’t seem fair. She’d hoped that she would inherit her sister’s bedroom when she went to college. Why did Lois need all that space now that she was only home on weekends? Couldn’t they trade bedrooms at long last?

She complained about it often and loudly, but nobody seemed to care.

She stood at the bottom of the stairs that led up to the attic and called out.

“Hey, Lois! Are you coming with us?”

She got no reply. She rolled her eyes. This often happened whenever she had to fetch Lois for one thing or another.

She climbed up the stairs and knocked on the door to her sister’s room.

“Hey, Lois,” she yelled again. “We’re going to church. Are you coming?”

Again, she got no reply.

Tiffany shuffled her feet impatiently, then knocked again.

“Are you awake?” she asked.

There was still no reply.

Tiffany groaned aloud. Lois might be fast asleep or listening to music on headphones. More likely, though, she was just ignoring her.

“OK,” she yelled. “I’ll tell Mom you’re not coming.”

As Tiffany made her way back down the stairs, she worried a little. Lois had been a bit down during her most recent visits—not exactly depressed, but not as cheerful as usual. She’d told Tiffany that college was harder than she’d expected, and the pressure was getting to her.

At the bottom of the stairs, Dad was standing in the foyer checking his watch impatiently. He looked ready to go, warmly clad in an overcoat, a fur cap, a scarf, and gloves. Mom was putting on her own coat.

“So is Lois coming?” Dad asked.

“She says no,” Tiffany said, lying a little. Dad might get mad if Tiffany said that Lois wouldn’t even answer her knock on the door.

“Well, I’m not surprised,” Mom said, putting on her gloves. “I heard her car pull in late last night. I’m not sure what time it was.”

Tiffany felt another pang of envy at the mention of her sister’s car. Lois had so much freedom now that she was in college! Best of all, nobody cared very much what time she came home at night. Tiffany hadn’t even heard her come in at all last night.

I guess I was fast asleep, she thought.

As Tiffany started putting on her own coat, Dad grumbled, “The two of you are taking forever. We’re going to be late for the service.”

“We’ll be there in plenty of time,” Mom said calmly.

“I’ll go out and get the car started,” Dad said.

He opened the front door and stomped outside. Tiffany and her mother quickly got bundled up and followed him.

The cold air hit Tiffany hard. There was still snow on the ground from a few days ago. She wished she were still in her warm bed. It was a lousy day to have to go anywhere.

Suddenly, she heard her mom gasp.

“Lester, what is it?” Mom called out to Dad.

Tiffany saw Dad standing in front of the open garage door. He was staring into the garage, his eyes wide and his mouth hanging open. He looked stunned and horrified.

“What’s going on?” Mom called out again.

Dad turned to see her. He seemed to be having trouble saying anything.

Finally, he blurted, “Call nine-one-one.”

“Why?” Mom replied.

Dad didn’t explain. He headed into the garage. Mom darted forward, and when she reached the open door, she let out a scream that paralyzed Tiffany with fear.

Mom rushed inside the garage.

For a long moment, Tiffany stood frozen in her tracks.

“What is it?” Tiffany called out.

She heard Mom’s sobbing voice call out from the garage, “Go back inside, Tiffany.”

“Why?” Tiffany yelled back.

Mom came running out of the garage. She grabbed Tiffany’s arm and tried to turn her around to go back to the house.

“Don’t look,” she said. “Go back inside.”

Tiffany wrestled loose from Mom and rushed into the garage.

It took her a moment to take everything in. All three cars were parked there. In the back corner to the left, Dad was wrestling clumsily with a ladder.

Something was hanging there by a rope tied to a roof beam.

It was a person.
It was her sister.

CHAPTER ONE

Riley Paige had just sat down to dinner when her daughter said something that really startled her.

“Aren’t we just the picture-perfect family?”

Riley stared at April, whose face reddened with embarrassment.

“Wow, did I just say that aloud?” April said sheepishly. “Was that corny or what?”

Riley laughed and looked around the table. Her ex-husband, Ryan, was sitting at the far end of the table from her. To her left, her fifteen-year-old daughter, April, was sitting next to their housekeeper, Gabriela. To her right was thirteen-year-old Jilly, a newcomer to the household.

April and Jilly had just made hamburgers for Sunday’s dinner, giving Gabriela a break from cooking.

Ryan took a bite of his hamburger, then said, “Well, we *are* a family, aren’t we? I mean, just look at us.”

Riley didn’t say anything.

A family, she thought. Is that what we are really?

The idea took her just a little bit by surprise. After all, she and Ryan had separated almost two years ago, and had been divorced for six months now. Although they were spending time together again, Riley had avoided giving much thought to where that might lead. She had put aside years of hurt and betrayal in order to enjoy a peaceful present.

Then there was April, whose adolescence had been anything but easy. Would her desire for togetherness last?

Riley felt even more uncertain about Jilly. She’d found Jilly in a truck stop in Phoenix, trying to sell her own body to truck drivers. Riley had rescued Jilly from a terrible life and an abusive father, and now she hoped to adopt her. But Jilly was still a troubled girl, and things were touch-and-go with her.

The one person at the table Riley felt surest about was Gabriela. The stout Guatemalan woman had been working for the family since long before the divorce. Gabriela had never been anything other than responsible, grounded, and loving.

“What do you think, Gabriela?” Riley asked.

Gabriela smiled.

“A family can be chosen, not just inherited,” she said. “Blood isn’t everything. Love is what matters.”

Riley suddenly felt warm inside. She could always count on Gabriela to say what needed to be said. She gazed with a new sense of satisfaction at the people around her.

After being on leave from BAU for a month, she was enjoying just being here at home in her townhouse.

And enjoying my family, she thought.

Then April said something else that surprised her.

“Daddy, when are you going to move in with us?”

Ryan looked quite startled. As she often did, Riley wondered whether his newfound commitment was too good to last.

“That’s kind of a big topic to take on right now,” Ryan said.

“How come?” April asked her father. “You might as well live here. I mean, you and Mom are sleeping together again and you’re here almost every day.”

Riley felt her face redden. Shocked, Gabriela gave April a sharp poke with her elbow.

¡Chica! ¡Silencio! she said.

Jilly looked around with a grin.

“Hey, that’s a great idea,” she said. “Then I’d be sure to get good grades.”

It was true—Ryan had been helping Jilly get up to speed at her new school, especially with social studies. He'd actually been very supportive of all of them in recent months.

Riley's eyes met Ryan's. She saw that he was blushing too.

As for herself, she didn't know what to say. She had to admit that she found the idea appealing. She'd grown comfortable with Ryan spending most of his nights here. Everything had fallen into place so easily—perhaps too easily. Maybe some of her comfort came from not having to make decisions about it.

She remembered what April had called everybody just now.

"A picture-perfect family."

They all certainly seemed like that at the moment. But Riley couldn't help feeling uneasy. Was all this perfection just an illusion? Like reading a good book or watching a pleasant movie?

Riley was all too aware that the world outside was full of monsters. She'd devoted her professional life to fighting them. But for the past month, she'd almost been able to pretend they didn't exist.

A smile slowly crossed Ryan's face.

"Hey, why don't we all move into my place?" he said. "There's plenty of room for all of us."

Riley stifled a gasp of alarm.

The last thing she wanted was to move back to the big suburban home that she had shared with Ryan for years. It was too full of unpleasant memories.

"I couldn't give this place up," she said. "I've gotten settled in so comfortably here."

April looked at her father eagerly.

"It's up to you, Daddy," she said. "Are you moving in with us or not?"

Riley watched Ryan's face. She could tell that he was struggling with his decision. She understood at least one reason why. He belonged to a law firm in DC, but fairly often worked at home. There wasn't room for him to do that here.

Finally Ryan said, "I'd have to keep the house. It could still be my local office."

April was almost bouncing from excitement.

"So are you saying yes?" she asked.

Ryan smiled silently for a moment.

"Yeah, I guess I am," he finally said.

April let out a squeal of delight. Jilly clapped her hands and giggled.

"Great!" Jilly said. "Please pass the ketchup—Dad."

Ryan, April, Gabriela, and Jilly all started chattering happily as they continued eating.

Riley told herself to enjoy this happy glow while she could. Sooner or later, she would be called upon to stop another monster. The thought sent a chill up her spine. Was some evil already lurking, waiting for her?

*

The next day, April's school had a shortened schedule to allow for teacher meetings, and Riley had given in to her daughter's pleas to let her cut the whole day. They decided to go shopping together while Jilly was still in school.

The rows of stores in the mall seemed endless to Riley, and many of the shops looked very much alike. Skinny mannequins in stylish clothes held impossible poses in every window. The figures they were passing right now were headless, adding to Riley's impression that they were all interchangeable. But April kept telling her what each store carried, and which styles she'd loved to wear. April apparently saw variety where Riley only saw sameness.

A teenage thing, I guess, Riley thought.

At least the mall wasn't crowded today.

April pointed to a sign outside a store named Towne Shoppe.

“Oh, look!” she said. “AFFORDABLE LUXURY! Let’s go in for a look!”

Inside the store, April pounced on a rack of jeans and jackets, pulling out things to try on.

“I guess I could use some new jeans myself,” Riley said.

April rolled her eyes.

“Oh, Mom, not mom jeans, please!”

“Well, I can’t wear what you wear. I’ve got to be able move around without worrying that my clothes are going to burst or fly off. No wardrobe malfunctions for me, thank you.”

April laughed. “A pair of *slacks*, you mean! Good luck finding anything like that here.”

Riley looked around at the available jeans. They were all extremely skinny, low-waisted, and artificially ragged.

Riley sighed. She knew of a couple of stores elsewhere in the mall where she could buy something more her style. But she’d have to endure all kinds of teasing and nagging from April.

“I’ll look for mine another time,” Riley said.

April grabbed a bundle of jeans and went to the changing room. When she came out, she was wearing the kind of jeans that Riley loathed—skin-tight, ripped in places, with the navel fully in view.

Riley shook her head.

“You might want to try mom jeans yourself,” she said. “They’d be a lot more comfortable. But then, being comfortable isn’t your thing, is it?”

“Nope,” April said, turning and looking at her jeans in a mirror. “I’m getting these. I’ll go try on the others.”

April returned to the changing room several times. She always came back with jeans that Riley hated but knew better than to forbid her from buying. It really wasn’t worth a battle, and she knew she’d lose one way or another.

As April posed in the mirror, Riley realized that her daughter was almost as tall as she was, and the T-shirt she was wearing revealed a well-developed figure. With her dark hair and hazel eyes, April’s resemblance to Riley was striking. Of course, April’s hair didn’t show the streaks of gray that had appeared in Riley’s. But even so ...

She’s becoming a woman, Riley thought.

She couldn’t help but feel uneasy about the idea.

Was April growing up too fast?

She’d certainly been through a lot just during the last year. She’d been taken captive twice. One of those times she’d been kept in the dark by a sadist with a blowtorch. She’d also had to fight off a killer in their own home. Worst of all, an abusive boyfriend had drugged her and tried to sell her for sex.

Riley knew that it was all too much for a fifteen-year-old to have had to deal with. She felt guilty that her own work had put April and other people she loved in mortal danger.

And now here April was, looking remarkably mature despite her efforts to look and act like a normal teenager. April seemed to be over the worst of her PTSD. But what kinds of fears and anxieties still troubled her deep down? Would she ever really get over them?

Riley paid for April’s new clothes and wandered out onto the mall balcony. The confidence in April’s walk made Riley feel less worried. Things were getting better, after all. She knew that right then Ryan was moving some of his own things into her townhouse. And both April and Jilly were doing well in school.

Riley was about to suggest that they find a place to eat when April’s phone buzzed. April abruptly walked away to take the call. Riley felt a flash of dismay. Sometimes that cell phone seemed to be a living thing that demanded all of April’s attention.

“Hey, what’s up?” April asked the caller.

Suddenly April's knees wobbled, and she sat down on a bench. Her face went pale, and her happy expression collapsed into pain. Tears began to roll down her face. Alarmed, Riley rushed over to her and sat down beside her.

"Oh my God!" April exclaimed. "How could—why—I can't—"

Riley felt a jolt of alarm.

What had happened?

Was someone hurt or in danger?

Was it Jilly, Ryan, Gabriela?

No, someone would surely have called Riley with such news, not April.

"I'm so, so sorry," April said over and over again.

Finally, she ended the call.

"Who was it?" Riley asked anxiously.

"It was Tiffany," April said in a stunned, quiet voice.

Riley recognized the name. Tiffany Pennington was April's best friend these days. Riley had met her a couple of times.

"What's the matter?" Riley asked.

April looked at Riley with an expression of grief and horror.

"Tiffany's sister is dead," April said.

April looked as though she couldn't believe her own words.

Then in a choked voice she added, "They say it was suicide."

CHAPTER TWO

Over dinner that evening, April tried to tell her family what little she knew about Lois's death. But her own words sounded strange and alien to her, like someone else was speaking.

It doesn't seem real, she kept thinking.

April had met Lois several times while visiting Tiffany. She remembered the last time clearly. Lois been smiling and happy, full of tales about being away at school. It was just impossible to believe that she was dead.

Death wasn't a complete stranger to April. She knew that her mom had faced death and had actually killed when working on FBI cases. But those had been bad guys, and they'd had to be stopped. April had even helped her mother fight and kill a sadistic murderer after he had taken April captive. She also knew that her grandfather had died four months ago, but she hadn't seen him in a long time and they had never been close.

But this death was more real to her, and it made no sense at all. Somehow it didn't even seem possible.

As April talked, she saw that her family was also confused and distressed. Her mom reached over and took her hand. Gabriela crossed herself and murmured a prayer in Spanish. Jilly's mouth hung open with horror.

April tried to remember everything that Tiffany had told her when they had talked again that afternoon. She had explained that yesterday morning Tiffany and her mom and dad had found Lois's body hanging in their garage. The police thought it looked like suicide. In fact, everybody was acting like it had been suicide. Like that was all settled.

Everybody but Tiffany, who kept saying she didn't think so.

April's father shuddered when she finished telling them everything she could think of.

"I know the Penningtons," he said. "Lester's a financial manager for a construction company. Not exactly wealthy, but comfortably well off. They've always seemed like a stable, happy family. Why would Lois do such a thing?"

April had been asking herself that very question all day.

"Tiffany says nobody knows," April said. "Lois was in her first year at Byars College. She was kind of stressed out about it, but even so ..."

Dad shook his head sympathetically.

"Well, maybe that explains it," he said. "Byars is a tough school. Even tougher to get into than Georgetown. And very expensive. I'm surprised the family could afford it."

April drew a deep sigh and said nothing. She thought that Lois had been on scholarships, but she didn't say so. She didn't feel like talking about it. She didn't feel like eating, either. Gabriela had fixed one of her specialties, a seafood soup called *tapado* that April normally loved. But so far she hadn't taken a spoonful of it.

Everybody was quiet for a few moments.

Then Jilly said, "She didn't kill herself."

Startled, April stared across at Jilly. Everybody else was looking at Jilly, too. The younger teen had crossed her arms and was looking very serious.

"What?" April asked.

"Lois didn't kill herself," Jilly said.

"How do you know?" April asked.

"I met her, remember? I could tell. She wasn't the kind of girl who would ever want to do that. She didn't want to die."

Jilly paused for a moment.

Then she said, "I know how it feels to want to die. She didn't. I could tell."

April's heart jumped up into her throat.

She knew that Jilly had been through her own share of hell. Jilly had told her about how her abusive father had locked her out of the house one cold night. Jilly had slept in a drainpipe, and then she had gone to a truck stop where she tried to become a prostitute. That was when Mom had found her.

If anybody knew what it felt like to want to die, Jilly sure did.

April felt a flood of grief and horror ready to erupt inside her. Was Jilly wrong? Had Lois felt that miserable?

"Excuse me," she said. "I don't think I can eat now."

April got up from the table and rushed upstairs to her bedroom. She shut the door, threw herself down on her bed, and sobbed.

She didn't know how much time passed. But after a while, she heard a knock at the door.

"April, can I come in?" her mother asked.

"Yes," April said in a choked voice.

April sat up, and Mom walked into the room carrying a grilled cheese sandwich on a plate. Mom smiled sympathetically.

"Gabriela thought this might be easier on your stomach than *tapado*," Mom said. "She's worried that you'll make yourself sick if you don't eat. I'm worried too."

April smiled through her tears. This was very sweet of both Gabriela and Mom.

"Thanks," she said.

She wiped her eyes and took a bite of the sandwich. Mom sat down on the bed beside her and took her hand.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Mom asked.

April gulped down a sob. For some reason, she found herself remembering how her best friend, Crystal, had moved away recently. Her father, Blaine, had been badly beaten right here in this house. Even though he and Mom had been interested in each other, he'd been so shaken that he'd decided to move.

"I've got the weirdest feeling," April said. "Like this was my fault somehow. Terrible things keep happening to us, and it's almost like it's contagious or something. I know it doesn't make sense but ..."

"I understand how you feel," Mom said.

April was surprised. "You do?"

Mom's expression saddened.

"I feel like that a lot myself," she said. "My work is dangerous. And it puts everybody I love in danger. It makes me feel guilty. A lot."

"But it's not your fault," April said.

"So how come you think it's *your* fault?"

April didn't know what to say.

"What else is bothering you?" Mom asked.

April thought for a moment.

"Mom, Jilly's right. I don't think Lois killed herself. And Tiffany doesn't think so either. I knew Lois. She was happy, one of the most together people I've ever known. And Tiffany looked up to her. She was like Tiffany's hero. It just doesn't make sense."

April could tell by her mother's expression that she didn't believe her.

She just thinks I'm being hysterical, April thought.

"April, the police must think that it was suicide, and her mother and father—"

"Well, they're wrong," April said, surprised by the sharpness in her own voice. "Mom, you've got to check it out. You know more about this kind of thing than any of them do. More even than the police."

Mom shook her head sadly.

“April, I can’t do that. I can’t just go in and start investigating something that’s already been settled. Think how the family would feel about that.”

It was all April could do to keep from crying again.

“Mom, I’m begging you. If Tiffany never finds out the truth, it will ruin her life. She’ll never get over it. Please, please do something.”

It was a huge favor to ask, and April knew it. Mom didn’t reply for a moment. She got up and walked over to the bedroom window and looked outside. She seemed to be deep in thought.

Still looking outside, Mom finally said, “I’ll go talk to Tiffany’s parents tomorrow. That is, if they want to talk to me. That’s all I can do.”

“Can I come with you?” April asked.

“You’ve got school tomorrow,” Mom said.

“Let’s do it after school then.”

Mom fell quiet again, then said, “OK.”

April got up from the bed and hugged her mother tightly. She wanted to say thank you, but she felt too overwhelmed with gratitude to get the words out.

If anyone can find out what’s wrong, Mom can, April thought.

CHAPTER THREE

The next afternoon, Riley drove April to the Penningtons' house. Despite her doubts that Lois Pennington had been murdered, Riley felt sure that this was the best thing to do.

I owe it to April, she thought as she drove.

After all, she knew what it felt like to be positive about something and not have anyone believe her.

And April certainly did seem positive that something was very wrong.

As for Riley, her instincts hadn't kicked in one way or the other. But as they drove into a higher-class section of Fredericksburg, she reminded herself that monsters often lurked behind the most peaceful of facades. Many of the charming homes they passed on the way surely held dark secrets. She'd seen too much evil in her life not to know that all too well.

And whether Lois's death had been suicide or murder, there could be no doubt that a monster had invaded the Penningtons' seemingly happy home.

Riley parked on the street in front of the house. It was a large home, three stories tall and filling a fairly wide lot. Riley remembered what Ryan had said about the Penningtons.

"Not exactly wealthy, but comfortably well off."

The house confirmed what he'd said. It was an attractive upscale home in a nice neighborhood. The only thing that seemed unusual about it was the police tape across the doors of the detached garage where the family had found their daughter hanging.

The cold air bit sharply as Riley and April got out of the car and walked toward the house. Several cars were parked tightly in the driveway.

They rang the front doorbell, and Tiffany greeted them. April threw herself into Tiffany's arms, and both girls started sobbing.

"Oh, Tiffany, I'm so sorry," April said.

"Thank you, thank you for coming," Tiffany said.

Their shared emotion brought a lump into Riley's throat. The two girls seemed so young right now, barely more than children. It seemed horribly unfair that they should have to undergo such a terrible ordeal. Even so, she felt an odd hint of pride in April's heartfelt kindness. April was growing up to be caring and compassionate.

I must be doing something right as a parent, Riley thought.

Tiffany was a little shorter than April, with a bit more teenaged awkwardness about her. Her hair was strawberry blond, and her skin was pale and freckled, which made the redness around her eyes from crying look more pronounced.

Tiffany led Riley and April into the living room. Tiffany's parents were sitting on a couch, separated from each other slightly. Did their body language reveal anything? Riley wasn't sure. She knew that couples dealt with grief in many different ways.

Several other people were hovering around, speaking to each other in hushed whispers. Riley guessed that they were friends and family who had come to help out however they could.

She heard low voices and the rattling of utensils in the kitchen, where people seemed to be preparing food. Through an arch that led into the dining room, she saw two couples arranging pictures and memorabilia on the table. There were also pictures of Lois and her family at various ages set up in the living room.

Riley shuddered at the thought that the girl in the pictures had been alive just two days ago. How would she feel if she had lost April so suddenly? It was a chilling possibility, and there had already been too many close calls.

Who would come to her house to offer help and comfort?

Would she even *want* anybody's help and comfort?

She shook off such thoughts as Tiffany introduced her to her parents, Lester and Eunice.

“Please, don’t get up,” Riley said as the couple started to rise to greet her.

Riley and April sat down near the couple. Eunice had her daughter’s freckled complexion and brightly colored hair. Lester’s complexion was darker, and his face was long and thin.

“I’m very sorry for your loss,” Riley said.

The couple thanked her. Lester managed to force a small smile.

“We’ve never met, but I know Ryan slightly,” he said. “How’s he doing these days?”

Tiffany reached from her own chair to tap her father on the arm. She silently mouthed, “They’re divorced, Dad.”

Lester’s face reddened a little.

“Oh, I’m very sorry,” he said.

Riley felt herself blush.

“Please don’t be,” she said. “Like people say these days—it’s complicated.”

Lester nodded, still smiling weakly.

They all said nothing for a few moments as a low buzz of activity continued around them.

Then Tiffany said, “Mom, Dad—April’s mother is an FBI agent.”

Lester and Eunice gaped, not knowing what to say. Embarrassed again, Riley didn’t know what to say either. She knew that April had called Tiffany yesterday to say that they were coming over. Apparently, Tiffany hadn’t told her parents what Riley did for a living until just now.

Tiffany looked back and forth at her parents, then said, “I thought maybe she could help us find out . . . what really happened.”

Lester gasped, and Eunice sighed bitterly.

“Tiffany, we’ve talked about this,” Eunice said. “We know what happened. The police are sure. We’ve got no reason to think otherwise.”

Lester stood unsteadily.

“I can’t deal with this,” he said. “I just . . . can’t.”

He turned and wandered into the dining room. Riley could see that the two couples there hurried to comfort him.

“Tiffany, you should be ashamed of yourself,” Eunice said.

The girl’s eyes were brimming with tears.

“But I just want to know the truth, Mom. Lois didn’t kill herself. She couldn’t have done that. I know it.”

Eunice looked at Riley.

“I’m sorry you got caught in the middle of this,” she said. “Tiffany’s having trouble accepting the truth.”

“It’s you and Dad who can’t deal with the truth,” Tiffany said.

“Hush,” her mother said.

Eunice handed her daughter a handkerchief.

“Tiffany, there were things you didn’t know about Lois,” she said slowly and cautiously. “She was more unhappy than she probably told you. She loved college, but it wasn’t easy for her. Keeping her grades up for her scholarships was a lot of pressure, and it was also hard for her to be away from home. She was starting to take antidepressants and was getting counseling at Byars. Your father and I thought she was getting along better, but we were wrong.”

Tiffany was trying to bring her sobs under control, but she still seemed very angry.

“That school is an awful place,” she said. “I’d never go there.”

“It’s not awful,” Eunice said. “It’s a very good school. It’s demanding, that’s all.”

“I’ll bet those other girls didn’t think it was such a good school,” Tiffany said.

April had been listening to her friend with great concern.

“What other girls?” she asked.

“Deanna and Cory,” Tiffany said. “They died too.”

Eunice shook her head sadly and said to Riley, “Two other girls committed suicide at Byars last semester. It’s been a terrible year there.”

Tiffany stared at her mother.

“They weren’t suicides,” she said. “Lois didn’t think so. She thought something was wrong at that place. She didn’t know what it was, but she told me it was something really bad.”

“Tiffany, they *were* suicides,” Eunice said wearily. “Everybody says so. Things like this happen.”

Tiffany stood up, shaking with rage and frustration.

“Lois’s death didn’t ‘just happen,’” she said.

Eunice said, “When you get older, you’ll understand that life can be harder than you realize. Now sit back down, please.”

Tiffany sat down in sullen silence. Eunice gazed off into space. Riley felt terribly uncomfortable.

“We really didn’t come here to disturb you in any way,” Riley told Eunice. “I apologize for the intrusion. Maybe it’s best if we leave.”

Eunice silently nodded. Riley and April showed themselves out.

“We should have stayed,” April said sullenly as soon as they were outside. “We should have asked more questions.”

“No, we were just upsetting them,” Riley said. “It was a terrible mistake.”

Suddenly, April trotted away from her.

“Where are you going?” Riley asked with alarm.

April headed straight for the side door to the garage. There was a strip of police tape across the doorframe.

“April, stay away from there!” Riley said.

April ignored both the tape and her mother and turned the doorknob. The door was unlocked and swung open. April ducked under the tape and into the garage. Riley hurried in after her, intending to scold her. Instead, her own curiosity got the best of her, and she peered around the garage.

There weren’t any cars inside, which made the three-car space look eerily cavernous. Dim light shone in through several windows.

April pointed toward a corner.

“Tiffany told me that Lois was found over there,” April said.

Sure enough, the spot was marked by strips of masking tape on the floor.

There were broad roof beams under the roof, and a stepladder leaning against the wall.

“Come on,” Riley said. “We shouldn’t be in here.”

She led her daughter out and pulled the door shut. As she and April walked toward the car, Riley visualized the scene. It was easy to imagine how the girl could have climbed up on that ladder and hanged herself.

Or was that really what happened? she wondered.

She had no reason to think otherwise.

Even so, she was beginning to feel a faint tingle of doubt.

*

A short while later at home, Riley called the district medical examiner, Danica Selves. She had been friends with Danica for years. When Riley asked her about the case of Lois Pennington’s death, Danica sounded surprised.

“Why are you so curious?” Danica asked. “Is the FBI taking an interest in this?”

“No, it’s just something personal.”

“Personal?”

Riley hesitated, then said, “My daughter is good friends with Lois’s sister, and she also knew Lois a little. Both she and Lois’s sister are having trouble believing that she committed suicide.”

“I see,” Danica said. “Well, the police found no signs of a struggle. And I conducted the tests and the autopsy myself. According to blood results, she’d taken a heavy dose of alprazolam some time before she died. My guess is she just wanted to be as out of it as she possibly could. By the time she hanged herself, she probably just didn’t care about what she was doing. It would have been a lot easier to do that way.”

“So it’s really an open-and-shut case,” Riley said.

“It sure looks that way to me,” Danica said.

Riley thanked her and ended the call. At that moment, April came downstairs with a calculator and a piece of paper.

“Mom, I think I’ve proved it!” she said excitedly. “It couldn’t have been anything but murder!”

April sat down beside Riley and showed her some numbers that she’d written down.

“I did a little research online,” she said. “I found out that about seven point five college students commit suicide out of one hundred thousand. That’s point zero zero seven five percent. But there are only about seven hundred students at Byars, and three of them are supposed to have killed themselves in the last few months. That’s about point four three percent—which is fifty-seven times the average! It’s just impossible!”

Riley’s heart sank. She appreciated that April was putting so much thought into this. It seemed very mature of her.

“April, I’m sure your math is just fine, but ...”

“But what?”

Riley shook her head. “It doesn’t prove anything at all.”

April’s eyes widened with disbelief.

“What do you mean, it doesn’t prove anything?”

“In statistics, there are things called *outliers*. They’re exceptions to the rules, they go against the averages. It’s like the last case I worked on—the poisoner, remember? Most serial killers are men, but that was a woman. And most killers like to watch their victims die, but she just didn’t care. It’s the same thing here. It’s no surprise that there are some colleges where more students commit suicide than the average.”

April stared at her and said nothing.

“April, I just talked to the medical examiner who did the autopsy. She’s sure that Lois’s death was a suicide. And she knows her job. She’s an expert. We have to trust her judgment.”

April’s face was tight with anger.

“I don’t see why you can’t trust *my* judgment just this once.”

Then she stormed away and went upstairs.

At least she’s sure she knows what happened, she thought with a groan.

That was more than Riley could say for herself.

Her instincts still told her nothing at all.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was happening all over again.

The monster named Peterson held April captive somewhere just ahead.

Riley struggled and searched through the dark. Each step seemed slow and cumbersome, but she knew she had to hurry.

With her shotgun slung over her shoulder, Riley stumbled in the dark down a sharp, muddy slope toward a river. Suddenly she saw them. Peterson was standing ankle-deep in the water. Just a few feet from him, April was half submerged in the water, bound by her hands and feet.

Riley reached for her shotgun, but Peterson raised a pistol and pointed it directly at April.

“Don’t even think about it,” Peterson yelled. “One move and it’s over.”

Riley was seized with horror. If she even raised her shotgun, Peterson would kill April before she could fire.

She put the shotgun on the ground.

The terror on her daughter’s face would haunt her forever ...

Riley stopped running and bent over, gasping.

It was early morning, and she had gone out for a run. But the horrible memory had stopped her dead in her tracks.

Would she ever forget that terrible moment?

Would she ever stop feeling guilty for putting April in deadly danger?

No, she thought. And that’s as it should be. I must never forget.

She inhaled and exhaled the sharp, cold air until she felt steadier. Then she started walking along the familiar woodland trail. Pale early-morning daylight was filtering through the trees.

This city park trail was close to home and easy to get to. Riley often ran here in the mornings. The exertion was usually good for driving ghosts and demons of past cases from her mind. But today it was having the opposite effect.

All that had happened yesterday—the visit to the Penningtons’, the peek into the garage, and April’s anger at Riley—had brought back floods of ugly memories.

And all because of me, Riley thought, quickening her pace into a jog.

But then she remembered what had happened next in that river.

Peterson’s gun jammed, and Riley shoved a knife between his ribs, only to stagger and fall into the cold water. Wounded, Peterson still managed to hold Riley under.

Then she saw April, wrists and feet still bound, raise the shotgun that Riley had dropped. She heard it crack against Peterson’s head.

But the monster turned and charged April. He shoved her face down in the water.

Her daughter was going to drown.

Riley found a sharp rock.

She lunged at Peterson, smashing it into his head.

He fell, and she leaped on top of him.

She smashed the rock into Peterson’s face over and over again.

The river darkened with blood.

Stirred by the memory, Riley ran faster.

She was proud of her daughter. April had shown courage and resourcefulness on that terrible day. She had been brave in other dangerous situations too.

But now April was angry with Riley.

And Riley couldn't help but wonder if it was with good reason.

*

Riley felt doubly out of place at Lois Pennington's church funeral service late that afternoon.

For one thing, she'd seldom gone to church over the years. Her father had been a hardened ex-Marine who never believed in anything or anyone but himself. She'd lived with an aunt and uncle during some of her childhood and teen years, and they'd tried to get her to go to church, but Riley had been too rebellious.

As far as funerals were concerned, Riley simply hated them. She'd seen too much of the brutal reality of death during her two decades in law enforcement, so as far as she was concerned, funerals were simply phony. They always made death seem so clean and peaceful.

The whole thing is misleading, she kept thinking. This girl had died violently, whether at her own hands or someone else's.

But April had insisted on coming, and Riley couldn't let her face this by herself. Which seemed ironic, because at the moment it was Riley who felt alone. She was sitting next to the aisle in the back row of the crowded sanctuary. April was up near the front, sitting in the row right behind the family, as close to Tiffany as she could get. But Riley was glad that April was near her friend, and she didn't mind sitting by herself.

Sunshine brightened the stained glass windows, and the casket at the front was layered with flowers and several large wreaths. The service was dignified and the choir sang well.

The preacher was droning on now about faith and salvation, assuring everybody that Lois was now in a better place. Riley wasn't paying attention to his words. She was looking around for telltale clues as to why Lois Pennington had died.

Yesterday she had noticed how Lois's parents sat slightly apart on their couch, not quite touching. She hadn't been sure how to read their body language. But now Lester Pennington's arm was around Eunice's shoulder in a warm gesture of comfort. The two of them seemed to be perfectly ordinary grieving parents.

If there was anything seriously amiss about the Penningtons as a family, Riley couldn't see it.

And oddly enough, that made Riley feel distinctly uneasy.

She considered herself a keen observer of human nature. If Lois had really committed suicide, her family life had most likely been troubled. But nothing appeared wrong with them—nothing other than normal grief.

The preacher managed to finish his sermon without once mentioning the supposed cause of Lois's death.

Then came a series of short, tearful testimonials by friends and relatives. They spoke of grief and happier times, sometimes relating humorous events that evoked sad chuckles from the congregation.

But nothing about suicide, Riley kept thinking.

Something seemed off to her.

Wouldn't somebody who had been close to Lois want to acknowledge something dark about her final days—a struggle against depression, a battle against inner demons, some unanswered cry for help? Wouldn't somebody suggest that her tragic death should be a lesson to others to get help and support instead of taking one's own life?

But no one said anything of the kind.

No one wanted to talk about it.

They seemed to be ashamed or baffled or both.

Perhaps they didn't even fully believe it.

The testimonials ended, and it came time for viewing the body. Riley stayed seated. She was sure that the mortician had done a skillful job. Whatever was left of poor Lois didn't look at all like

she had looked when she was found hanging in that garage. Riley knew from hard experience what a strangled corpse looked like.

Finally the preacher offered a closing benediction and the casket was carried out. The family walked out together, and everybody else was free to go.

When Riley got outside, she saw Tiffany and April hugging each other tearfully. Then Tiffany saw Riley and hurried toward her.

“Isn’t there anything you can do?” the girl asked in a choked voice.

Shaken, Riley managed to say, “No, I’m sorry.”

Before Tiffany could plead further, her father called out her name. Tiffany’s family was climbing into a black limousine. Tiffany joined them, and the vehicle drove away.

Riley turned back toward April, who refused to look at her.

“I’ll take a bus home,” April said.

April walked away, and Riley didn’t try to stop her. Feeling terrible, she made her way to her car in the church parking lot.

*

Dinner that evening was hardly the cheerful occasion it had been just two days ago. April was still not speaking to Riley, and barely to anybody else. Her sadness was catching. Ryan and Gabriela were somber as well.

In the middle of the meal, Jilly spoke up.

“I made a friend at school today. Her name is Jane. She’s adopted, like me.”

April’s expression brightened.

“Hey, that’s great, Jilly,” April said.

“Yeah. We’ve got a whole lot in common. A lot to talk about.”

Riley’s own spirits lifted slightly. It was good that Jilly was starting to make friends. And Riley knew that April had been worried about Jilly.

The two girls talked a little about Jane. Then everybody fell silent again, as somber as before.

Riley knew that Jilly wanted to break the dark mood, to cheer April up. But the younger girl looked worried now. Riley guessed that she was alarmed by all this tension in her new family. Jilly was surely afraid she could lose what she had so recently found.

I hope she’s not right, Riley thought.

After dinner, the girls went upstairs to their rooms and Gabriela cleaned up the kitchen. Ryan poured a glass of bourbon for Riley and another for himself, and they sat together in the living room.

Neither of them spoke for a little while.

“I’m going upstairs to talk to April,” Ryan finally said.

“Why?” Riley asked.

“She’s being rude. And she’s being disrespectful to you. We shouldn’t let her get away with it.”

Riley sighed.

“She’s not being rude,” she said.

“Well, what would you call it?”

Riley thought for a moment.

“She just really *cares*,” she said. “She’s worried about her friend Tiffany, and she’s feeling powerless. She’s afraid that something terrible happened to Lois. We should be glad that she’s thinking about others. It’s a sign of growing up.”

They both fell silent again.

“What do you think really happened?” Ryan finally asked. “Do you think Lois committed suicide, or was she murdered?”

Riley shook her head wearily.

“I wish I knew,” she said. “I’ve learned to trust my gut, my instincts. But my instincts aren’t kicking in at all. I just don’t have any feeling about it one way or the other.”

Ryan patted her hand.

“Whatever happened, it’s not your responsibility,” he said.

“You’re right,” Riley said.

Ryan yawned.

“I’m tired,” he said. “I think I’m going to turn in early.”

“I’ll sit down here for a while,” Riley said. “I’m not ready to sleep yet.”

Ryan went upstairs, and Riley poured herself another large drink. The house was quiet, and Riley felt alone and strangely helpless—just as she was sure April was feeling. But after another drink, she started to relax and soon felt drowsy. She kicked off her shoes and stretched out on the couch.

A little while later she woke up to find that somebody had tucked blankets around her. Ryan must have come downstairs to check on her and make sure she was comfortable.

Riley smiled, feeling less alone now. Then she fell asleep again.

*

Riley felt a flash of déjà vu as April hurried toward the Penningtons’ garage.

As she’d done yesterday, Riley called out.

“April, stay away from there!”

This time, April pulled the police tape loose before she opened the door.

Then April disappeared into the garage.

Riley ran after her and went inside.

The garage interior was much bigger and darker than it had been yesterday, like a huge abandoned warehouse.

Riley didn’t see April anywhere.

“April, where are you?” she called out.

April’s voice echoed in the air.

“I’m here, Mom.”

Riley couldn’t tell where the voice was coming from.

She turned slowly around, peering into the seemingly endless darkness.

Finally, an overhead light switched on.

Riley was stunned with horror.

Hanging from a beam was a girl just a couple of years older than April.

She was dead, but her eyes were open, and her gaze was locked on Riley.

And scattered all around the girl, on tables and on the floor, were hundreds of framed pictures showing the girl and her family at different times of her life.

“April!” Riley screamed.

No answer came.

Riley awakened and sat bolt upright on the couch, almost hyperventilating with terror at the nightmare.

It was all she could do to stop herself from yelling at the top of her lungs ...

“April!”

But she knew that April was upstairs asleep.

The whole family was asleep—except for her.

Why did I have that dream? she wondered.

It took only a moment for her to know the answer.

She realized that her instincts had kicked in at long last.

She knew that April was right—something was very wrong with Lois’s death.
And it was up to her to do something about it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Riley felt a distinct chill when she got out of her car at Byars College. It wasn't just from the weather, which was cold enough. The school had a weirdly unwelcoming vibe about it.

She shivered deeply as she looked around.

Students were wandering the campus, bundled tightly against the cold, hurrying to their destinations and barely speaking to one another. None of them looked happy to be here.

Small wonder this place makes students want to kill themselves, Riley thought.

For one thing, the place seemed to belong to a bygone age. Riley almost felt like she was stepping back in time. The old brick buildings had been kept in perfect condition. So had the white columns, relics of times when columns were required for this kind of setting.

The parklike campus was impressively large, given that it was planted right in the nation's capital. Of course, DC had grown up around it during the nearly two hundred years of its existence. The small, exclusive school had thrived, producing alumni who went on to success in the nation's most prestigious graduate schools, then into positions of power in business and politics. Students came to schools like this to make and maintain high-level connections that would last a lifetime.

Naturally, it was far too expensive for Riley's family—even, she felt sure, with the scholarship support they occasionally gave for excellent students from significant families. Not that she would ever want to send April here. Or Jilly, for that matter.

Riley went into the administration building and found the dean's office, where she was greeted by a stern-looking secretary.

Riley showed the woman her badge.

"I'm Special Agent Riley Paige with the FBI. I called earlier today."

The woman nodded.

"Dean Autrey is expecting you," she said.

The woman showed Riley into a large, gloomy office with heavy, dark wood paneling.

An elegant, somewhat elderly man stood up from his desk to greet her. He was tall, with silver hair, and he wore an expensive three-piece suit with a bow tie.

"Agent Paige, I presume," he said with a chilly smile. "I'm Dean Willis Autrey. Please have a seat."

Riley sat down in front of his desk. Autrey sat down and swiveled in his chair.

"I'm not sure I understand the nature of your visit," he said. "Something to do with the unfortunate passing of Lois Pennington, isn't it?"

"Her suicide, you mean," Riley said.

Autrey nodded and steepled his fingers.

"Hardly an FBI case, I would think," he said. "I called the girl's parents, gave them the school's heartfelt condolences. They were devastated, of course. The whole thing was so unfortunate. But they didn't seem to have any specific concerns."

Riley realized that she had to choose her words carefully. She wasn't here on an assigned case—in fact, her superiors at Quantico wouldn't approve of this visit at all. But maybe she could manage to keep Autrey from finding that out.

"Another family member has expressed misgivings," she said.

She figured there was no need to tell him she meant Lois's teenaged sister.

"How unfortunate," he said.

He seems to like using that word—unfortunate, Riley thought.

"What can you tell me about Lois Pennington?" Riley asked.

Autrey was starting to seem bored now, as if his mind were elsewhere.

“Well, nothing that her family hasn’t told you, I’m sure,” he said. “I didn’t know her personally, but ...”

He turned toward his computer and typed.

“She seems to have been a perfectly ordinary first-year student,” he said, looking at the screen. “Reasonably good grades. No reports of anything untoward. Although I see that she did get some counseling for depression.”

“But she’s not the only suicide at your school this year,” Riley said.

Autrey’s expression darkened a little. He said nothing.

Before leaving home, Riley had done a little research into the two suicides that Tiffany had mentioned.

“Deanna Webber and Cory Linz both allegedly killed themselves last semester,” Riley said. “Cory’s death was right here on campus.”

“‘Allegedly’?” Autrey asked. “A rather unfortunate word, I think. I’ve not heard anything to the contrary.”

He turned his face slightly away from Riley, as if to pretend she wasn’t even there.

“Ms. Paige—” he began.

“Agent Paige,” Riley corrected.

“Agent Paige—I’m sure that a professional such as yourself is aware that the suicide rate among college students has increased over recent decades. It’s the third leading cause of death among people in the undergraduate age group. There are more than a thousand suicides on college campuses each year.”

He paused, as if to let those facts sink in.

“And of course,” he said, “some schools experience clusters in a given year. Byars is a demanding school. It’s unfortunate but rather inevitable that we should get somewhat more than our share of suicides.”

Riley suppressed a smile.

The figures April had researched a couple of days ago were about to come in handy.

April would be pleased, she thought.

She said, “The national average of college suicides is about seven point five out of one hundred thousand. But just this year, three of your students out of seven hundred have killed themselves. That’s fifty-seven times the national average.”

Autrey raised his eyebrows.

“Well, as I’m sure you know, there are always—”

“Outliers,” Riley said, managing again not to smile. “Yes, I know all about outliers. Even so, the suicide rate at your school strikes me as exceptionally—unfortunate.”

Autrey sat looking away in silence.

“Dean Autrey, I’m under the impression you’re not happy to have an FBI agent poking around here,” she said.

“As a matter of fact, I’m not,” he said. “Should I feel otherwise? This is a waste of your time and mine, and of taxpayers’ money as well. And your presence here might give the impression that something is amiss. There’s nothing amiss here at Byars College, I assure you.”

He leaned across his desk toward Riley.

“Agent Paige, what branch of the FBI are you with exactly?”

“The Behavioral Analysis Unit.”

“Ah. Right nearby in Quantico. Well, you might want to keep in mind that many of our students come from political families. Some of their parents have considerable influence over the government—the FBI included, I imagine. I’m sure we don’t want this sort of thing getting back to them.”

“This sort of thing?” Riley asked.

Autrey swiveled back and forth in his chair.

“Such people might be prone to register complaints with your superiors,” he said with a significant look.

Riley felt a tingle of unease.

She sensed that he’d guessed she wasn’t here in an official capacity.

“It’s really best not to stir up trouble where no problem exists,” Autrey continued. “I’m only making this observation for your benefit. I’d hate for you to run afoul of your superiors.”

Riley almost laughed aloud.

Running “afoul” of her superiors was practically routine for her.

So was getting suspended or fired and then getting reinstated again.

It didn’t scare Riley in the least.

“I see,” she said. “Anything not to taint your school’s reputation.”

“I’m glad we see eye to eye,” Autrey said.

He rose to his feet, obviously expecting Riley to leave.

But Riley wasn’t ready to leave—not yet.

“Thank you for your time,” she said. “I’ll be on my way as soon as you give me the contact information for the families of the previous suicides.”

Autrey stood glaring at her. Riley glared back without moving from her chair.

Autrey glanced at his watch. “I have another appointment. I must go now.”

Riley smiled.

“I’m in a bit of a hurry too,” she said, looking at her own watch. “So the sooner you give me that information, the sooner we both can get on with things. I’ll wait.”

Autrey frowned, then sat down at his computer again. He typed a little, and then his printer rumbled. He handed the sheet with the information to Riley.

“I’m afraid that I’ll have to register a complaint with your superiors,” he said.

Riley still didn’t move. Her curiosity was mounting.

“Dean Autrey, you just mentioned that Byars gets ‘somewhat more than its share’ of suicides. Just how many suicides are we talking about?”

Autrey didn’t reply. His face reddened with anger, but he kept his voice quiet and controlled.

“Your superior at BAU will be hearing from me,” he said.

“Of course,” Riley said with measured politeness. “Thank you for your time.”

Riley left the office and the administration building. This time the cold air felt bracing and invigorating.

Autrey’s evasiveness convinced Riley that she’d come upon a nest of trouble.

And Riley thrived on trouble.

CHAPTER SIX

As soon as Riley got into her car, she went over the information Dean Autrey had given her. Details about Deanna Webber's death began to come back to her.

Of course, she remembered, bringing up old news stories on her cell phone. *The congresswoman's daughter.*

Representative Hazel Webber was a rising politician, married to a prominent Maryland lawyer. Their daughter's death had been in the headlines last fall. Riley hadn't paid much attention to the story at the time. It seemed more like salacious gossip than real news—the sort of thing Riley thought was nobody's business but the family's.

Now she thought differently.

She found the phone number for Congresswoman Hazel Webber's office in Washington. When she dialed the number, an efficient-sounding receptionist answered.

"This is Special Agent Riley Paige, with the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit," Riley said. "I'd like to arrange a meeting with Representative Webber."

"May I ask what this is about?"

"I need to talk with her about her daughter's death last fall."

A silence fell.

Riley said, "I'm sorry to disturb the congresswoman and her family about this terrible tragedy. But we just need to tie up a few loose ends."

More silence.

"I'm sorry," the receptionist said slowly. "But Representative Webber isn't in Washington right now. You'll need to wait until she gets back from Maryland."

"And when might that be?" Riley asked.

"I couldn't say. You'll just have to call back."

The receptionist ended the call without another word.

She's in Maryland, Riley thought.

She ran a quick search and found that Hazel Webber lived in Maryland horse country. It didn't look as though the place would be hard to find.

But before Riley could start her car, her cell phone buzzed.

"This is Hazel Webber," the caller said.

Riley was startled. The receptionist must have contacted the congresswoman immediately after hanging up on Riley. She certainly hadn't expected to hear back from Webber herself, much less so quickly.

"How can I help you?" Webber said.

Riley explained again that she wanted to talk about some "loose ends" regarding her daughter's death.

"Could you be a bit more specific?" Webber asked.

"I'd rather do that in person," Riley said.

Webber was quiet for a moment.

"I'm afraid that's impossible," Webber said. "And I'll thank you and your superiors not to trouble me and my family any further. We're just now beginning to heal. I'm sure you understand."

Riley was struck by the woman's icy tone. She didn't detect the slightest trace of grief.

"Representative Webber, if you can give me just a little bit of your time—"

"I said no."

Webber ended the call.

Riley was dumbstruck. She had no idea what to make of the terse, awkward exchange.

All she knew for sure was that she'd touched a nerve with the congresswoman.

And she needed to go to Maryland right away.

*

It was a pleasant two-hour drive. Since the weather was good, Riley took a route that included the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, paying the toll in order to enjoy the drive across the water.

She soon found herself in Maryland horse country, where handsome wooden fences enclosed pastures, and tree-lined lanes led to elegant homes and barns set far back from the road.

She pulled up to the gate outside the Webbers' estate. A heavysset uniformed guard stepped out of his shack and approached her.

Riley showed the guard her badge and introduced herself.

"I'm here to see Representative Webber," she said.

The guard stepped away and spoke into his microphone. Then he stepped toward Riley again.

"The congresswoman says there's been some sort of mistake," he said. "She isn't expecting you."

Riley smiled as broadly as she could.

"Oh, is she too busy at the moment? That's okay, my schedule's not tight. I'll wait right here until she has time."

The guard scowled, trying to look intimidating.

"I'm afraid you'll have to leave, ma'am," he said.

Riley shrugged and acted as if she didn't take his meaning.

"Oh, really, it's all right. No trouble at all. I can wait right here."

The guard stepped away and spoke into his microphone again. After glaring at Riley silently for a moment, he went into his shack and opened the gate. Riley drove on through.

She drove through a broad, snow-patched pasture, where a couple of horses trotted freely about. It was a peaceful scene.

When she reached the house, it was even larger than she had expected—a contemporary mansion. She glimpsed other well-kept buildings just beyond a slight rise in the rolling landscape.

An Asian man wordlessly met her at the door. He was about as large as a sumo wrestler, which made his formal, butler-like suit seem grotesquely inappropriate. He led Riley through a vaulted corridor with a floor of expensive-looking reddish-brown wood.

Finally she was greeted by a small, grim-looking woman who wordlessly led her into an almost eerily neat office.

"Wait here," the woman said.

She left, shutting the door behind her.

Riley sat in a chair near the desk. Minutes passed. She felt tempted to take a look at materials on the desk or even on the computer. But she knew that her every move was surely being recorded by security cameras.

Finally, Representative Hazel Webber swept into the room.

She was a tall woman—thin but imposing. She didn't look old enough to have been in Congress for as long as Riley supposed—nor did she look old enough to have a college-aged daughter. A certain stiffness around her eyes might be habitual or Botox-induced or both.

Riley remembered seeing her on television. Normally when she met someone she'd seen on TV, she was struck by how different they looked in real life. Weirdly, Hazel Webber looked exactly the same. It was as if she were truly two-dimensional—an almost unnaturally shallow human being in every possible way.

Her outfit also puzzled Riley. Why was she wearing a jacket over her lightweight sweater? The house was certainly warm enough.

Part of her style, I guess, Riley figured.

The jacket gave her a more formal, businesslike look than just slacks and a sweater. Perhaps it also represented a kind of armor, a protection against any genuine human contact.

Riley stood up to introduce herself, but Webber spoke first.

“Agent Riley Paige, BAU,” she said. “I know.”

Without another word, she sat down at her desk.

“What are you here to tell me?” Webber said.

Riley felt a jolt of alarm. Of course, she had nothing to tell her. Her whole visit was a bluff, and Webber suddenly struck her as the kind of woman who wasn’t easily bluffed. Riley was in over her head and had to tread water as hard as she could.

“I’m actually here to ask *you* for information,” Riley said. “Is your husband at home?”

“Yes,” the woman said.

“Would it be possible for me to talk with both of you?”

“He knows that you’re here.”

Her non-answer disarmed Riley, but she took care not to show it. The woman fastened her cold, blue eyes on Riley’s. Riley didn’t flinch. She just returned her stare, bracing herself for a subtle battle of wills.

Riley said, “The Behavioral Analysis Unit is investigating an unusual number of apparent suicides at Byars College.”

“*Apparent* suicides?” Webber said, arching a single eyebrow. “I’d hardly describe Deanna’s suicide as ‘apparent.’ It seemed plenty real to my husband and me.”

Riley could swear that the temperature in the room had dropped a few degrees. Webber betrayed not the slightest hint of emotion at her mention of her own daughter’s suicide.

She’s got ice water in her veins, Riley thought.

“I’d like you to tell me what happened,” Riley said.

“Why? I’m sure you’ve read the report.”

Of course, Riley had done nothing of the kind. But she had to keep bluffing her way along.

“It would help if I could hear it in your own words,” she said.

Webber was silent for a moment. Her stare was unwavering. But so was Riley’s.

“Deanna was injured in a riding accident last summer,” Webber said. “Her hip was badly fractured. It seemed likely that it would have to be replaced altogether. Her days of riding in competitions were over. She was heartbroken.”

Webber paused for a moment.

“She was taking oxycodone for the pain. She overdosed—deliberately. It was intentional, and that’s all there is to it.”

Riley sensed that she was leaving something unsaid.

“Where did it happen?” she asked.

“In her bedroom,” Webber said. “She was snug in her bed. The medical examiner said she died of respiratory arrest. She looked like she was asleep when the maid found her.”

And then—Webber blinked.

She literally blinked.

She had faltered in their battle of wills.

She’s lying! Riley realized.

Riley’s pulse quickened.

Now she had to really apply the pressure, probe with exactly the right questions.

But before Riley could even think of what to ask, the office door opened. The woman who had brought Riley here came in.

“Congresswoman, I need a word with you, please,” she said.

Webber looked relieved as she got up from her desk and followed her assistant out the door.

Riley took some long, slow breaths.

She wished she hadn't been interrupted.

She was sure she'd been about to crack through Hazel Webber's deceptive facade.

But her opportunity wasn't gone.

When Webber came back, Riley would start in on her again.

After less than a minute, Webber returned. She seemed to have recovered her self-assurance.

She stood by the open door and said, "Agent Paige—if you really *are* Agent Paige—I'm afraid I must ask you to leave."

Riley gulped hard.

"I don't understand."

"My assistant just called the BAU. They have absolutely no investigation underway concerning suicides at Byars College. Now whoever you are—"

Riley pulled out her badge.

"I *am* Special Agent Riley Paige," she said with determination. "And I'm going to do everything I can to make sure that such an investigation gets underway as soon as possible."

She walked past Hazel Webber out of the office.

On her way out of the house, she knew that she had made an enemy—and a dangerous one at that.

It was a different sort of danger from what she usually faced.

Hazel Webber wasn't a psychopath whose weapons of choice were chains, knives, guns, or blowtorches.

She was a woman without a conscience, and her weapons were money and power.

Riley preferred the kind of adversary she could punch out or shoot. Even so, she was ready and willing to deal with Webber and whatever threats she could muster.

She lied to me about her daughter, Riley kept thinking.

And now Riley was determined to find out the truth.

The house seemed empty now. Riley was surprised to leave without encountering a single soul. She felt as if she could rob the place and not get caught.

She went outside and got into her car and drove away.

As she approached the manor gate, she saw that it was closed. Standing just inside were both the burly guard who had let her in and the enormous butler. Both had their arms crossed, and they were obviously waiting for her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The two men definitely looked threatening. They also looked a little bit ridiculous—the smaller of the two wearing his guard uniform, his much more massive partner wearing his ultra-formal butler's outfit.

Like a pair of circus clowns, she thought.

But she knew they weren't trying to be funny.

Riley pulled her car to a stop right in front of them. She rolled down her window, looked out, and called to them.

"Is there some sort of problem, gentlemen?"

The guard came closer, directly in front of her car.

The colossal butler lumbered toward her passenger window.

He spoke in a rumbling bass voice.

"Representative Webber would like to clear up a misunderstanding."

"And that would be?"

"She wants you to understand that snoops aren't welcome here."

Now Riley got the picture.

Webber and her assistant had come to the conclusion that Riley was an imposter, not an FBI agent at all. They probably suspected that she was a reporter getting ready to write some sort of exposé about the congresswoman.

No doubt these two guys were used to dealing with nosy reporters.

Riley pulled out her badge again.

"I think there *has* been a misunderstanding," she said. "I really am a special agent with the FBI."

The big man smirked. He obviously believed the badge was a fake.

"Step out of the car, please," he said.

"I'd rather not, thank you," Riley said. "I'd really appreciate if you'd open the gate."

Riley had left her door unlocked. The big man opened it.

"Step out of the car, please," he repeated.

Riley groaned under her breath.

This isn't going to end well, she thought.

Riley stepped out of the car and shut the door. The two men moved to stand side by side a short distance from her.

Riley wondered which of them was going to make the first move.

Then the huge man cracked his knuckles and strode toward her.

Riley took a couple of steps toward him.

As he reached out for her, she grabbed him by his lapel and the sleeve of his left arm and tugged him off balance. Then she pivoted all the way around on her left foot and ducked down. She barely felt the man's massive weight as his whole body flew over her back. He slammed loudly and upside-down against the car door and then landed head first on the ground.

The car got the worst of it, she thought with fleeting dismay.

The other man was already moving toward her, and she whirled to face him.

She landed a kick to his groin. He bent over with a huge groan, and Riley could see that the altercation was over.

She snatched the man's pistol from his hip holster.

Then she surveyed her handiwork.

The larger man still lay in a crumpled heap beside the car, staring at her with a terrified expression. The car door was dented, but not as badly as Riley had feared. The uniformed guard was on his hands and knees gasping for breath.

She held the pistol, handle first, toward the guard.

“You seem to have misplaced this,” she said in a pleasant voice.

His hands trembling, he reached for the gun.

Riley pulled it away from him.

“Huh-uh,” she said. “Not until you open the gate.”

She took the man by the hand and helped him to his feet. He staggered to the shack and threw the switch that opened the iron gate. Riley walked toward the car.

“Excuse me,” she told the enormous man.

Still looking quite terrified, the man scrambled sideways like a giant crab, getting out of Riley’s way. She got into the car and drove through the gate. She tossed the pistol on the ground as she drove away.

They don’t think I’m a reporter anymore, she thought.

She was also sure that they would let the congresswoman know that pretty quickly.

*

A couple of hours later, Riley pulled her car into the parking lot at the BAU building. She sat there for a few moments. She hadn’t been here once during her month on leave. She hadn’t expected to be back so soon. It felt really strange.

She turned off the engine, removed the keys, got out of the car, and went into the building. As she made her way toward her office, friends and colleagues spoke to her with varying degrees of welcome, surprise, or restraint.

She stopped at the office of her usual partner, Bill Jeffreys, but he wasn’t there. He was probably out on an assignment, working with someone else.

She felt a slight pang of sadness—even jealousy.

In many ways, Bill was her best friend in the world.

Still, she figured maybe this was just as well. Bill didn’t know that she and Ryan were together again, and he wouldn’t approve. He had held her hand too many times during her painful breakup and divorce. He’d find it hard to believe that Ryan was a changed man.

When she opened the door to her own office, she had to double check to make sure she was in the right place. It all looked far too neat and well organized. Had they given her office to another agent? Had someone else been working here?

Riley opened a drawer and found familiar files, though now in better order.

Who would have straightened everything up for her?

Certainly not Bill. He would have known better.

Lucy Vargas, maybe, she thought.

Lucy was a young agent that both she and Bill had worked with and liked. If Lucy was the culprit behind all this neatness, at least she’d done it in a spirit of helpfulness.

Riley sat at her desk for a few minutes.

Images and memories came to her—the girl’s coffin, her devastated parents, and Riley’s terrible dream of the hanged girl surrounded by mementos. She also remembered how Dean Autrey had evaded her questions, and how Hazel Webber had outright lied.

She reminded herself of what she’d said to Hazel Webber. She’d promised to get an official investigation underway. And it was time to make good on that promise.

She picked up her office phone and buzzed her boss, Brent Meredith.

When the team chief picked up, she said, “Sir, this is Riley Paige. I wonder if I could—”

She was about to ask for a few minutes of his time when his voice thundered.

“Agent Paige, get in my office right now.”

Riley shuddered.

Meredith was plenty mad at her about something.

CHAPTER EIGHT

When Riley hurried into Brent Meredith's office, she found him standing by his desk waiting for her.

"Close the door," he said. "Sit down."

Riley did as she was told.

Still standing, Meredith didn't speak for a few moments. He just glared at Riley. He was a big man—broad-built with black, angular features. And he was intimidating even when he was in the best of moods.

He wasn't in a good mood right now.

"Is there something you'd like to tell me, Agent Paige?" he asked.

Riley gulped. She guessed that some of her activities that day had already gotten back to him.

"Perhaps you'd better start first, sir," she said meekly.

He moved closer to her.

"I've just gotten two complaints from on high about you," he said.

Riley's heart sank. By "on high," she knew who Meredith meant. The complaints had come from Special Agent in Charge Carl Walder himself—a contemptible little man who had already suspended Riley more than once for insubordination.

Meredith growled, "Walder tells me he got a call from the dean of a small college."

"Yes, Byars College. But if you'll give me a moment to explain—"

Meredith interrupted her again.

"The dean said you walked into his office and made some preposterous allegations."

"That's not exactly what happened, sir," Riley pleaded.

But Meredith steamrolled right along.

"Walder also got a call from Representative Hazel Webber. She said that you made your way into her home and harassed her. You even lied to her about some nonexistent case. And then you assaulted two members of her staff. You threatened them at gunpoint."

Riley bristled at the accusation.

"That's *really* not what happened, sir."

"Then what did happen?"

"It was the guard's own gun," she blurted.

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Riley realized ...

That didn't come out right at all.

"I was trying to give it back!" she said.

But she instantly knew ...

That didn't help.

A long silence fell.

Meredith drew a deep breath. Finally, he said, "You'd better have a good explanation for your actions, Agent Paige."

Riley took a deep breath.

"Sir, there have been three suspicious deaths at Byars College, just during this school year. They were allegedly suicides. I don't believe that's what they were."

"This is the first I've heard of it," Meredith said.

"I understand, sir. And I came here just to tell you about it."

Meredith stood, waiting for further explanation.

"A friend of my daughter's had a sister at Byars College—Lois Pennington, a freshman. Her family found her hanging in the garage last Sunday. Her sister doesn't believe it was suicide. I interviewed her parents, and—"

Meredith yelled loud enough to be heard out in the hallway.

“You *interviewed* her *parents*?”

“Yes, sir,” Riley said quietly.

Meredith took a moment to try to bring his temper under control.

“Need I tell you that this is not a BAU case?”

“No, sir,” Riley said.

“In fact, as far as I know, this is not a case at all.”

Riley didn’t know what to say next.

“So what did her parents tell you?” Meredith asked. “Did *they* think it was suicide?”

“Yes,” Riley said in a hushed voice.

Now Meredith didn’t seem to know what to say. He shook his head with dismay.

“Sir, I know how this sounds,” Riley said. “But the dean at Byars was hiding something. And Hazel Webber lied to me about her own daughter’s death.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know!”

Riley looked at Meredith imploringly.

“Sir, after all these years, surely you know that my instincts are good. When I feel something in my gut, I’m almost always right. You’ve got to trust me. There’s something wrong with these girls’ deaths.”

“Riley, you know that’s not the way things work.”

Riley was startled. Meredith seldom called her by her first name—only when he was genuinely concerned about her. She knew that he valued, liked, and respected her, and she felt the same about him.

He leaned against his desk and shrugged unhappily.

“Maybe you’re right, and maybe you’re wrong,” he said with a sigh. “Either way, I can’t make this a BAU case just because of your gut feelings. There’d have to be a whole lot more to it.”

Meredith now gazed at her with a worried expression.

“Agent Paige, you’ve been through a lot lately. You’ve been on some dangerous cases, and your partner almost got poisoned to death on the last one. And you’ve got a new family member to take care of, and ...”

“And what?” Riley asked.

Meredith paused, then said, “I put you on leave a month ago. You seemed to think it was a good idea. The last time we talked, you even asked me for more time away. I think that’s best. Take all the time you need. You need more rest.”

Riley felt discouraged and defeated. But she knew there was no point in arguing. The truth was, Meredith was right. There was no way he could take on this case on the basis of what she’d told him. Especially not with a bureaucratic creep like Walder breathing down his neck.

“I’m sorry, sir,” she said. “I’ll go home now.”

She felt terribly alone as she left Meredith’s office and headed out of the building. But she wasn’t ready to put her suspicions aside. Her gut feeling was much too strong for that. She knew she had to do something.

First things first, she thought.

She had to get more information. She had to prove that something was wrong.

But how was she going to do that alone?

*

Riley got home about a half hour before dinner. She went into the kitchen and found Gabriela preparing another of her delicious Guatemalan specialties, *gallo en perro*, a spicy stew.

“Are the girls home?” Riley asked.

“Sí. They are in April’s room doing homework together.”

Riley felt a bit relieved. At home at least, something seemed to be going right.

“How about Ryan?” Riley asked.

“He called. He will be late.”

Riley felt a pang of unease. It reminded her of bad times with Ryan. But she told herself not to worry. Ryan’s job was demanding, after all. And besides, Riley’s own work kept her away from home much more than she would like.

She went upstairs and got on her computer. She ran a search on Deanna Webber’s death, but didn’t find anything she didn’t know already. Then she looked for information on Cory Linz, the other girl who had died. Again, she found very little information.

She did a search for recent obituaries that mentioned Byars College, and soon came up with six. One of those had died in a hospital after a long battle with cancer. Of the others, she recognized the photos of three young people. They were Deanna Webber, Lois Pennington, and Cory Linz. But she didn’t recognize the young man and the young woman in the other two obituaries. Their names were Kirk Farrell and Constance Yoh, both sophomores.

Of course, none of the obituaries stated that the deceased had committed suicide. Most of them were pretty vague about the actual cause of death.

Riley sat back in her chair and sighed.

She needed help. But who could she turn to? She still didn’t have access to the techies at Quantico.

She shuddered at one possibility.

No, not Shane Hatcher, she thought.

The criminal genius who had escaped from Sing Sing had come to her aid on more than one case. Her failure—or was it her reluctance?—to recapture him had stirred considerable consternation among Riley’s superiors at the BAU.

She knew perfectly well how to contact him.

In fact, she could do it right now, using her computer.

No, Riley thought with another shudder. Absolutely not.

But who else could she turn to?

Now she remembered something Hatcher had told her when she’d been in a similar situation.

“I think you know who to talk to at the FBI when you’re persona non grata. It’s somebody else who doesn’t give a damn about the rules.”

Riley felt a tingle of excitement.

She knew exactly whose help she needed.

CHAPTER NINE

Riley picked up her phone and dialed.

The answering voice said, “Roff here.”

The socially inept computer geek was a technical analyst in the Seattle FBI field office. Van Roff had helped with her last case and, like other professional geeks she’d known, he positively relished any opportunity to bend or even break the rules.

Riley spoke excitedly.

“Van, I need your help. And I’m afraid it isn’t exactly legitimate or sanctioned by the powers that be.”

Before Riley could explain, Roff interrupted her very loudly.

“Hey, Rufus, old buddy! How’s Cancún treating you? Listen, I hope you’re staying safe, not catching any of them tropical diseases, if you know what I mean. You’re wearing a condom, right?”

Baffled, Riley stammered, “Uh, what?”

Roff said, “Listen, Rufus, I’m sure you’ve got all kinds of raunchy stories, and I can’t wait to hear them. Vicarious sex is pretty much all I get these days. But I can’t talk right now. I’ll get back to you later.”

Then he hung up.

Riley stared at her phone. It took a moment for her to realize what had just happened.

Of course. He’s not alone.

Higher-ups in the Seattle FBI tried to keep a close eye on Roff. Perhaps they were even listening in on his phone or monitoring his computer.

She was sure it was a game the computer geek enjoyed playing. He would be happy with the challenge of evading oversight and looking into whatever interested him.

Anyway, Riley felt sure that he would get in touch with her whenever he could. She hoped it wouldn’t be very long.

*

A little while later, Riley joined Gabriela, April, and Jilly for dinner.

“How’s the case going?” April asked eagerly as Riley sat at the table.

“Well, it’s not exactly a ‘case,’” Riley said.

“But you’re working on it, right? Are you trying to find out what happened to those girls?”

Riley hesitated. How much should she tell April of her activities today?

“I’m working on it,” she said. “But I’m not ready to talk about it yet.”

April’s smile made Riley feel a bit better. At least her daughter wasn’t angry with her anymore. Riley just hoped that April wouldn’t wind up disappointed. Although Riley was feeling sure that there was something to be investigated, she was a long way from making any progress. She would need to know a lot more in order to open an official case. And she suspected she was going to have to shed light on matters that some families wanted kept in the dark.

April and Jilly chatted cheerfully about one thing or another over dinner. At one point, April got out her cell phone and brought up questions for a test Jilly had coming up. April began to quiz her.

“Girls, not during supper, please,” Riley said.

Riley was a bit surprised to hear Gabriela disagree with her.

“No, it is good. The girls studying is good, at the table or anywhere else.”

Riley smiled. Yes, she supposed that this was good. She realized that Gabriela was keenly aware of Jilly's teetering on an edge between a desperate life and a happy one. And Gabriela would also know what kind of difference a good education could make.

So she said, "OK, study away. Anywhere, anytime."

Riley was pleased that the two girls were bonding wonderfully. And Jilly was getting truly excited about school.

The house phone rang during dinner. Riley got up and answered it. It was Ryan.

"Hi," she said. "Are you on your way? I can save some dinner for you."

"I'm afraid I won't get in until very late tonight," he said. "I've got a huge amount of work to do. I hope that's OK."

Riley stifled a sigh.

"It's OK," she said.

She ended the call and went back into the kitchen.

"Was that Dad?" April asked. "When's he getting home?"

"He says he'll be late," Riley said, sitting back down.

April's smile suddenly vanished.

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