

BLAKE PIERCE

A hand is shown gripping a chain-link fence. The hand is positioned on the right side of the frame, with fingers wrapped around the metal mesh. The background is dark and textured, suggesting a wall or a confined space. The lighting highlights the hand and the metallic sheen of the fence.

ONCE  
LURED

A RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY--BOOK #4

A Riley Paige Mystery

Блейк Пирс

**Once Lured**

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

## **Пирс Б.**

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

ISBN 978-1-63-291800-0

Women are turning up dead on a lone stretch of highway in Delaware. Some go missing for an inexplicable length of time, while others are turning up dead, their bodies left out for display in bizarre and mysterious ways. When a pattern is discovered, it becomes clear to the FBI that a twisted serial killer is on the hunt—luring girls in devious schemes—and that he won't stop killing, ever. The FBI, desperate to crack the case, urges Special Agent Riley Paige to take it on. But the brilliant Riley, still reeling from past cases, has finally found peace in her home life, and is determined to help her daughter April get back on her feet. Yet when the murders become too disturbing, too urgent—and when her former partner Bill implores her—Riley finally realizes she can't say no. Riley's hunt leads her deep into the unsettling world of hitchhikers, of drifters, of women that no one else cares for. When she discovers that several women are being kept alive and that there is still time to save them, she realizes she will stop at nothing, obsessing over the case and driving herself to the brink. Yet Riley realizes her own life is falling apart, and her own fragile psyche can barely handle the strain. In a frantic race against time, she will have to plunge deep into the killer's mind to save these women—and to save herself—from collapse. A dark psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, ONCE LURED is book #4 in a riveting new series—with a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

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# **Pierce Blake**

## **ONCE LURED (A Riley Paige Mystery – Book #4) by Blake Pierce**

**Blake Pierce**

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which include the mystery suspense thrillers ONCE GONE (book #1), ONCE TAKEN (book #2), ONCE CRAVED (#3) and ONCE LURED (#4). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series and AVERY BLACK 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](http://www.blakepierceauthor.com) [www.blakepierceauthor.com](http://www.blakepierceauthor.com) to learn more and stay in touch.

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**RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY SERIES**

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**ONCE TAKEN (Book #2)**

**ONCE CRAVED (Book #3)**

**ONCE LURED (Book #4)**

**MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY SERIES**

**BEFORE HE KILLS (Book #1)**

**AVERY BLACK MYSTERY SERIES**

**CAUSE TO KILL (Book #1)**

## PROLOGUE

The man worried as he sat in his car. He knew he had to hurry. Tonight, it was important to keep everything on track. But would the woman come along this road at her usual hour?

It was eleven o'clock at night, and he was cutting it close.

He remembered the voice he had heard, reverberating in his head, before he'd come here. Grandpa's voice.

*"You'd better be right about her schedule, Scratch."*

Scratch. The man in the car didn't like that name. It wasn't his real name. It was a folktale name for the Devil. As far as Grandpa was concerned, he was a "bad seed."

Grandpa had called him Scratch for longer than he could remember. Although everybody else called him by his real name, Scratch had stuck in his own mind. He hated his grandpa. But he couldn't pull him out of his head.

Scratch reached up and slapped his own skull several times, trying to get the voice out.

It hurt, and for a moment he had a sense of calm.

But then came Grandpa's dull laughter, echoing somewhere in there. It was a little fainter now, at least.

He looked anxiously at his watch. A few minutes past eleven. Would she be late tonight? Would she go somewhere else? No, that wasn't her style. He'd scouted her movements for days. She was always punctual, always stuck to the same routine.

If only she understood how much was at stake. Grandpa would punish him if he botched this. But there was much more to it than that. The world itself was running out of time. He had a huge responsibility, and it weighed on him heavily.

Car lights appeared, far back along the road, and he sighed with relief. That must be her.

This country road only led to a few houses. It was usually deserted at this hour except for the woman who always drove from her job straight to the house where she rented a room.

Scratch had turned his car around to face hers and stopped it right in the middle of this little gravel road. He stood outside, hands trembling, using a flashlight to peer under his hood, hoping it would work.

His heart slammed as the other vehicle drove by.

*Stop!* he pleaded silently. *Please stop!*

Soon, the other vehicle pulled to a stop a short distance from him.

He bit back a smile.

Scratch turned and looked toward the lights. Yes, it was her shabby little car, just as he had hoped.

Now, he just had to lure her to him.

She lowered her window, and he looked over at her and smiled his most pleasant smile.

"I guess I'm stranded," he called out.

He turned the flashlight briefly on the driver's face. Yes, it was definitely her.

Scratch noticed that she had a charming, open face. More importantly, she was very thin, which suited his purposes.

It seemed a shame, what he was going to have to do to her. But it was like Grandpa always said: *"It's for the greater good."*

It was true, and Scratch knew it. If the woman could only understand, perhaps she'd even be willing to sacrifice herself. After all, sacrifice was one of the finest features of human nature. She ought to be glad to be of service.

But he knew that was too much to expect. Things would get violent and messy, just like they always did.

“What’s the problem?” the woman called.

He noticed something appealing in how she spoke. He didn’t yet know what it was.

“I don’t know,” he said. “She just died on me.”

The woman craned her head out of the window. He looked straight at her. Her freckled face framed by bright red curly hair was open and smiling. She didn’t seem to be the least bit dismayed by the inconvenience he’d caused her.

But would she be trusting enough to get out of the car? Probably, if the other women had been any indication.

Grandpa was always telling him how horribly ugly he was, and he couldn’t help thinking of himself that way. But he knew that other people – women especially – found him rather pleasant to look at.

He gestured toward the open hood. “I don’t know anything about cars,” he yelled back to her.

“I don’t either,” the woman called back.

“Well, maybe the two of us together can figure out what’s wrong,” he said. “Do you mind giving it a try?”

“Not at all. Just don’t expect me to be much help.”

She opened her door, got out, and walked toward him. Yes, everything was going perfectly. He had lured her out of her car. But time was still of the essence.

“Let’s take a peek,” she said, stepping beside him and looking at the engine.

Now he realized what he liked about her voice.

“You’ve got an interesting accent,” he said. “Are you Scottish?”

“Irish,” she said pleasantly. “I’ve only been here two months, got a green card especially so I could work with a family here.”

He smiled. “Welcome to America,” he said.

“Thanks. I love it so far.”

He pointed toward the engine.

“Wait a minute,” he said. “What do you think that is?”

The woman bent over for a closer look. He tripped the release and slammed the hood on her head with a thunk.

He opened the hood, hoping not to have to hit her again. Luckily, she was out cold, her face and torso stretched limp across the engine.

He looked all around. Nobody was in sight. Nobody had seen what had happened.

He shook with delight.

He gathered her up in his arms, noticing that her face and the front of her dress were now smeared with grease. She was as light as a feather. He carried her around to the side of his car and stretched her out on the back seat.

He felt certain that this one would serve his needs well.

\*

Just as Meara began to regain consciousness, she was jolted by a deafening barrage of noise. It seemed like every kind of sound she could imagine. There were gongs, bells, chimes, birdcalls, and sundry melodies as if from a dozen music boxes. They all seemed deliberately hostile.

She opened her eyes, but nothing came into focus. Her head was splitting with pain.

*Where am I?* she wondered.

Was it somewhere in Dublin? No, she was able to put together just a bit of chronology. She’d flown here two months ago, started working as soon as she got settled. She was definitely in Delaware. With an effort, she remembered stopping to help a man with his car. Then something had happened. Something bad.

But what was this place, with all its horrible noise?

She became aware that she was being carried like a child. She heard the voice of the man who was carrying her, speaking above the racket.

“Don’t worry, we got here on time.”

Her eyes began to focus. Her vision was filled by a staggering number of clocks of every conceivable size, shape, and style. She saw massive grandfather clocks flanked by smaller clocks, some of them cuckoo clocks, others with little parades of mechanical people. Still smaller clocks were ranged across shelves.

*They’re all sounding the hour,* she thought.

But in all the noise, she couldn’t begin to pick out the number of gongs or bells.

She turned her head to see who was carrying her. He looked down at her. Yes, it was him – the man who had asked for her help. She’d been a fool to stop for him. She’d fallen into his trap. But what was he going to do to her?

As the noise from the clocks died away, her eyes went out of focus again. She couldn’t keep them open. She felt her consciousness fading.

*Got to stay awake,* she thought.

She heard a metallic rattling, then felt herself lowered gently to a cold, hard surface. There was another rattling, followed by footsteps, and finally by a door opening and closing. The multitude of clocks kept ticking.

Then she heard a pair of female voices.

“She’s alive.”

“Too bad for her.”

The voices were hushed and hoarse. Meara managed to open her eyes again. She saw that the floor was gray concrete. She turned painfully and saw three human forms seated on the floor near her. Or at least she thought they were human. They seemed to be young girls, teenagers, but they were gaunt, little more than skeletons, their bones showing clearly beneath their skin. One seemed barely conscious, her head hanging forward and eyes staring at the gray floor. They reminded her of photos she’d seen of prisoners in concentration camps.

Were they even alive? Yes, they must be alive. She’d just heard them both speak.

“Where are we?” Meara asked.

She barely heard the hissed response.

“Welcome,” one of them said, “to hell.”

## CHAPTER ONE

Riley Paige didn't see the first punch coming. Still, her reflexes responded well. She felt time slow down as the first jab flashed toward her stomach. She backed away from it perfectly. Then a broad left hook came toward her head. She jumped to the side and dodged it. When he closed in with a final jab to her face, her guard went up and she took the punch to her gloves.

Then time resumed its normal pace. She knew the combination of blows had come in less than two seconds.

"Good," Rudy said.

Riley smiled. Rudy was dodging and weaving now, more than ready for her attack. Riley did the same, bobbing, faking, trying to keep him guessing.

"No need to hurry," Rudy said. "Think it through. Think of it like a game of chess."

She felt a twinge of annoyance as she kept her lateral motion going. He was going easy on her. Why did he have to go easy on her?

But she knew that it was just as well. This was her first time in the sparring ring with an actual opponent. Until now, she'd been testing her combinations on a heavy bag. She had to remember that she was just a beginner at this form of fighting. It really was best not to hurry.

It had been Mike Nevins's idea for her to take up sparring. The forensic psychiatrist who consulted with the FBI was also Riley's good friend. He had gotten her through a lot of personal crises.

She'd recently complained to Mike that she was having trouble controlling her aggressive impulses. She was losing her temper frequently. She felt on edge.

"*Try sparring,*" Mike had said. "*It's a great way to let off steam.*"

Right now she felt pretty sure that Mike was right. It felt good to be thinking on her feet, dealing with real threats instead of imagined ones, and it was relaxing to be dealing with threats that weren't actually deadly.

It was also good that she'd joined a gym that got her away from Quantico headquarters. She spent too much time there. This was a welcome change.

But she had dawdled too long. And she could see in Rudy's eyes that he was preparing for another attack.

She mentally chose her next combination. She popped abruptly toward him for her attack. Her first punch was a left jab, which he dodged and countered with a right cross that grazed her sparring helmet. She followed in less than a second with a right jab, which he took to his glove. In a flash she launched a left hook, which he dodged by lurching to the side.

"Good," Rudy said again.

It didn't feel good to Riley. She hadn't landed a single punch, while he had clipped her a little even while defending himself, and she was starting to feel irritation building up. But she reminded herself of what Rudy had told her at the very start ...

*"Don't expect to land a lot of punches. Nobody really does. Not with sparring, anyway."*

She was watching his gloves now, sensing that he was about to launch another attack. But just then, a strange transformation took place in her imagination.

*The gloves turned into a single flame – the white hissing flame of a propane torch. She was caged in darkness again, the prisoner of a sadistic killer named Peterson. He was toying with her, making her dodge the flame to escape its searing heat.*

*But she was tired of being humiliated. This time she was determined to strike back. When the flame leaped toward her face, she simultaneously ducked and launched a fierce jab that didn't connect. The flame hooked around to her, and she countered with a cross that also didn't connect. But before Peterson could make another move, she threw an uppercut, and she felt it smash into his chin ...*

"Hey!" Rudy shouted.

His voice brought Riley back to her present reality. Rudy was stretched out on his back on the mat.

*How did he get down there?* Riley wondered.

Then she realized that she'd hit him – and hit him hard.

“Oh my God!” she shouted. “Rudy, I'm sorry!”

Rudy was grinning and getting back on his feet.

“Don't be,” he said. “That was good.”

They resumed sparring. The rest of the session was uneventful, and neither of them landed any punches. But now the whole thing felt good to Riley. Mike Nevins was right. This was just the therapy she needed.

All the same, she kept wondering when she'd ever be able to shake off those memories.

*Maybe never,* she thought.

\*

Riley cut enthusiastically into her steak. The chef at Blaine's Grill did a great job with several less conventional dishes, but today's workout at the gym had left her hungry for a good steak and a salad. Her daughter, April, and her friend Crystal had ordered burgers. Blaine Hildreth, Crystal's father, was in the kitchen, but he would be back any moment now to finish up his mahi-mahi.

Riley gazed around the comfortable dining room with a deep feeling of satisfaction. She realized that her life didn't include enough warm evenings like this with friends, family, and a nice meal. The scenes her job presented were more often ugly and unsettling.

In a few days she would testify at a parole hearing for a child-killer who hoped to get out of jail early. And she needed to make sure that he didn't get away with that.

Several weeks ago she'd closed a disturbing case in Phoenix. She and her partner, Bill Jeffreys, had caught a killer who murdered prostitutes. Riley was still having trouble feeling that she'd done much good in solving that case. Now she knew too much for her own comfort about a whole world of exploited women and girls.

But she was determined to keep such thoughts out of her mind right now. She felt herself relaxing little by little. Eating out at a restaurant with a friend and both of their kids reminded her what it could be like to live a normal life. She was living in a nice home and growing closer to a nice neighbor.

Blaine returned and sat down. Riley couldn't help observing yet again that he was attractive. His receding hairline gave him a pleasantly mature look, and he was lean and fit.

“Sorry,” Blaine said. “This place runs fine without me when I'm not here, but if I'm in view everybody decides they need my help.”

“I know what that's like,” Riley said. “I'm hoping that if I keep out of sight, BAU will forget me for a while.”

April said, “No chance of that. They'll call soon. You'll be headed off to some other part of the country.”

Riley sighed. “I could get used to not being on constant call.”

Blaine finished a bite of his mahi-mahi.

“Have you thought about changing careers?” he asked.

Riley shrugged. “What else would I do? I've been an agent most of my adult life.”

“Oh, I'm sure there are lots of things a woman of your talents could do,” Blaine said. “Most of them safer than being an FBI agent.”

He thought for a moment. “I could picture you being a teacher,” he added.

Riley chuckled. “Do you think that's safer?” she asked.

“Depends on where you do it,” Blaine said. “What about college?”

“Hey, that’s an idea, Mom,” April said. “You wouldn’t have to travel all the time. And you’d still get to help people.”

Riley said nothing as she mulled it over. Teaching at a college would surely be something like the teaching she’d done at the academy in Quantico. She’d enjoyed doing that. It always gave her a chance to recharge. But would she want to be a full-time teacher? Could she really spend all her days inside a building with no real activity?

She poked at a mushroom with her fork.

*I might turn into one of these,* she thought.

“What about becoming a private investigator?” Blaine asked.

“I don’t think so,” Riley said. “Digging up dirty secrets about divorcing couples doesn’t appeal to me.”

“That’s not all that PIs do,” Blaine said. “What about investigating insurance fraud? Hey, I’ve got this cook who’s collecting disability, says he’s got a bad back. I’m sure he’s faking it, but I can’t prove it. You could start with him.”

Riley laughed. Blaine was joking, of course.

“Or you could look for missing people,” Crystal said. “Or missing pets.”

Riley laughed again. “Now *that* would make me feel like I was doing some real good in the world!”

April had dropped out of the conversation. Riley saw that she was texting and giggling. Crystal leaned across the table toward Riley.

“April’s got a new boyfriend,” Crystal said. Then she silently mouthed, “I don’t like him.”

Riley was annoyed that her daughter was ignoring everybody else at the table.

“Stop doing that,” she told April. “It’s rude.”

“What’s rude about it?” April said.

“We’ve talked about this,” Riley said.

April ignored her and typed a message.

“Put that away,” Riley said.

“In a minute, Mom.”

Riley stifled a groan. She’d long since learned that “in a minute” was teen talk for “never.”

Just then her own phone buzzed. She felt angry with herself for not turning it off before leaving the house. She looked at the phone and saw that it was a message from her FBI partner, Bill. She thought about leaving it unread, but she couldn’t make herself do that.

As she brought up the message, she glanced up and saw April grinning at her. Her daughter was enjoying the irony. Silently seething, Riley read Bill’s text message.

*Meredith has a new case. He wants to discuss it with us ASAP.*

Special Agent in Charge Brent Meredith was Riley’s boss, and Bill’s too. She felt tremendous loyalty to him. Not only was he a good and fair boss, he’d gone to bat for Riley many times when she was in trouble with the bureau. Even so, Riley was determined not to let herself get drawn in, at least for the time being.

*I can’t go traveling right now,* she texted back.

Bill replied, *It’s right here in the area.*

Riley shook her head with discouragement. Standing her ground wasn’t going to be easy.

She texted back to him, *I’ll get back to you.*

No reply came, and Riley put the phone back in her bag.

“I thought you said that was rude, Mom,” April said in a quiet, sullen voice.

April was still texting.

“I’m through with mine,” she said, trying not to sound as annoyed as she felt.

April ignored her. Riley’s own phone buzzed again. She cursed silently. She saw that the text was from Meredith himself.

*Be at BAU meeting tomorrow 9 AM.*

Riley was trying to think of a way to excuse herself when another text followed.

*That's an order.*

## CHAPTER TWO

Riley's spirits sank as she looked at the two images looming on screens above the BAU conference room table. One was a photo of a carefree girl with bright eyes and a winning smile. The other was her corpse, horribly emaciated and lying with her arms pointed in odd directions. Since she had been ordered to attend this meeting, Riley knew there must be other victims like this one.

Sam Flores, a savvy lab technician with black-rimmed glasses, was running the multimedia display for the four other agents seated around the table.

"These pictures are of Metta Lunoe, seventeen years old," Flores said. "Her family lives in Collierville, New Jersey. Her parents reported her missing in March – a runaway."

He added a huge map of Delaware to the display, indicating a location with a pointer.

He said, "Her body turned up in a field outside of Mowbray, Delaware, on May sixteenth. Her neck had been broken."

Flores brought up another pair of images – one showing another vibrant young girl, the other showing her almost unrecognizably withered, her arms stretched out in a similar way.

"These pictures are of Valerie Bruner, also seventeen, a reported runaway from Norbury, Virginia. She disappeared in April."

Flores pointed to another location on the map.

"Her body was found stretched out in a dirt road near Redditch, Delaware, on June twelfth. Obviously the same MO as the earlier killing. Agent Jeffreys was brought in to investigate."

Riley was startled. How could Bill have worked on a case that hadn't involved her? Then she remembered. In June, she had been hospitalized, recovering from her horrible ordeal in Peterson's cage. Even so, Bill had visited her frequently in the hospital. He'd never mentioned that he was also working this case.

She turned toward Bill.

"Why didn't you tell me about this?" she asked.

Bill's face looked grim.

"It wasn't a good time," he said. "You had troubles of your own."

"Who was your partner?" Riley asked.

"Agent Remsen."

Riley recognized the name. Bruce Remsen had transferred out of Quantico before she had come back to work.

Then after a pause, Bill added, "I couldn't crack the case."

Now Riley could read his expression and tone of voice. After years of friendship and partnership, she understood Bill as well as anybody did. And she knew that he was deeply disappointed with himself.

Flores brought up the medical examiner's photos of the girls' naked backs. The bodies were so wasted away that they barely seemed real. Both backs bore old scars and fresh welts.

Riley felt a gnawing discomfort all over now. She was taken aback by the feeling. Since when had she gotten queasy about photos of corpses?

Flores said, "They were both starved almost to death before their necks were broken. They were also severely beaten, probably over a long period of time. Their bodies were moved to where they were found postmortem. We have no idea where they were actually killed."

Trying not to let her rising unease get the best of her, Riley mulled over similarities with cases she and Bill had solved during the last few months. The so-called "dolly killer" had left his victims' bodies where they could be easily found, posed naked in grotesque doll-like positions. The "chain killer" hung the bodies of his victims up off the ground, wildly decked in heavy chains.

Now Flores brought up the image of another young woman – a cheerful-looking redhead. Alongside the photo was one of a beat-up, empty Toyota.

“This car belonged to a twenty-four-year-old Irish immigrant named Meara Keagan,” Flores said. “She was reported missing yesterday morning. Her car was found abandoned just outside an apartment building in Westree, Delaware. She worked there for a family as maid and nanny.”

Now Special Agent Brent Meredith spoke. He was a daunting, big-boned African-American with angular features and a no-nonsense demeanor.

“She got off her shift at eleven o’clock the night before last,” Meredith said. “The car was found early the next morning.”

Special Agent in Charge Carl Walder leaned forward in his chair. He was Brent Meredith’s boss – a babyish, freckle-faced man with curly, copper-colored hair. Riley didn’t like him. She didn’t think he was especially competent. It didn’t help that he’d once fired her.

“Why do we think this disappearance is linked with the earlier murders?” Walder asked. “Meara Keagan is older than the other victims.”

Now Lucy Vargas chimed in. She was a bright young rookie with dark hair, dark eyes, and a dark complexion.

“You can see by the map. Keagan disappeared in the same general area where the two bodies were found. It might be coincidence, but it seems unlikely. Not over a period of five months, all so close together.”

Despite her increasing discomfort, Riley was pleased at the sight of Walder wincing a little. Without meaning to, Lucy had put him in his place. Riley hoped he wouldn’t find some way to get back at Lucy later on. Walder could be petty that way.

“That’s correct, Agent Vargas,” Meredith said. “Our guess is that the younger girls were abducted while hitchhiking. Very likely along this highway that runs through the area.” He pointed out a specific line on the map.

Lucy asked, “Isn’t hitchhiking banned in Delaware?” She added, “Of course, that can be hard to enforce.”

“You’re right about that,” Meredith said. “And this isn’t an interstate or even the main state highway, so hitchhikers probably do use it. Apparently the killer does too. One body was found alongside this road and the other two are less than ten miles from it. Keagan was taken about sixty miles north along that same route. With her he used a different ruse. If he follows his usual pattern, he’ll keep her until she’s almost starved to death. Then he’ll break her neck and leave her body the same way as before.”

“We’re not going to let that happen,” Bill said in a tight voice.

Meredith said, “Agents Paige and Jeffreys, I want you to get right to work on this.” He pushed a manila folder stuffed with photos and reports across the table toward Riley. “Agent Paige, here’s all the info you need to bring you up to speed.”

Riley reached toward the folder. But her hand jerked back with a spasm of horrible anxiety.

*What’s the matter with me?*

Her head was spinning, and out-of-focus images started to take shape in her brain. Was this PTSD from the Peterson case? No, it was different. It was something else entirely.

Riley got up from her chair and fled the conference room. As she hurried down the hallway toward her office, the images in her head came into sharper focus.

They were faces – faces of women and girls.

She saw Mitzi, Koreen, and Tantra – young call girls whose respectable attire masked their degradation even from themselves.

She saw Justine, an aging whore hunched over a drink at a bar, tired and bitter and fully prepared to die an ugly death.

She saw Chrissy, virtually imprisoned in a brothel by her abusive pimp husband.

And worst of all, she saw Trinda, a fifteen-year-old girl who had already lived a nightmare of sexual exploitation, and who could imagine no other life.

Riley arrived in her office and collapsed into her chair. Now she understood her onslaught of revulsion. The images she'd seen just now had been a trigger. They'd brought to the surface her darkest misgivings about the Phoenix case. She'd stopped a brutal murderer, but she hadn't brought justice to the women and girls she'd met. A whole world of exploitation remained. She hadn't even scratched the surface of the wrongs they endured.

And now she was haunted and troubled in a way she'd never known before. This seemed worse than PTSD to her. After all, she could give vent to her private rage and horror in a sparring gym. She had no way to get rid of these new feelings.

And could she bring herself to work another case like Phoenix?

She heard Bill's voice at the door.

"Riley."

She looked up and saw her partner looking at her with a sad expression. He was holding the folder Meredith had tried to give her.

"I need you on this case," Bill said. "It's personal for me. It makes me crazy that I couldn't crack it. And can't help wondering if I was off my game because my marriage was falling apart. I got to know Valerie Bruner's family. They're good people. But I haven't stayed in touch with them because ... well, I let them down. I've got to make things right with them."

He put the folder on Riley's desk.

"Just look at this. Please."

He left Riley's office. She sat staring at the folder in a state of indecision.

This wasn't like her. She knew she had to snap out of it.

As she mulled things over, she remembered something from her time in Phoenix. She had been able to save one girl named Jilly. Or at least she had tried.

She took out her phone and dialed the number for a shelter for teenagers in Phoenix, Arizona. A familiar voice came on the line.

"This is Brenda Fitch."

Riley was glad that Brenda took the call. She'd gotten to know the social worker during her previous case.

"Hi, Brenda," she said. "This is Riley. I just thought I'd check in on Jilly."

Jilly was a girl that Riley had rescued from sex trafficking – a skinny, dark-haired thirteen-year-old. Jilly had no family except for an abusive father. Riley called every so often to find out how Jilly was doing.

Riley heard a sigh from Brenda.

"It's good of you to call," Brenda said. "I wish more people showed some concern. Jilly's still with us."

Riley's heart sank. She hoped that someday she'd call and be told that Jilly had been taken in by a kindly foster family. This wasn't going to be that day. Now Riley was worried.

She said, "The last time we talked, you were afraid you'd have to send her back to her father."

"Oh, no, we've got that legally sorted out. We've even got a restraining order to keep him away from her."

Riley breathed a sigh of relief.

"Jilly asks about you all the time," Brenda said. "Would you like to talk to her?"

"Yes. Please."

Brenda put Riley on hold. Riley suddenly wondered whether this was such a good idea. Whenever she talked to Jilly, she wound up feeling guilty. She couldn't understand why she felt that way. After all, she had saved Jilly from a life of exploitation and abuse.

*But saved her for what?* she wondered. What kind of life did Jilly have to look forward to?

She heard Jilly's voice.

"Hey, Agent Paige."

"How many times do I have to tell you not to call me that?"

"Sorry. Hey, Riley."

Riley chuckled a little.

"Hey, yourself. How are you doing?"

"Okay, I guess."

A silence fell.

*A typical teenager*, Riley thought. It was always hard to get Jilly talking.

"So what are you up to?" Riley asked.

"Just waking up," Jilly said, sounding a bit groggy. "Going to eat breakfast."

Riley then realized that it was three hours earlier in Phoenix.

"I'm sorry to call so early," Riley said. "I keep forgetting about the time difference."

"It's okay. It's nice of you to call."

Riley heard a yawn.

"So are you going to school today?" Riley asked.

"Yeah. They let us out of the joint every day to do that."

It was Jilly's little running joke, calling the shelter the "joint" as if it were a prison. Riley didn't find it very funny.

Riley said, "Well, I'll let you go have breakfast and get ready."

"Hey, wait a minute," Jilly said.

Another silence fell. Riley thought she heard Jilly choke back a sob.

"Nobody wants me, Riley," Jilly said. She was crying now. "Foster families keep passing me over. They don't like my past."

Riley was staggered.

*Her "past"?* she thought. *Jesus, how can a thirteen-year-old have a "past"? What's the matter with people?*

"I'm sorry," Riley said.

Jilly spoke haltingly through her tears.

"It's like ... well, you know, it's ... I mean, Riley, it seems like *you're* the only one who cares."

Riley's throat ached and her eyes stung. She couldn't reply.

Jilly said, "Couldn't I come to live with you? I won't be much trouble. You've got a daughter, right? She could be like my sister. We could look after each other. I miss you."

Riley struggled to speak.

"I ... I don't think that's possible, Jilly."

"Why not?"

Riley felt devastated. The question struck her like a bullet.

"It's just ... not possible," Riley said.

She could still hear Jilly crying.

"Okay," Jilly said. "I've got to head over to breakfast. Bye."

"Bye," Riley said. "I'll call again soon."

She heard a click as Jilly ended the call. Riley bent over her desk, tears running down her own face. Jilly's question kept echoing through her head ...

*"Why not?"*

There were a thousand reasons. She had her hands full with April as it was. Her job was too consuming, both of her time and energy. And was she in any way qualified or prepared to deal with Jilly's psychological scarring? Of course she wasn't.

Riley wiped her eyes and sat upright. Indulging in self-pity wasn't going to help anybody. It was time to get back to work. Girls were dying out there, and they needed her.

She picked up the folder and opened it. Was it time, she wondered, to get back in the arena?

## CHAPTER THREE

Scratch sat on his front porch swing watching the kids come and go in their Halloween costumes. He usually enjoyed having trick-or-treaters come around. But it seemed a bittersweet occasion this year.

*How many of these kids will be alive in just a few weeks?* he wondered.

He sighed. Probably none of them. The deadline was near and no one was paying attention to his messages.

The porch swing chains were creaking. There was a light, warm rain falling, and Scratch hoped that the kids wouldn't catch cold. He had a basket of candy on his lap, and he was being pretty generous. It was getting late, and soon there would be no more kids.

In Scratch's mind Grandpa was still complaining, even though the cranky old man had died years ago. And it didn't matter that Scratch was grown now, he was never free from the old man's advice.

*"Look at that one in the cloak and the black plastic mask,"* Grandpa said. *"Call that a costume?"*

Scratch hoped that he and Grandpa weren't about to have another argument.

*"He's dressed up as Darth Vader, Grandpa,"* he said.

*"I don't care who the hell he's supposed to be. It's a cheap, store-bought outfit. When I took you trick-or-treating, we always made your costumes for you."*

Scratch remembered those costumes. To turn him into a mummy, Grandpa had wrapped him up in torn-up bed sheets. To make him into a knight in shining armor, Grandpa had decked him out in cumbersome poster board covered with aluminum foil, and he'd carried a lance made out of a broomstick. Grandpa's costumes were always creative.

Still, Scratch didn't remember those Halloweens fondly. Grandpa would always curse and complain while getting him into those outfits. And when Scratch got home from trick-or-treating ... for a moment, Scratch felt like a little boy again. He knew that Grandpa was always right. Scratch didn't always understand why, but that didn't matter. Grandpa was right, and he was wrong. That was just the way things were. It was the way things had always been.

Scratch had been relieved when he got too old for trick-or-treating. Ever since then, he'd been free to sit on the porch dispensing candy to kids. He was happy for them. He was glad that they were enjoying childhood, even if he hadn't.

Three kids clambered up onto the porch. A boy was dressed as Spiderman, a girl as Catwoman. They looked about nine years old. The third kid's costume made Scratch smile. A little girl, about seven years old, was wearing a bumblebee outfit.

*"Trick-or-treat!"* they all shouted as they gathered in front of Scratch.

Scratch chuckled and rummaged around in the basket for candy. He gave some to the kids, who thanked him and went away.

*"Stop giving them candy!"* Grandpa growled. *"When are you going to stop encouraging the little bastards?"*

Scratch had been quietly defying Grandpa for a couple of hours now. He'd have to pay for it later.

Meanwhile, Grandpa was still grumbling. *"Don't forget, we've got work to do tomorrow night."*

Scratch didn't reply, just listened to the creaking porch swing. No, he wouldn't forget what had to be done tomorrow night. It was a dirty job, but it had to be done.

\*

Libby Clark followed her big brother and her cousin into the dark woods that lay behind all the neighborhood backyards. She didn't want to be here. She wanted to be home snugly in bed.

Her brother, Gary, was leading the way, carrying a flashlight. He looked all weird in his Spiderman costume. Her cousin Denise was following Gary in her Catwoman outfit. Libby was trotting along behind both of them.

"Come on, you two," Gary said, pushing ahead.

He slid between two bushes just fine, and so did Denise, but Libby's costume was all puffy and got caught on some branches. Now she had something new to be scared about. If the bumblebee costume got ruined, Mommy would have a fit. Libby managed to get untangled and scurried to catch up.

"I want to go home," Libby said.

"Go right ahead," Gary said, moving right along.

But of course Libby was too scared to go back. They had come way too far already. She didn't dare go back alone.

"Maybe we all should go back," Denise said. "Libby's scared."

Gary stopped and turned around. Libby wished she could see his face behind that mask.

"What's the matter, Denise?" he said. "Are you scared too?"

Denise laughed nervously.

"No," she said. Libby could tell she was lying.

"Then come on, both of you," Gary said.

The little group kept on moving. The ground was soggy and slimy, and Libby was up to her knees in wet weeds. At least it had stopped raining. The moon was starting to show through the clouds. But it was also getting colder, and Libby was damp all over, and she was shivering, and she was really, really scared.

Finally the trees and bushes opened onto a large clearing. Steam was rising up from the wet ground. Gary stopped right up to the edge of the space, and so did Denise and Libby.

"Here it is," Gary whispered, pointing. "Lookit – it's square, just like there was supposed to be a house or something here. But there's not a house. There's nothing. Trees and bushes can't even grow here. Just weeds is all. That's because it's cursed ground. Ghosts live here."

Libby reminded herself of what Daddy said.

*"There's no such thing as ghosts."*

Even so, her knees were shaking. She was afraid she was going to pee herself. Mommy sure wouldn't like that.

"What are those?" Denise asked.

She pointed to two shapes rising up out of the ground. To Libby they looked like big pipes that were bent over at the top, and they were almost completely covered with ivy.

"I don't know," Gary said. "They remind me of submarine periscopes. Maybe the ghosts are watching us. Go take a look, Denise."

Denise let out a scared-sounding laugh.

"*You* have a look!" Denise said.

"Okay, I will," Gary said.

Gary stepped none too boldly out into the clearing and walked toward one of the shapes. He stopped in his tracks about three feet away from it. Then he turned around and came back to rejoin his cousin and sister.

"I can't tell what it is," he said.

Denise laughed again. "That's because you didn't even look!" she said.

“Did so,” Gary said.

“Did not! You didn’t even get near it!”

“I did so get near it. If you’re so curious, go check it out yourself.”

Denise didn’t say anything for a moment. Then she trotted out onto the bare patch. She got a little closer to the shape than Gary, but she trotted straight back without stopping.

“I don’t know what it is either,” she said.

“It’s your turn to look, Libby,” Gary said.

Libby’s fear was creeping up in her throat just like that ivy.

“Don’t make her go, Gary,” Denise said. “She’s too little.”

“She’s not too little. She’s growing up. It’s time she acted like it.”

Gary gave Libby a sharp shove. She found herself a couple of feet out into the space. She turned around and tried to go back again, but Gary stretched his hand out to stop her.

“Huh-uh,” he said. “Denise and I went. You’ve got to go too.”

Libby gulped hard and turned around and faced the empty space with its two bent things. She had the creepy feeling that they could be looking back at her.

She remembered her daddy’s words again ...

*“There’s no such thing as ghosts.”*

Daddy wouldn’t lie about a thing like that. So what was she scared of, anyway?

Besides, she was getting mad at Gary for being a bully. She was almost as mad as she was scared.

*I’ll show him,* she thought.

Her legs still shaking, she took step after step out into the big square space. As she walked toward the metal thing, Libby actually felt braver.

By the time she got close to the thing – closer than even Gary or Denise had gotten – she was feeling pretty proud of herself. Still, she couldn’t tell what it was.

With more courage than she even thought she had, she reached her hand out toward it. She pushed her fingers among the ivy leaves, hoping that her hand wouldn’t get snatched or eaten or maybe something worse. Her fingers came up against the hard, cold metal pipe.

*What is it?* she wondered.

Now she felt a slight vibration in the pipe. And she heard something. It seemed to be coming from the pipe.

She leaned really close to the pipe. The sound was faint, but she knew that it wasn’t her imagination. The sound was real, and it was just like a woman weeping and moaning.

Libby jerked her hand away from the pipe. She was too frightened to move or speak or scream or do anything. She couldn’t even breathe. It felt like that time when she’d fallen out of a tree on her back and the wind got knocked out of her lungs.

She knew that she had to get away. But she stayed frozen. It was like she had to tell her body how to move.

*Turn and run,* she thought.

But for a few terrifying seconds she just couldn’t do it.

Then her legs seemed to start running all on their own, and she found herself dashing back toward the edge of the clearing. She was terrified that something really bad would reach out and grab her and yank her back.

When she arrived at the edge of the woods, she bent over, gasping for breath. Now she realized that she hadn’t even been breathing all this time.

“What’s the matter?” Denise asked.

“A ghost!” Libby gasped out. “I heard a ghost!”

She didn’t wait for a reply. She tore away and ran as fast as she could back the way they’d come. She heard her brother and cousin running behind her.

“Hey, Libby stop!” her brother called out. “Wait up!”

But there was no way she was going to stop running until she was safe at home.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Riley knocked on April's bedroom door. It was noon, and it seemed high time for her daughter to get up. But the answer she got wasn't what she had been hoping for.

"What do you want?" came the muffled, sullen retort from inside the room.

"Are you going to sleep all day?" Riley asked.

"I'm up now. I'll be down in a minute."

With a sigh, Riley walked back down the stairs. She wished Gabriela was here, but she always took some time away on Sundays.

Riley plopped herself down on the couch. All day yesterday April had been sullen and distant. Riley hadn't known how to relieve the unidentified tension between them, and she'd been relieved when April had gone to a Halloween party in the evening. Since it had been at a friend's house a couple of blocks away, Riley hadn't worried. At least not until it got to be after one a.m. and her daughter wasn't home.

Fortunately, April had showed up while Riley was still undecided whether or not to take some kind of action. But April had come in and stalked off to bed with barely a word to her mother. And so far, she didn't sound any more inclined to communicate this morning.

Riley was glad that she was home to try to sort out whatever was wrong. She hadn't committed herself to the new case, and she was still feeling torn about it. Bill kept reporting to her, so she knew that yesterday he and Lucy Vargas had gone out to investigate Meara Keagan's disappearance. They'd interviewed the family Meara had been working for, and also her neighbors in her apartment building. They'd gotten no leads at all.

Today Lucy was taking charge of a general search, coordinating several agents who were passing out flyers with Meara's picture on them. Meanwhile, Bill was none too patiently waiting for Riley to decide whether to take the case or not.

But she didn't have to decide right away. Everybody at Quantico understood that Riley wouldn't be available tomorrow. One of the first killers she'd ever brought to justice was up for parole in Maryland. Not testifying at that hearing was simply out of the question.

As Riley sat mulling over her choices, April came bounding down the stairs, fully dressed. She charged into the kitchen without even giving her mother so much as a glance. Riley got up and followed her.

"What have we got to eat?" April asked, looking inside the refrigerator.

"I could fix you some breakfast," Riley said.

"That's okay. I'll find something."

April took out a piece of cheese and closed the refrigerator door. At the kitchen counter she cut off a slice of cheese and poured herself a cup of coffee. She added cream and sugar to the coffee, sat down at the kitchen table, and began to nibble on the cheese.

Riley sat down with her daughter.

"How was the party?" Riley asked.

"It was okay."

"You got home kind of late."

"No, I didn't."

Riley decided not to argue. Maybe one o'clock really wasn't late for fifteen-year-olds to be out at parties these days. How would she know?

"Crystal told me you have a boyfriend," Riley said.

"Yeah," April said, sipping her coffee.

"What's his name?"

"Joel."

After a few moments of silence, Riley asked, “How old is he?”

“I don’t know.”

Riley felt a knot of anxiety and anger rise up in her throat.

“How old is he?” Riley repeated.

“Fifteen, okay? The same as me.”

Riley felt sure that April was lying.

“I’d like to meet him,” Riley said.

April rolled her eyes. “Christ, Mom. When did you grow up? The fifties or something?”

Riley felt stung.

“I don’t think that’s unreasonable,” Riley said. “Have him stop by. Introduce him to me.”

April set down her coffee cup so hard it spilled a little onto the table.

“Why do you try to control me all the time?” she snapped.

“I’m not trying to control you. I just want to meet your boyfriend.”

For a few moments, April just stared sullenly and silently into her coffee. Then she suddenly got up from the table and stormed out of the kitchen.

“April!” Riley yelled.

Riley followed April through the house. April went to the front door and grabbed her bag, which was hanging on the hat stand.

“Where are you going?” Riley said.

April didn’t reply. She opened the door and went out, slamming the door behind her.

Riley stood in stunned silence for a few moments. Surely, she thought, April would come right back.

She waited for a whole minute. Then she went to the door, opened it, and looked up and down the street. There was no sign of April anywhere.

Riley felt the bitter taste of disappointment in her mouth. She wondered how things had gotten like this. She’d had tough times with April in the past. But when the three of them – Riley, April, and Gabriela – had moved to this townhouse during the summer, April had been very happy. She’d made friends with Crystal and had been fine when school started in September.

But now, just two months later, April had gone from a happy teenager back to being a sullen one. Had her PTSD kicked back in? April had suffered a delayed reaction after the killer named Peterson had caged her and tried to kill her. But she had been seeing a good therapist and had seemed to be working her way through those problems.

Still standing in the open doorway, Riley took her cell phone out of her pocket and texted April.

*U come back here. Right now.*

The text was marked as “delivered.” Riley waited. Nothing happened. Had April left her own cell phone at home? No, that was not possible. April had grabbed her bag on the way out, and she never went anywhere without her cell phone.

Riley kept looking at the phone. The message was still marked as “delivered,” not “read.” Was April simply ignoring her text?

Just then, Riley felt pretty sure she knew where April had gone. She picked up a key from a table near the door and stepped out onto her little front porch. She went down the stairs from her townhouse and across the lawn to the next unit, where Blaine and Crystal lived. Again staring at her cell phone, she rang the doorbell.

When Blaine answered the door and saw her, a wide smile spread across his features.

“Well!” he said. “This is a nice surprise. What brings you over?”

Riley stammered awkwardly.

“I was wondering if ... Does April happen to be here? Visiting Crystal?”

“No,” he said. “Crystal’s not here either. She went to the coffee shop, she said. You know, the one close by.”

Blaine knitted his brow with concern.

“What’s the matter?” he asked. “Is there some kind of problem?”

Riley groaned. “We had a fight,” she said. “She stormed out. I was hoping she’d come over here. I think she’s ignoring my text.”

“Come on in,” Blaine said.

Riley followed him into his living room. The two of them sat down on the couch.

“I don’t know what’s going on with her,” Riley said. “I don’t know what’s going on with us.”

Blaine smiled wistfully.

“I know the feeling,” he said.

Riley was a bit surprised.

“Do you?” she asked. “It always looks to me like you and Crystal get along perfectly.”

“Most of the time, sure. But since she’s gotten to be a teenager, it gets pretty rocky sometimes.”

Blaine looked at Riley sympathetically for a moment.

“Don’t tell me,” he said. “It’s got something to do with a boyfriend.”

“Apparently,” Riley said. “She won’t tell me anything about him. And she refuses to introduce him to me.”

Blaine shook his head.

“They’re both at that age,” he said. “Having a boyfriend is a life-and-death matter. Crystal doesn’t have one yet, which is fine with me, but not with her. She’s absolutely desperate about it.”

“I guess I was the same at that age,” Riley said.

Blaine chuckled a little. “Believe me, when I was fifteen, girls were just about all I ever thought about. Would you like some coffee?”

“I would, thanks. Black will be fine.”

Blaine went to the kitchen. Riley looked around, noticing yet again how nicely decorated the place was. Blaine definitely had good taste.

Blaine came back with two cups of coffee. Riley took a sip. It was delicious.

“I swear, I didn’t know what I was getting into when I became a mother,” she said. “I guess it didn’t help that I was way too young for it.”

“How old were you?”

“Twenty-four.”

Blaine threw back his head and laughed.

“I was younger. Got married at twenty-one. I thought Phoebe was the most beautiful girl I’d ever seen. Sexy as hell. I kind of overlooked that fact that she was also bipolar and already drank a lot.”

Riley was more and more interested. She’d known that Blaine had been divorced, but little else. It seemed that she and Blaine had youthful mistakes in common. It had been too easy for them to see life through the rosy glow of physical attraction.

“How long did your marriage last?” Riley asked.

“About nine years. We should have ended it long before. *I* should have ended it. I kept thinking I could rescue Phoebe. It was a stupid idea. Crystal was born when Phoebe was twenty-one and I was twenty-two, a student in chef school. We were too poor and too immature. Our next baby was stillborn, and Phoebe never got over it. She became a complete alcoholic. She got abusive.”

Blaine’s look was farther away now. Riley sensed that he was reliving bitter memories that he didn’t want to talk about.

“When April came along, I was in training to be an FBI agent,” she said. “Ryan wanted me to give it up, but I wouldn’t. He was dead set on becoming a successful lawyer. Well, we both got the careers we wanted. We just didn’t have anything in common for the long haul. We couldn’t make the real foundations of a marriage.”

Riley fell silent under Blaine's sympathetic gaze. She felt relieved to be able to talk to another adult about all this. She was starting to realize that it was almost impossible to feel uncomfortable around Blaine. She felt as if she could talk to him about anything.

"Blaine, I'm really torn right now," she said. "I'm really needed on an important case. But things are such a mess at home. I feel like I'm not spending enough time with April."

Blaine smiled.

"Oh, yeah. The old work-versus-family dilemma. I know it well. Believe me, owning a restaurant is awfully time consuming. Making time for Crystal is a challenge."

Riley looked into Blaine's gentle blue eyes.

"How do you find a balance?" she asked.

Blaine shrugged slightly.

"You don't," he said. "There's not enough time for everything. But there's no point in punishing yourself for not being able to do the impossible. Believe me, giving up your career isn't a solution. I mean, Phoebe tried being a stay-at-home mom. It was part of what drove her crazy. You just have to make peace with it."

Riley smiled. It sounded like a wonderful idea – making peace with it. Maybe she could do that. It really did seem possible.

She reached over and touched Blaine's hand. He took her hand and squeezed it. Riley felt a delicious tension between them. For a moment, she thought that maybe she could stay with Blaine for while, now that both their children were occupied elsewhere. Maybe she could ...

But even as the thoughts began to form in her mind, she felt herself drawing away from him. She wasn't ready to act on these fresh new feelings.

She gently pulled her hand away.

"Thanks," she said. "I'd better go home. For all I know, April's back already."

She exchanged goodbyes with Blaine. As soon as she stepped out the door, her phone buzzed. It was a text from April.

*Just got ur text. Really sorry I acted like that. I'm at the coffee shop. Be back soon.*

Riley sighed. She simply had no idea what to text back. It seemed best not to reply at all. She and April were going to have to have a serious talk later on.

Riley had just stepped back into her house when the phone buzzed again. It was a call from Ryan. Her ex was just about the last person in the world she wanted to hear from. But she knew that he'd keep leaving messages if she didn't talk to him now. She accepted the call.

"What do you want, Ryan?" she asked curtly.

"Am I catching you at a bad time?"

Riley wanted to say that no time was a good time as far as he was concerned. But she kept her thought to herself.

"Now's okay, I guess," she said.

"I was thinking about dropping by to see you and April," he said. "I'd like to talk to both of you."

Riley stifled a groan. "I'd rather you didn't do that."

"I thought you said this isn't a bad time."

Riley didn't reply. This was just like Ryan, twisting her words to try to manipulate her.

"How's April doing?" Ryan asked.

She almost snorted with laughter. She knew he was just trying to get some kind of conversation going.

"Nice of you to ask," Riley said sarcastically. "She's doing fine."

It was a lie, of course. But bringing Ryan into things was the last way to make them better.

"Listen, Riley ..." Ryan's voice trailed off. "I've made a lot of mistakes."

*No kidding*, Riley thought. She kept silent.

After a few moments Ryan said, "Things haven't been going so well for me lately."

Riley still said nothing.

“Well, I just wanted to make sure that you and April are all right.”

Riley could hardly believe his nerve.

“We’re doing fine. Why do you ask? Has one of your new girlfriends left, Ryan? Or are things going badly at the office?”

“You’re being awfully hard on me, Riley.”

As far as she was concerned, she was being as gentle as she could manage. She understood the whole situation. Ryan must be alone right now. The socialite who had moved in with him after the divorce must have left, or some newer affair had gone sour.

She knew that Ryan couldn’t stand being alone. He’d always turn back to Riley and April as a last resort. If she let him come back, it would only last until another woman caught his eye.

Riley said, “I think you ought to patch things up with your last girlfriend. Or the one before that. I don’t even know how many you’ve been through since we’ve been divorced. How many, Ryan?”

She heard a slight gasp on the phone. Riley had definitely called it right.

“Ryan, the truth is this *isn’t* a good time.”

It was the truth. She’d just paid a nice visit to a man she liked. Why spoil it now?

“When will be a good time?” Ryan asked.

“I don’t know,” Riley said. “I’ll let you know. Bye.”

She ended the call. She’d been pacing since she’d started talking to Ryan. She sat down and took a few deep breaths to calm herself.

Then she sent a text message to April.

*U’d better get home right now.*

It only took a few seconds before she got a reply.

*OK. I’m on my way. I’m sorry, Mom.*

Riley sighed. April sounded fine now. She would probably be all right for a little while. But something was off.

What was going on with her?

## CHAPTER FIVE

In his dimly lit lair, Scratch dashed frantically back and forth among the hundreds of clocks, trying to get everything ready. It was just a few minutes before midnight.

*“Fix the one with the horse on it!”* Grandpa yelled. *“It’s a whole minute behind!”*

“I’ll get to it,” Scratch said.

Scratch knew he’d be punished anyway, but it would be especially bad if he didn’t get everything ready on time. Right now he had his hands full with other clocks.

He fixed the clock with the curling metal flowers, which had fallen a full five minutes behind. Then he opened a grandfather clock and moved the minute hand just a little to the right.

He checked the big clock with deer antlers on top. It often fell behind, but it looked okay right now. Finally he was able to fix the one with the rearing horse on it. It was a good thing, too. It was all of seven minutes behind.

*“That’ll have to do,”* Grandpa grumbled. *“You know what to do next.”*

Scratch obediently went to the table and picked up the whip. It was a cat o’ nine tails, and Grandpa had started beating him with it when he was too young to remember.

He walked toward the end of the lair that was separated by a chain-link fence. Behind the fence were the four female captives, with no furnishings except wooden bunks without mattresses. There was a closet behind them where they went to relieve themselves. The stench had stopped bothering Scratch quite a while back.

The Irish woman he had fetched a couple of nights back was watching him carefully. After their long diet of crumbs and water, the others were wasted and weary. Two of them seldom did anything more than weep and moan. The fourth was just sitting on the floor near the fence, shrunken and cadaverous. She made no noise at all. She barely looked alive.

Scratch opened the door to the cage. The Irish woman leaped forward, trying to escape. Scratch lashed fiercely at her face with the whip. She cringed back, turning away. He whipped her back over and over again. He knew from experience that it would hurt plenty even through her tattered blouse, especially over the welts and cuts he’d given her already.

Then an uproar of noise filled the air as all the clocks began to strike the midnight hour. Scratch knew what he was supposed to do now.

As the racket continued, he hurried back to the weakest and skinniest girl, the one who seemed barely alive. She looked up at him with a strange expression. She was the only one who had been here long enough to know what he was about to do next. She looked almost as if she were ready for it, maybe even welcomed it.

Scratch had no choice.

He crouched beside her and snapped her neck.

As life ebbed out of her body, he stared up at an ornate antique clock just on the other side of the fence. A hand-carved Death was marching back and forth across the front of it, clad in a black robe, his grinning skull face peering out from beneath his cowl. He was cutting down knights and kings and queens and paupers alike. It was Scratch’s favorite of all the clocks.

The surrounding noise slowly died away. Soon there was no sound at all except the chorus of ticking clocks and the whimpering of the women who still survived.

Scratch slung the dead girl over his shoulder. She was so feather-light that it took no effort at all. He opened the cage, stepped outside, and locked it behind him.

The time, he knew, had come.

## CHAPTER SIX

*A pretty good act*, Riley thought.

Larry Mullins's voice was shaking a little. As he finished up his prepared statement to the parole board and the families of his victims, he sounded like he was on the verge of tears.

"I've had fifteen years to look back," Mullins said. "Not a day goes by when I'm not filled with regret. I can't go back and change what happened. I can't bring Nathan Betts and Ian Harter back to life. But I still have years to make a meaningful contribution to society. Please give me a chance to do that."

Mullins sat down. His lawyer handed him a handkerchief, and he wiped his eyes – although Riley didn't see any actual tears.

The hearing officer and case manager conferred with each other in whispers. So did the members of the parole board.

Riley knew it would soon be her turn to testify. Meanwhile, she studied Mullins's face.

She remembered him well and thought that he hadn't changed much. Even back then, he had been well-scrubbed and well-spoken with an earnest air of innocence about him. If he was more hardened now, he hid it behind his expressions of abject sorrow. Back then he had been working as a nanny – or a "manny," as his lawyer preferred to say.

What struck Riley most was how little he'd aged. He'd been twenty-five when he'd gone to prison. He still had the same amiable, boyish expression that he'd had back then.

The same wasn't true of the victims' parents. The two couples looked prematurely old and broken in spirit. Riley's heart ached for all their years of grief and sorrow.

She wished she'd been able to do right by them from the beginning. So had her first FBI partner, Jake Crivaro. It had been one of Riley's first cases as an agent, and Jake had been a fine mentor.

Larry Mullins had been arrested on a charge of the death of one child on a playground. During their investigation, Riley and Jake found that another child had died under almost identical circumstances while in Mullins's care in a different city. Both children had been suffocated.

When Riley had apprehended Mullins, read him his rights, and cuffed him, his smirking, gloating expression had all but admitted his guilt to her.

*"Good luck,"* he had said to her sarcastically.

Indeed, luck turned against Riley and Jake as soon as Mullins was in custody. He had firmly denied committing the murders. And despite Riley's and Jake's best efforts, the evidence against him remained dangerously thin. It had been impossible to determine just how the boys had been suffocated, and no murder weapon had been found. Mullins himself only admitted to letting them out of his sight. He'd denied murdering either of them.

Riley remembered what the chief prosecutor had said to her and Jake.

"We've got to be careful, or the bastard will walk. If we try to prosecute him on all possible charges, we'll lose the whole thing. We can't prove that Mullins was the only person who had access to the children when they were killed."

Then came the plea-bargaining. Riley hated plea bargains. Her hatred for them had started with that case. Mullins's lawyer offered the deal. Mullins would plead guilty to both murders, but not as premeditated killings, and his sentences would run simultaneously.

It was a lousy deal. It didn't even make sense. If Mullins had really killed the children, how could he have also been merely negligent? The two conclusions were completely contradictory. But the prosecutor saw no choice but to accept the deal. Mullins finally faced thirty years in prison with the possibility of parole or early release for good behavior.

The families had been crushed and horrified. They'd blamed Riley and Jake for not doing their job. Jake had retired as soon as the case was over, a bitter and angry man.

Riley had promised the boys' families she would do everything she could to keep Mullins behind bars. A few days ago, Nathan Betts's parents had called Riley to tell her about the parole hearing. The time had come for her to keep her promise.

The general whispering came to an end. Hearing Officer Julie Simmons looked at Riley.

"I understand that FBI Special Agent Riley Paige would like to make a statement," Simmons said.

Riley gulped hard. The moment she had spent fifteen years preparing for had arrived. She knew the parole board was familiar with all of the evidence already, as incomplete as it was. There was no point in going over it again. She had to make a more personal appeal.

She stood up and spoke.

"As I understand it, Larry Mullins is up for parole because he is an 'exemplary prisoner.'" With a note of irony, she added, "Mr. Mullins, I congratulate you on your achievement."

Mullin nodded, his face showing no expression. Riley continued.

"'Exemplary behavior' – what does that mean, exactly? It seems to me that it has less to do with what he has done than with what he *hasn't* done. He hasn't broken prison rules. He's behaved himself. That's all."

Riley struggled to keep her voice steady.

"Frankly, I'm not surprised. There aren't any children in prison for him to kill."

There were gasps and murmurs in the room. Mullins's smile turned into a steady glare.

"Pardon me," Riley said. "I realize that Mullins never pleaded to premeditated murder, and the prosecution never pursued that verdict. But he pleaded guilty nonetheless. He killed two children. There is no way he could have done so with good intentions."

She paused a moment, choosing her next words carefully. She wanted to goad Mullins into showing his anger, showing his true colors. But of course the man knew that if he did, he'd ruin his record of good behavior and would never get out. Her best strategy was to make the board members face the reality of what he had done.

"I saw Ian Harter's lifeless four-year-old body the day after he was killed. He looked like he was asleep with his eyes open. Death had taken all expression away, and his face was slack and peaceful. Even so, I could still see the terror in his lifeless eyes. His last moments on this earth were filled with terror. It was the same for little Nathan Betts."

Riley heard both mothers begin to cry. She hated bringing back those awful memories, but she simply had no choice.

"We mustn't forget their terror," Riley said. "And we mustn't forget that Mullins showed little emotion during his trial, and certainly no sign of remorse. His remorse came much, much later – if it was ever real at all."

Riley took a long, slow breath.

"How many years of life did he take away from those boys if you add them together? Much, much more than a hundred, it seems to me. He got a sentence of thirty years. He's only served fifteen. It's not enough. He'll never live long enough to pay back all those lost years."

Riley's voice was shaking now. She knew she had to control herself. She couldn't break down in tears or shout with rage.

"Has the time come to forgive Larry Mullins? I leave that up to the boys' families. Forgiveness really isn't what this hearing is about. It's just not the point. The most important matter is the danger he still presents. We can't risk the likelihood that more children will die at his hands."

Riley noticed that a couple of people on the parole board were checking their watches. She panicked a little. The board had already reviewed two other cases this morning, and they had four more to finish before noon. They were getting impatient. Riley had to wrap this up immediately. She looked straight at them.

"Ladies and gentleman, I implore you not to grant this parole."

Then she said, “Perhaps someone else would like to speak on the prisoner’s behalf.”

Riley sat down. Her final words had been double-edged. She knew perfectly well that not one single person was here to speak in Mullins’s defense. Despite all his “good behavior,” he still didn’t have a friend or defender in the world. Nor, Riley was sure, did he deserve one.

“Would anybody like to speak?” the hearing officer asked.

“I would just like to add a few words,” a voice said from the back of the room.

Riley gasped. She knew that voice well.

She whirled around in her seat and saw a familiar short, barrel-chested man standing in the back of the room. It was Jake Crivaro – the last person she expected to see today. Riley was delighted and surprised.

Jake came forward and stated his name and rank for the board members, then said, “I can tell you that this guy is a master manipulator. Don’t believe him. He’s lying. He showed no remorse when we caught him. What you are seeing is all an act.”

Jake stepped right up to the table and leaned across it toward Mullins.

“Bet you didn’t expect to see me today,” he said, his voice full of contempt. “I wouldn’t have missed it – you child-killing little prick of a weasel.”

The hearing officer banged her gavel.

“Order!” she shouted.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Jake said mock-apologetically. “I didn’t mean to insult our model prisoner. After all, he’s rehabilitated now. He’s a *repentant* child-killing little prick of a weasel.”

Jake just stood there, looking down at Mullins. Riley studied the prisoner’s expression. She knew that Jake was doing his best to provoke an outburst from Mullins. But the prisoner’s face remained stony and calm.

“Mr. Crivaro, please take your seat,” the hearing officer said. “The board may make their decision now.”

The board members huddled together to share their notes and thoughts. Their whispering was animated and tense. Meanwhile, there was nothing for Riley to do but wait.

Donald and Melanie Betts were now sobbing. Darla Harter was weeping, and her husband, Ross, was holding her hand. He was staring straight at Riley. His look cut through her like a knife. What did he think of the testimony she just gave? Did he think it made up for her failure all those years ago?

The room was too warm, and she felt sweat breaking on her brow. Her heart was beating anxiously.

It only took a few minutes for the huddle to break up. One of the board members whispered to the hearing officer. She turned toward everybody else who was present.

“Parole is denied,” she said. “Let’s get started on the next case.”

Riley gasped aloud at the woman’s bluntness, as if the case were about nothing more than a parking ticket. But she reminded herself that the board was in a hurry to move on with the rest of their morning work.

Riley stood up, and both couples rushed toward her. Melanie Betts threw herself into Riley’s arms.

“Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you . . .” she kept saying

The three other parents crowded around her, smiling through their tears and saying “thank you” over and over again.

She saw that Jake was standing aside in the hallway. As soon as she could, she left the parents and ran to him.

“Jake!” she said, giving him a hug. “How long has it been?”

“Too long,” Jake said with that sideways smile of his. “You kids today never write or call.”

Riley sighed. Jake had always treated her like a daughter. And it really was true that she should have stayed in better touch.

“So how have you been?” she asked.

“I’m seventy-five years old,” he said. “I’ve had both knees and a hip replaced. My eyes are shot. I’ve got a hearing aid and a pacemaker. And all my friends except you have croaked. How do you think I’ve been?”

Riley smiled. He’d aged quite a lot since she’d last seen him. Even so, he didn’t seem nearly as frail as he was making himself out to be. She was sure he could still do his old job if he was ever needed again.

“Well, I’m glad you were able to talk yourself in here,” she said.

“You shouldn’t be surprised,” Jake said. “I’m at least as smooth a talker as that bastard Mullins.”

“Your statement really helped,” Riley said.

Jake shrugged. “Well, I wish I could’ve gotten a rise out of him. I’d love to have seen him lose it in front of the parole board. But he’s cooler and smarter than I remember. Maybe prison has taught him that. Anyway, we got a good decision even without getting him to freak out. Maybe he’ll stay behind bars for good.”

Riley didn’t say anything for a moment. Jake gave her a curious look.

“Is there something you’re not telling me?” he asked.

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple,” Riley said. “If Mullins keeps racking up points for good behavior, his early release will probably be mandatory in another year. There’s nothing you or I or anybody can do about it.”

“Jesus,” Jake said, looking as bitter and angry as he had all those years before.

Riley knew just how he felt. It was heartbreaking to imagine Mullins going free. Today’s small victory now seemed much more bitter than sweet.

“Well, I’ve got to be going,” Jake said. “It was great seeing you.”

Riley sadly watched her old partner walk away. She understood why he wasn’t going to hang around to indulge in negative feelings. That just wasn’t his way. She made a mental note to get in touch with him soon.

She also tried to find a bright side to what had just happened. After fifteen long years, the Bettises and the Harters had finally forgiven her. But Riley didn’t feel as if she deserved forgiveness, any more than did Larry Mullins.

Just then, Larry Mullins was led out in handcuffs.

He turned to look at her and smiled wide, mouthing his evil words silently.

“See you next year.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Riley was in her car and headed back home when she got the call from Bill. She put her phone on speaker.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“We’ve found another body,” he said. “In Delaware.”

“Was it Meara Keagan?” Riley asked.

“No. We haven’t identified the victim. This is just like the other two, only worse.”

Riley let the facts of the situation sink in. Meara Keagan was still being held captive. The killer might be holding other women captive as well. It was all but certain that the killings would continue. How many killings was anybody’s guess.

Bill’s voice was agitated.

“Riley, I’m losing my mind here,” he said. “I know I’m not thinking straight. Lucy’s a great help, but she’s still awfully green.”

Riley understood perfectly how he felt. The irony felt palpable. Here she was beating herself up about the Larry Mullins case. Meanwhile in Delaware, Bill felt as if his own past failure had cost a third woman her life.

Riley thought about the drive to wherever Bill was. It would probably take nearly three hours to get there.

“Are you finished there?” Bill asked.

Riley had told both Bill and Brent Meredith that she would be in Maryland today for the parole hearing.

“Yeah,” she said.

“Good,” Bill said. “I’ve sent a helicopter to pick you up.”

“You what?” Riley said with a gasp.

“There’s a private airport near where you are. I’ll text you the location. The chopper is probably there already. There’s a cadet on board who’ll drive your car back.”

Without another word, Bill ended the call.

Riley drove in silence for a moment. She had been relieved when the hearing had ended during the morning. She wanted to be home when her daughter got out of school. There had been no more arguments yesterday, but April hadn’t said much at all. This morning Riley had left before April was awake.

But the decision had obviously been made for her. Ready or not, she was on the new case. She would have to talk to April later.

But she didn’t have to think long before it seemed perfectly right. She turned her car around and followed the directions Bill had sent her. The surest cure for her feeling of failure would be to bring another killer to justice —*real* justice.

It was time.

\*

Riley stared down at the dead girl lying on the wooden bandstand floor. It was a bright, cool morning. The bandstand was housed in a gazebo right in the center of the town square, surrounded by nicely kept grass and trees.

The victim looked shockingly like the girls in the photos Riley had seen of the two victims from earlier months. She was lying face up and so emaciated that she appeared to be positively mummified.

Her dirty, torn clothing might have once fit but now looked grotesquely large on her. She bore old scars and more recent wounds from what looked like the lashes of a whip.

Riley guessed that she was about seventeen, the age of the other two murder victims.

*Or maybe not*, she thought.

After all, Meara Keagan was twenty-four. The killer might be changing his MO. This girl was too wasted away for Riley to be able to determine her age.

Riley was standing between Bill and Lucy.

“She looks like she was starved more than the other two,” Bill remarked. “He must have kept her for a lot longer.”

Riley heard a world of self-reproach in Bill’s words. She looked at her partner. The bitterness showed in his face as well. Riley knew what Bill was thinking. This girl had surely been alive and held captive when he’d investigated this case and come up with nothing. He was blaming himself for her death.

Riley knew that he shouldn’t blame himself. Even so, she didn’t know what to say to make him feel better. Her own regrets about the Larry Mullins case still left a bad taste in her mouth.

Riley turned around to take in her surroundings. From here, the only completely visible structure was the courthouse across the street – a large brick building with a clock tower. Redditch was a charming little colonial town. Riley wasn’t really surprised that the body could have been brought here in the dead of night without anybody noticing. The whole town would have been fast asleep. The square was lined with sidewalks, so the killer hadn’t left any footprints.

The local police had taped off the square and were keeping onlookers away. But Riley could see that some press had gathered outside the tapes.

She was worried. So far, the press hadn’t caught on that the two previous murders and Meara Keagan’s disappearance had all been connected. But with this new murder, somebody was liable to connect the dots. The public would know sooner or later. Then the investigation would become a lot more difficult.

Standing nearby was Redditch’s police chief Aaron Pomeroy.

“How and when was the body found?” Riley asked him.

“We’ve got a street cleaner who goes out to work before dawn. He found her.”

Pomeroy looked badly shaken. He was an overweight, aging man. Riley figured that even in a little town like this, a cop his age had handled a murder or two somewhere along the line. But he’d probably never dealt with anything this disturbing.

Agent Lucy Vargas crouched beside the corpse and studied it closely.

“Our killer’s awfully confident,” Lucy said.

“How do you figure?” Riley asked.

“Well, he’s putting the bodies out for display,” she said. “Metta Lunoe was found in an open field, Valerie Bruner by the side of a road. Only about half of all serial killers transport their victims away from the murder site. Of those who do, about half conceal them. And most bodies that are left in view are just dumped. This kind of display suggests that he’s pretty cocky.”

Riley was pleased that Lucy had paid good attention in class. But somehow she didn’t think that cockiness was this killer’s point. He wasn’t trying to show off or taunt the authorities. He was up to something else. Riley didn’t yet know what it was.

But she was pretty sure it had something to do with the way the body was laid out. It was both awkward and deliberate. The girl’s left arm was stretched straight above her head. Her right arm was also straight but placed slightly to one side of her body. Even the head, with its broken neck, had been straightened to align as well as possible with the rest of the body.

Riley thought back to the photos of the other victims. She noticed that Lucy was carrying a tablet computer.

Riley asked her, “Lucy, could you bring up the photos of the other two corpses?”

It took Lucy only a few seconds to comply. Riley and Bill crowded next to Lucy to look at the two images.

Bill pointed and said, “Metta Lunoe’s corpse was a mirror image of this one – right arm raised, left arm to the side of the body. Valerie Bruner’s right arm was raised but her left arm was placed across the body, pointed downwards.”

Riley stooped down and took hold of the corpse’s wrist and tried to move it. The whole arm was immobile. Rigor mortis had fully set in. It would take a medical examiner to determine the exact time of death, but Riley felt pretty sure that the girl had been dead for at least nine hours. And like the other girls, she’d been moved to this spot shortly after she’d been killed.

The more she looked, the more something nagged at Riley. The killer had gone to so much trouble to arrange the corpse. He’d carried the body across the square, up six stairs, and had meticulously manipulated it. Even so, its overall position didn’t make sense.

The body wasn’t aligned with any of the gazebo walls. It wasn’t related to the opening of the gazebo or to the courthouse or anything else that Riley could see. It seemed to be laid out at a random angle.

*But this guy doesn’t do anything random,* she thought.

Riley sensed that the killer was trying to communicate something. She had no idea what it might be.

“What do you make of the poses?” Riley asked Lucy.

“I don’t know,” Lucy said. “Not many killers actually pose their bodies. It’s weird.”

*She’s still really new to this job,* Riley reminded herself.

Lucy hadn’t caught on that the weird cases were exactly the ones they routinely got called in for. For seasoned agents like Riley and Bill, weirdness had long since become numbingly normal.

Riley said, “Lucy, let’s take a look at the map.”

Lucy brought up the map that showed where the other two bodies had been found.

“The bodies have been placed in a pretty tight cluster,” Lucy said, pointing again. “Valerie Bruner was found less than ten miles from where Metta Lunoe was found. And this one is less than ten miles from where Valerie Bruner was found.”

Riley could see that Lucy was right. However, Meara Keagan had disappeared quite a few miles to the north in Westree.

“Does anybody see any connections among the locations?” Riley asked Bill and Lucy.

“Not really,” Lucy said. “Metta Lunoe’s body was in a field outside of Mowbray. Valerie Bruner’s was just along the edge of a highway. And now this one right in the middle of a small town. It’s almost as if the killer was looking for places that have nothing in common.”

Just then Riley heard shouting from among the onlookers.

“I know who did it! I know who did it!”

Riley, Bill, and Lucy all turned to look. A young man was waving and shouting from behind the tape.

“I know who did it!” he cried again.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Riley took a careful look at the man who was shouting. She could see that several people around him were nodding and murmuring in agreement.

“I know who did it! We all know who did it!”

“Josh is right,” a woman next to him said. “It’s got to be Dennis.”

“He’s a weirdo,” another man said. “That guy has always been a ticking bomb.”

Bill and Lucy hurried toward the edge of the square where the man was shouting, but Riley held her position. She called out to one of the cops beyond the tape.

“Bring him over here,” she said, pointing to the man who was doing the yelling.

She knew it was important to separate him from the group. If everybody started pitching in with stories, the truth would be impossible to untangle. If there was any truth in what everybody was yelling about.

Besides, reporters were starting to cluster around him. It wouldn’t do for Riley to interview the guy right under their noses.

The cop lifted the tape and escorted the man toward them.

He was still yelling, “We all know who did it! We all know who did it!”

“Calm down,” Riley said, taking him by the arm and leading him far enough away from the onlookers to be able to talk to him unheard.

“Ask anybody about Dennis,” the agitated man was saying. “He’s a loner. He’s weird. He scares girls. He annoys women.”

Riley got out her notepad, and so did Bill. She saw the intense interest in Bill’s eyes. But she knew they’d better take things slowly. They barely knew anything just yet. Besides, this man was so agitated that Riley felt wary of his judgment. She needed to hear from somebody more neutral.

“What’s his full name?” Riley asked.

“Dennis Vaughn,” the man said.

“Keep talking to him,” Riley told Bill.

Bill nodded and kept taking notes. Riley walked back to the gazebo, where Police Chief Aaron Pomeroy was still standing beside the body.

“Chief Pomeroy, what can you tell me about Dennis Vaughn?”

Riley could tell by his expression that the name was all too familiar.

“What do you want to know about him?” he asked.

“Do you think he might be a viable suspect?”

Pomeroy scratched his head. “Now that you mention it, maybe so. At least he might be worth talking to.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, we’ve had a lot of trouble with him for years. Indecent exposure, lewd behavior, that kind of thing. A couple of years ago it was window peeping, and he spent some time in the Delaware Psychiatric Center. Last year he got obsessed with a high school cheerleader, wrote letters to her and stalked her. The girl’s family got a court injunction, but he ignored it. So he did six months in prison.”

“When was he released?” she asked.

“Back in February.”

Riley was getting more and more interested. Dennis Vaughn had gotten out of prison shortly before the killings had started. Was it merely a coincidence?

“Local girls and women are starting to complain,” Pomeroy said. “Rumor has it that he’s been snapping pictures of them. It’s nothing we can arrest him for – at least not yet.”

“What else can you tell me about him?” Riley asked.

Pomeroy shrugged. “Well, he’s kind of a bum. He’s maybe thirty years old and he’s never held down a job that anybody can remember. Sponges off family he’s got here in town – aunts, uncles, grandparents. I hear that he’s been real sullen lately. Holds it against the whole town that he had to do prison time. He keeps telling folks, ‘One of these days.’”

“One of these days’ what?” Riley asked.

“Nobody knows. Folks have started calling him a ticking bomb. They don’t know what he might do next. But he’s actually never been violent that we know of.”

Riley’s mind was racing, trying to make sense of this possible new lead.

Meanwhile, Bill and Lucy had finished talking to the man and were walking toward Riley and Pomeroy.

Bill’s face looked bright and confident – a sudden change from his recent gloomy demeanor.

“Dennis Vaughn’s our killer, all right,” he told Riley. “Everything the guy just told us fits the profile perfectly.”

Riley didn’t reply. It was starting to seem likely, but she knew better than to jump to conclusions.

Besides, the certainty in Bill’s voice made her nervous. Ever since she’d arrived here this morning, she’d felt like Bill was teetering on the brink of really erratic behavior. It was understandable given his personal feelings about the case, especially his guilt over not solving it sooner. But it could also get to be a serious problem. She needed him to be his usual rock-solid self.

She turned toward Pomeroy.

“Could you tell us where to find him?”

“Sure,” Pomeroy said, pointing. “Walk straight along Main Street until you get to Brattleboro. Turn left, and his house is the third one to the right.”

Riley told Lucy, “You stay and wait for the medical examiner’s team. It’s fine for them to take the body right away. We’ve got lots of photographs.”

Lucy nodded.

Bill and Riley walked toward the police tape, where reporters craned toward them with cameras and microphones.

“Does the FBI have a statement to make?” asked one.

“Not yet,” Riley said.

She and Bill ducked under the tape and pushed their way among the reporters and onlookers.

Another reporter yelled, “Does this killing have anything to do with the murders of Metta Lunoe and Valerie Bruner?”

“Or with Meara Keagan’s disappearance?” another asked.

Riley bristled. It wouldn’t be long before the news was widespread that there was a serial killer in Delaware.

“No comment,” she snapped at the reporters. Then she added, “If you keep following us I’ll arrest you for interfering with an investigation. It’s called obstruction of justice.”

The reporters backed away. Riley and Bill disentangled themselves from the small crowd and continued on their way. Riley knew they wouldn’t have a lot of time on this case before other, more aggressive reporters arrived on the scene. They were likely to have a lot of media attention to deal with.

It was a short walk to Dennis Vaughn’s house. After just three blocks, they got to Brattleboro and turned left.

Vaughn’s house was a dilapidated little ruin with a heavily dented tin roof, peeling white paint, and a sagging front porch. The lawn was knee-deep with grass and weeds, and an old, decrepit-looking Plymouth Valiant was parked in the driveway. The vehicle was certainly large enough for the transportation of emaciated corpses.

Bill and Riley walked up onto the porch and knocked on the screen door.

“Whaddya want?” called a voice from inside.

“Are we speaking to Dennis Vaughn?” Bill answered.

“Yeah, maybe. Why?”

Riley said, “We’re with the FBI. We want to talk to you.”

The front door opened. Dennis Vaughn stood behind the screen door, which was still hooked shut. He was an unsavory-looking young man, overweight, with a shaggy beard. Excessive body hair showed under his torn, food-stained undershirt.

“What’s this all about?” Vaughn asked in a petulant, quavering voice. “Are you here to arrest me or what?”

“We’ve just got some questions,” Riley said, showing her badge. “Could we come inside?”

“Why should I let you in?” Vaughn asked.

“Why shouldn’t you let us in?” Riley asked. “You don’t have anything to hide, do you?”

“We could come back with a warrant,” Bill added.

Vaughn shook his head and growled. He unhooked the screen door and Bill and Riley stepped inside.

The house was even more of a wreck inside. The wallpaper was peeling, and there were broken gaps in the floorboards. There was hardly any furniture – just a couple of battered straight-back chairs and a couch with its stuffing hanging out. Plates and bowls were scattered everywhere, some of them filled with moldy food. Disagreeable smells filled the air.

What caught Riley’s eye were dozens of photographs randomly thumbtacked to the walls. All of them were of women and girls in casual, unsuspecting poses.

Vaughn noticed Riley’s interest in the pictures.

“It’s my hobby,” he said. “Is there anything wrong with that?”

Riley didn’t reply, and Bill said nothing. Riley doubted there was anything illegal about the pictures themselves. It looked as if they’d all been taken outdoors in public places in broad daylight, and none were actually indecent. Even so, the very act of snapping pictures of girls and women without their knowledge or consent struck Riley as deeply creepy.

Vaughn sat down on a wooden chair that creaked under his weight.

“You’re here to accuse me of something,” he said. “So why don’t you get on with it?”

Riley sat down on another rickety chair facing him. Bill stood beside her.

“What do you think we’re here to accuse of you of?” she asked.

It was an interview technique that had worked well for her in the past. Sometimes it was best not to start with direct questions about a case. Sometimes it was better to get a potential suspect talking until he tripped himself up with his own words.

Vaughn shrugged.

“One thing or another,” he said. “It’s always something. Everybody always misunderstands.”

“Misunderstands what?” Riley asked, still trying to coax him along.

“I like girls, okay?” he said. “What guy my age doesn’t? Why do people think everything I do is wrong just because *I* do it?”

He glanced around at some of the pictures, as if he hoped they’d say something to defend him. Riley just waited for him to keep talking. She hoped that Bill would do the same, but her partner’s impatience was tense and palpable.

“I try to be friendly with girls,” he said. “Can I help it if they don’t understand?”

His voice was slow, even a bit sluggish. Riley felt pretty sure he wasn’t drunk or drugged. Perhaps he was a bit mentally slow or had some neurological problem.

“Why do you think people treat you differently?” Riley said, trying to sound almost sympathetic.

“How should I know?” Vaughn said, shrugging again.

Then in an almost inaudible sullen voice he added ...

“One of these days.”

“One of these days’ what?” Riley asked.

Vaughn shrugged yet again. “Nothing. I don’t mean anything. But one of these days. That’s all I’m saying.”

Riley felt encouraged that his talk was becoming nonsensical. That often happened before a suspect really betrayed himself.

But before Vaughn could say anything else, Bill stepped toward him menacingly.

“What do you know about the murders of Metta Lunoe and Valerie Bruner?”

“I never heard of them,” Vaughn said.

Bill bent uncomfortably close to him and peered into his eyes. Riley was worried now. She wanted to tell Bill to knock it off. But interfering might make things worse.

“What about Meara Keagan?” Bill asked.

“Never heard of her either.”

Bill was talking more loudly now.

“Where were you last Thursday night?”

“I don’t know.”

“You mean you weren’t at home?”

Vaughn was sweating nervously. His eyes were wide with alarm.

“Maybe I wasn’t. I don’t keep track. I go out sometimes.”

“Where do you go?”

“I go driving around. I like to get out of town. I hate this town. I wish I could live someplace else.”

Bill spat his next question in Vaughn’s face.

“And where were you driving around last Thursday?”

“I don’t know. I don’t even know if I was driving around that night.”

“You’re lying,” Bill shouted. “You were driving around Westree, weren’t you? You found a nice lady there, didn’t you?”

Riley shot out of her seat. Bill was clearly out of control now. She had to stop him.

“Bill,” she said quietly, grabbing him by the shoulder.

Bill shoved away her hand. He pushed Vaughn over in the chair. Already on the verge of breaking, the chair fell to pieces. Vaughn was sprawled on the floor for a moment. Then Bill grabbed him by the undershirt and hauled him across the room, pushing him back first against the wall.

“Bill, stop it,” Riley shouted.

Bill was pressing Vaughn against the wall. Riley was afraid he might pull his gun at any second.

“Prove it!” Bill snarled.

Riley managed to get between Bill and Vaughn. She pushed Bill back forcefully.

“That’s enough!” she snapped loudly. “We’re leaving!”

Bill was staring at her, his eyes wild with rage.

Riley turned to Vaughn and said, “I’m sorry. My partner’s sorry. We’ll go now.”

Without waiting for Vaughn to say anything, Riley shoved Bill toward the front door, then out onto the porch.

“What the hell’s the matter with you?” she hissed at him.

“What’s the matter with *you*? Let me back in there. We’ve got him. I know we’ve got him. We’ll make him show us his driver’s license, find out what his middle name is.”

“No,” Riley said. “We’re not going to make him do anything. Jesus, Bill, you could lose your badge for acting like that. You know better.”

Bill looked like he couldn’t believe his ears. “Why?” he demanded. “We’ve got him. We could get a confession.”

Riley felt like shaking him.

“We don’t know that. Maybe he is our guy, but I don’t think so.”

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