

A hand with pale skin and short, unpolished nails reaches out from a dark, shadowed area at the top of the frame. The hand is positioned palm-down on a heavily textured, reddish-brown surface that resembles aged parchment or stone. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the contours of the hand and the texture of the surface.

ONCE COLD

A RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY--BOOK #8

BLAKE PIERCE

A Riley Paige Mystery

Блейк Пирс

Once Cold

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There is one cold case that has plagued Special Agent Riley Paige for her entire career, dwelling at the corners of her consciousness, forcing her to return to it again and again. The only case she has never solved, she has finally put it out of her mind. Until she gets a call from the murdered victim's mother. It spurs Riley to face the case once again, and to not give up until she has found answers. Yet Riley barely has time to catch her breath when she receives a lead for another cold case, one which, if possible, strikes an even deeper note within her. It is a lead that promises to solve the case of her own mother's killer. And it comes from Shane Hatcher.

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Blake Pierce

ONCE COLD

BOOKS BY BLAKE PIERCE

RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY SERIES

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ONCE TAKEN (Book #2)

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PROLOGUE

The man walked into the Patom Lounge and found himself surrounded by a thick haze of cigarette smoke. The lights were dim, an old heavy metal tune blared over the speakers, and already he could feel his impatience.

The place was too hot, too crowded. He flinched as beside him a short cheer arose; he turned to see a dart game being played by five drunks. Beside them there was a lively pool game going on. The sooner he got out of here, the better.

He looked around the room for only a few seconds before his eyes lighted upon a young woman sitting at the bar.

She had a cute face and a boyish haircut. She was just a little too well dressed for a dive like this. *She'll do just fine*, the man thought.

He walked over to the bar, sat on the stool beside her, and smiled.

"What's your name?" he asked.

He realized that he couldn't hear his own voice over the general din.

She looked at him, smiled back, pointed to her ears, and shook her head.

He repeated his question louder, moving his lips in an exaggerated manner.

She leaned close to him. Nearly yelling, she said, "Tilda. What's yours?"

"Michael," he said, not very loudly.

It wasn't his real name, of course, but that probably didn't even matter. He doubted that she could hear him. She didn't seem to care.

He looked at her drink, which was almost empty. It looked like a margarita. He pointed to the glass and said very loudly, "Care for another?"

Still smiling, the woman named Tilda shook her head no.

But she wasn't brushing him off. He felt sure of that. Was it time for a bold move?

He reached for a cocktail napkin and took a pen out of his shirt pocket.

He wrote on the cocktail napkin ...

Care to go somewhere else?

She looked at the message. Her smile broadened. She hesitated for a moment, but he sensed that she was here looking for a thrill. And she seemed pleased to have found one.

Finally, to his delight, she nodded.

Before they left, he picked up a matchbook with the name of the bar.

He would need it later.

He helped her into her coat and they walked outside. The cool spring air and sudden quiet was startling after the noise and heat.

"Wow," she said as she walked along with him. "I almost went deaf in there."

"I take it you don't hang out there a lot," he said.

"No," she said.

She didn't elaborate, but he was sure that this was the first time she'd ever been to the Patom Lounge.

"Me neither," he said. "What a dive."

"You can say that again."

"What a dive," he said.

They both laughed.

"That's my car over there," he said, pointing. "Where would you like to go?"

She hesitated again.

Then, with an impish twinkle in her eye, she said, "Surprise me."

Now he knew that his earlier guess was correct. She really had come here looking for a thrill.

Well, so had he.

He opened the passenger door of his car, and she climbed inside. He got behind the wheel and started to drive.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

With a smile and a wink, he replied, “You said to surprise you.”

She laughed. Her laughter sounded nervous but pleased.

“I take it you live here in Greybull,” he said.

“Born and bred,” she said. “I don’t think I’ve seen you before. Do you live somewhere around here?”

“Not far away,” he said.

She laughed again.

“What brings you to this boring little town?”

“Business.”

She looked at him with a curious expression. But she didn’t press the issue. Apparently she wasn’t very interested in getting to know him. That suited his purposes just fine.

He pulled into the parking lot of a dingy little motel called the Maberly Inn. He parked in front of room 34.

“I’ve already rented this room,” he said.

She said nothing.

Then, after a short silence, he asked, “Is this OK with you?”

She nodded a little nervously.

They went into the room together. She looked around. The room had a musty, disagreeable odor, and the walls were decorated with ugly paintings.

She walked to the bed and pressed her hand on the mattress, checking its firmness.

Was she displeased with the room?

He wasn’t sure.

The gesture made him angry – furiously angry.

He didn’t know why, but something inside him snapped.

Normally he wouldn’t strike until he had her naked on the bed. But now he couldn’t help himself.

As she turned around to head for the bathroom, he blocked her way.

Her eyes widened with alarm.

Before she could react further, he pushed her backward onto the bed.

She thrashed about, but he was much stronger than she was.

She tried to scream, but before she could, he grabbed a pillow and pressed it onto her face.

Soon, he knew, it would all be over.

CHAPTER ONE

Suddenly, the lights snapped on in the lecture hall, and Agent Lucy Vargas's eyes hurt from the glare.

The students sitting around her started murmuring softly. Lucy's mind had been focused deeply in the exercise – to imagine a real murder from the killer's point of view – and it was hard to snap back.

"OK, let's talk about what you saw," the instructor said.

The instructor was none other than Lucy's mentor, Special Agent Riley Paige.

Lucy wasn't actually a student in the class, which was for FBI Academy cadets. She was just sitting in today, as she did from time to time. She was still fairly new to the BAU, and she found Riley Paige to be a source of limitless inspiration and information. She took every opportunity she could to learn from her – and also to work with her.

Agent Paige had given the students details of a murder case that had gone cold some twenty-five years ago. Three young women had been killed in central Virginia. The killer had been nicknamed the "Matchbook Killer," because he left matchbooks with the victims' bodies. The matchbooks were from bars in a general area near Richmond. He'd also left napkins imprinted with the names of the motels where the women had been killed. Even so, investigating those places had not brought any breaks in the case.

Agent Paige had told the students to use their imaginations to recreate one of the murders.

"Let your imagination loose," Agent Paige had said before they started. "Visualize lots of details. Don't worry about getting the little things right. But try to get the big picture right – the atmosphere, the mood, the setting."

Then she'd turned out the lights for ten minutes.

Now that the lights were on again, Agent Paige walked back and forth in front of the lecture hall.

She said, "First of all, tell me a little about the Patom Lounge. What was it like?"

A hand shot up in the middle of the hall. Agent Paige called on the male student.

"The place wasn't exactly elegant, but it was trying to look more classy than it was," he said.

"Dimly lit booths along the walls. Some kind of soft upholstery everywhere – suede, maybe."

Lucy felt puzzled. She hadn't pictured the bar as looking anything like this at all.

Agent Paige smiled a little. She didn't tell the student whether he was right or not.

"Anything else?" Agent Paige asked.

"There was music, playing low," another student said. "Jazz, maybe."

But Lucy distinctly remembered imagining the din of '70s and '80s hard rock tunes.

Had she gotten everything wrong?

Agent Paige asked, "What about the Maberly Inn? What was it like?"

A female student held up her hand, and Agent Paige picked her.

"Kind of quaint, and nice as motels go," the young woman said. "And pretty old. Dating to before most of the really commercial motel chain franchises came along."

Another student spoke up.

"That sounds right to me."

Other students voiced their agreement.

Again, Lucy was struck by how differently she'd pictured the place.

Agent Paige smiled a little.

"How many of you share these general impressions – both of the bar and the motel?"

Most of the students raised their hands.

Lucy was starting to feel a little awkward now.

"Try to get the big picture right," Agent Paige had told them.

Had Lucy blown the whole exercise?

Had everyone in the class gotten things right except her?

Then Agent Paige brought up some images on the screen in front of the classroom.

First came a cluster of photographs of the Patom Lounge – a night shot from outside with a neon sign glowing in the window, and several other photos from inside.

“This is the bar,” Agent Paige said. “Or at least this is how it looked back around the time of the murders. I’m not sure what it looks like now – or if it’s even there.”

Lucy felt relieved. It looked much like she had imagined it – a rundown dive with cheaply paneled walls and fake leather upholstery. It even had a couple of pool tables and a dartboard, just like she’d supposed. And even in the pictures, one could see a thick haze of cigarette smoke.

The students gaped in surprise.

“Now let’s take a look at the Maberly Inn,” Agent Paige said.

More photos appeared. The motel looked every bit as sleazy as Lucy had imagined it – not very old, but nevertheless in bad repair.

Agent Paige chuckled a little.

“Something seems to be a little off here,” she said.

The classroom laughed nervously in agreement.

“Why did you visualize the scenes like you did?” Agent Paige asked.

She called on a young woman who held up her hand.

“Well, you told us that the killer first approached the victim in a bar,” she said. “That spells ‘singles bar’ for me. Kind of cheesy, but at least trying to look classy. I just didn’t get an image of some working-class dive.”

Another student said, “Same with the motel. Wouldn’t the killer take her to a place that looked nicer, if only to trick her?”

Lucy was smiling broadly now.

Now I get it, she thought.

Agent Paige noticed her smile and smiled back.

She said, “Agent Vargas, where did so many of us go wrong?”

Lucy said, “Everybody forgot to take into account the victim’s age. Tilda Steen was just twenty years old. Women who go to singles bars are typically older, in their thirties or middle-aged, often divorced. That’s why you’ve visualized the bar wrong.”

Agent Paige nodded in agreement.

“Go on,” she said.

Lucy thought for a moment.

“You said she came from a fairly solid middle-class family in an ordinary little town. Judging from the picture you showed us earlier, she was attractive, and I doubt that she had trouble getting dates. So why did she let herself get picked up in a dive like the Patom Lounge? My guess is she was bored. She deliberately went someplace that might be a little dangerous.”

And she found more danger than she’d bargained for, Lucy thought.

But she didn’t say so aloud.

“What can we all learn from what just happened?” Agent Paige asked the class.

A male student raised his hand and said, “When you’re mentally reconstructing a crime, be sure to factor in every bit of information you’ve got. Don’t leave anything out.”

Agent Paige looked pleased.

“That’s right,” she said. “A detective has to have a vivid imagination, has to be able to get into a killer’s mind. But that’s a tricky business. Just overlooking a single detail can throw you way off. It can make the difference between solving the case and not solving it at all.”

Agent Paige paused, then added, “And this case never did get solved. Whether it ever will ... well, it’s doubtful. After twenty-five years, the trail’s gone pretty cold. A man killed three young women – and there’s a good chance he’s still out there.”

Agent Paige let her words sink in for a moment.

“That’s all for today,” she finally said. “You know what you’re supposed to read for the next class.”

The students left the lecture hall. Lucy decided to stay for a few moments and chat with her mentor.

Agent Paige smiled at her and said, “You did some pretty good detective work just now.”

“Thanks,” Lucy said.

She was very pleased. The slightest bit of praise from Riley Paige meant a great deal to her.

Then Agent Paige said, “But now I want you to try something a little more advanced. Shut your eyes.”

Lucy did so. In a low, steady voice, Agent Paige gave her more details.

“After he killed Tilda Steen, the murderer buried her in a shallow grave. Can you describe for me how that happened?”

As she’d been doing during the exercise, Lucy tried to slip into the murderer’s mind.

“He left the body lying on the bed, then stepped out of the motel room door,” Lucy said aloud. “He looked carefully around. He didn’t see anybody. So he took her body out to his car and dumped it in the back seat. Then he drove to a wooded area. Some place that he knew pretty well, but not very close to the crime scene.”

“Go on,” Agent Paige said.

Her eyes still closed, Lucy could feel the killer’s methodical coldness.

“He stopped the car where it wouldn’t be easy to see. Then he got a shovel out of his trunk.”

Lucy felt stumped for a moment.

It was night, so how would the killer find his way into the woods?

It wouldn’t be easy to carry a flashlight, a shovel, and a corpse.

“Was it a moonlit night?” Lucy asked.

“It was,” Agent Paige said.

Lucy felt encouraged.

“He picked up the shovel with one hand and slung the body over his shoulder with the other. He trudged off into the woods. He kept going until he found a faraway place where he was sure nobody ever went.”

“A faraway place?” Agent Paige asked, interrupting Lucy’s reverie.

“Definitely,” Lucy said.

“Open your eyes.”

Lucy did so. Agent Paige was packing up her briefcase to go.

She said, “Actually, the killer took the body to the woods right across the highway from the motel. He only carried Tilda’s body a few yards into the thicket. He could easily have seen car lights from the highway, and he probably used the light from a street lamp to bury Tilda. And he buried her carelessly, covering her more with rocks than earth. A passing bicyclist noticed the smell a few days later and called the cops. The body was easy to find.”

Lucy’s mouth dropped open with surprise.

“Why didn’t he go to more trouble to hide the murder?” she asked. “I don’t understand.”

Shutting her briefcase, Agent Paige frowned ruefully.

“I don’t either,” she said. “Nobody does.”

Agent Paige picked up her briefcase and left the lecture hall.

As Lucy watched her leave, she detected an attitude of bitterness and disappointment in Agent Paige’s stride.

Clearly, as detached as Agent Paige tried to seem, this cold case still was tormenting her.

CHAPTER TWO

Over dinner that evening, Riley Paige couldn't get the "Matchbook Killer" out of her mind. She had used that cold case as an example for her class because she knew she'd be hearing about it again soon.

Riley tried to concentrate on the delicious Guatemalan stew that Gabriela had prepared for them. Their live-in housekeeper and general helper was a wonderful cook. Riley hoped that Gabriela wouldn't notice that she was having trouble enjoying dinner tonight. But of course, the girls did notice.

"What's the matter, Mom?" asked April, Riley's fifteen-year-old daughter.

"Is something wrong?" asked Jilly, the thirteen-year-old girl that Riley was hoping to adopt.

From her seat on the other side of the table, Gabriela also gazed at Riley with concern.

Riley didn't know what to say. The truth was, she knew that she was going to get a fresh reminder of the Matchbook Killer tomorrow – a phone call that she got every year. There was no point in trying to put it out of her mind.

But she didn't like bringing her work home to the family. Sometimes, despite all her best efforts, she had even put her loved ones in terrible danger.

"It's nothing," she said.

The four of them ate quietly for a few moments.

Finally April said, "It's Dad, isn't it? It bothers you that he's not home again this evening."

The question took Riley a bit by surprise. Her husband's recent absences from the household had been troubling her lately. She and Ryan had gone to a lot of effort to reconcile, even after a painful divorce. Now their progress seemed to be crumbling, and Ryan had been spending more and more time at his own house.

But Ryan hadn't been on her mind at all right now.

What did that say about her?

Was she getting numb to her failing relationship?

Had she just given up?

Her three dinner companions were still looking at her, waiting for her to say something.

"It's a case," Riley said. "It always nags at me this time of year."

Jilly's eyes widened with excitement.

"Tell us about it!" she said.

Riley wondered how much she should tell the kids. She didn't want to describe the murder details to her family.

"It's a cold case," she said. "A series of murders that neither the local police nor the FBI were able to solve. I've been trying to crack it for years."

Jilly was bouncing in her chair.

"How are you going to solve it?"

The question stung Riley a little.

Of course, Jilly didn't mean to be hurtful – quite the opposite. The younger girl was proud to have a law enforcement agent for a parent. And she still had the idea that Riley was some kind of superhero who couldn't ever fail.

Riley held back a sigh.

Maybe it's time to tell her that I don't always catch the bad guys, she thought.

But Riley just said, "I don't know."

It was the simple, honest truth.

But there was one thing Riley did know.

The twenty-fifth anniversary of Tilda Steen's death was coming up tomorrow, and she wouldn't be able to get it out of her mind any time soon.

To Riley's relief, the conversation at the table turned to Gabriela's delicious dinner. The stout Guatemalan woman and the girls all started speaking in Spanish, and Riley had trouble following all that was said.

But that was OK. April and Jilly were both studying Spanish, and April was getting to be quite fluent. Jilly was still struggling with the language, but Gabriela and April were helping her to learn it.

Riley smiled as she watched and listened.

Jilly looks well, she thought.

She was a dark-skinned, skinny girl – but hardly the desperate waif Riley had rescued from the streets of Phoenix a few months ago. She was hearty and healthy, and she seemed to be adjusting well to her new life with Riley and her family.

And April was proving to be a perfect big sister. She was recovering well from the traumas she had been through.

Sometimes when she looked at April, Riley felt that she was looking in a mirror – a mirror that showed her own teenage self from many years ago. April had Riley's hazel eyes and dark hair, though none of Riley's touches of gray.

Riley felt a warm glow of reassurance.

Maybe I'm doing a pretty good job as a parent, she thought.

But the glow faded quickly.

The mysterious Matchbook Killer was still lurking around the edges of her mind.

*

After dinner, Riley went up to her bedroom and office. She sat down at her computer and took a few deep breaths, trying to relax. But the task that awaited her was somehow unnerving.

It seemed ridiculous for her to feel this way. After all, she had hunted and fought dozens of dangerous killers over the years. Her own life had been threatened more times than she could count.

Just talking to my sister shouldn't get to me like this, she thought.

But she hadn't seen Wendy in ... how many years had it been?

Not since Riley had been a little girl, anyway. Wendy had gotten back in touch after their father had died. They had talked on the phone, mulling over the possibility of getting together in person. But Wendy lived far away in Des Moines, Iowa, and they hadn't been able to work out the details. So they'd finally agreed on this time for a video chat.

To prepare herself, Riley looked at a framed picture that was sitting on her desk. She had found it among her father's belongings after his death. It showed Riley, Wendy, and their mother. Riley looked like she was about four, and Wendy must have been in her teens.

Both girls and their mother looked happy.

Riley couldn't remember when or where the picture had been taken.

And she certainly couldn't remember her family ever being happy.

Her hands cold and shaking, she typed Wendy's video address on her keyboard.

The woman who appeared on the screen might as well have been a perfect stranger.

"Hi, Wendy," Riley said shyly.

"Hi," Wendy replied.

They sat staring at each other dumbly for a few awkward moments.

Riley knew that Wendy was about fifty, some ten years older than her. She seemed to wear her years pretty well. She was a bit heavyset and looked thoroughly conventional. Her hair didn't appear to be graying like Riley's. But Riley doubted that it was her natural color.

Riley glanced back and forth between the picture and Wendy's face. She noticed that Wendy looked a little like their mother. Riley knew that she looked more like their father. She wasn't especially proud of the resemblance.

“Well,” Wendy finally said to break the silence. “What have you been up to ... during the last few decades?”

Riley and Wendy both laughed a little. Even their laughter felt strained and awkward.

Wendy asked, “Are you married?”

Riley sighed aloud. How could she explain what was going on between her and Ryan when she didn't even know herself?

She said, “Well, as the kids say these days, ‘It’s complicated.’ And I do mean *really* complicated.”

There was a bit more nervous laughter.

“And you?” Riley asked.

Wendy seemed to be starting to relax a little.

“Loren and I are coming up on our twenty-fifth anniversary. We’re both pharmacists, and we own our own drugstore. Loren inherited it from his father. We’ve got three kids. The youngest, Barton, is away at college. Thora and Parish are both married and on their own. I guess that makes Loren and me your classic empty-nesters.”

Riley felt a strange pang of melancholy.

Wendy’s life had been nothing at all like hers. In fact, Wendy’s life had apparently been completely normal.

Just as she had with April over dinner, she again had the feeling of looking in the mirror.

Except this mirror wasn’t of her past.

It was of a future self – someone she once might have become, but now would never, ever be.

“What about you?” Wendy asked. “Any kids?”

Again, Riley felt tempted to say ...

“It’s complicated.”

Instead, she said, “Two. I’ve got a fifteen-year-old, April. And I’m in the process of adopting another – Jilly, who’s thirteen.”

“Adoption! More people should do that. Good for you.”

Riley didn’t feel like she deserved to be congratulated at the moment. She might feel better if she could be sure that Jilly would grow up in a two-parent family. Right now, that issue was in doubt. But Riley decided not to go into all that with Wendy.

Instead, there was some business she needed to discuss with her sister.

And she was afraid it might be awkward.

“Wendy, you know that Daddy left me his cabin in his will,” she said.

Wendy nodded.

“I know,” she said. “You sent me some pictures. It looks like a nice place.”

The words were a bit jarring ...

“... a nice place.”

Riley had been there a few times – most recently after her father died. But her memories of it were far from pleasant. Her father had bought it when he retired as a US Marine colonel. Riley remembered it as the home of a lonely, mean old man who hated just about everybody – and a man that just about everybody hated in return. The last time Riley had seen him alive, they had actually come to blows.

“I think it was a mistake,” she said.

“What was?”

“Leaving the cabin to me. It was wrong for him to do that. It should have gone to you.”

Wendy looked genuinely surprised.

“Why?” she asked.

Riley felt all kinds of ugly emotions welling up inside her. She cleared her throat.

“Because you were with him at the end, when he was in hospice. You took care of him. You even took care of everything afterwards – his funeral and all the legal stuff. I wasn’t there. I – ”

She almost choked on her next words.

“I don’t think I could have done that. Things weren’t good between us.”

Wendy smiled sadly.

“Things weren’t good between him and me either.”

Riley knew it was true. Poor Wendy – Daddy had beaten her regularly until at last she ran away for good at the age of fifteen. And yet Wendy had shown the decency to take care of Daddy at the end.

Riley had done no such thing, and she couldn’t help feeling guilty about it.

Riley said, “I don’t know what the cabin is worth. It must be worth something. I want you to have it.”

Wendy’s eyes widened. She looked alarmed.

“No,” she said.

The bluntness of her reply startled Riley.

“Why not?” Riley asked.

“I just can’t. I don’t want it. I want to forget all about him.”

Riley knew just how she felt. She felt the same way.

Wendy added, “You should just sell it. Keep the money. I want you to.”

Riley didn’t know what to say.

Fortunately, Wendy changed the subject.

“Before he died, Dad told me you were a BAU agent. How long have you been doing that kind of work?”

“About twenty years,” Riley said.

“Well. I think Dad was proud of you.”

A bitter chuckle rose up in Riley’s throat.

“No, he wasn’t,” she said.

“How do you know?”

“Oh, he let me know. He had his own way of communicating things like that.”

Wendy sighed.

“I suppose he did,” Wendy said.

An awkward silence fell. Riley wondered what they should talk about. After all, they’d barely spoken for many years. Should they try again to figure out how to get together in person? Riley couldn’t imagine traveling to Des Moines just to see this stranger named Wendy. And she was sure Wendy felt the same way about coming to Fredericksburg.

After all, what could they possibly have in common?

At that moment, Riley’s desk phone rang. She was grateful for the interruption.

“I’d better get that,” Riley said.

“I understand,” Wendy said. “Thanks for getting in touch.”

“Thank *you*,” Riley said.

They ended the call and Riley answered her phone. Riley said hello, then heard a confused-sounding woman’s voice.

“Hello ... who’s speaking?”

“Who’s calling?” Riley asked.

A silence fell.

“Is ... is Ryan at home?” the woman asked.

Her words sounded slurred now. Riley felt pretty sure the woman was drunk.

“No,” Riley said. She hesitated for a moment. After all, she told herself, it could be a client of Ryan’s. But she knew it wasn’t. The situation was all too familiar.

Riley said, “Don’t call this number again.”

She hung up.
She bristled with anger.
It's starting all over again, she thought.
She dialed up Ryan's home phone number.

CHAPTER THREE

When Ryan answered the phone, Riley wasted no time getting to the point.

“Are you seeing someone else, Ryan?” she asked.

“Why?”

“A woman called here asking for you.”

Ryan hesitated before asking, “Did you get her name?”

“No. I hung up.”

“I wish you hadn’t. She might have been a client.”

“She was drunk, Ryan. And it was personal. I could hear it in her voice.”

Ryan didn’t seem to know what to say.

Riley repeated her question, “Are you seeing someone else?”

“I – I’m sorry,” Ryan stammered. “I don’t know how she got your number. It must have been some kind of mistake.”

Oh, there’s been a mistake, all right, Riley thought.

“You’re not answering my question,” she said.

Ryan was starting to sound angry now.

“What if I *am* seeing someone else? Riley, we never made any agreement to be exclusive.”

Riley was stunned. No, she couldn’t remember them making any such agreement. But even so ...

“I just assumed – ” she began.

“Maybe you assumed too much,” Ryan interrupted.

Riley tried to fight down her temper.

“What’s her name?” she asked.

“Lina.”

“Is it serious?”

“I don’t know.”

The phone was shaking in Riley’s hand.

She said, “Don’t you think it’s about time you made up your mind?”

A silence fell.

Finally, Ryan said, “Riley, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about this. I need some space. This whole family thing – I thought I was ready for it, but I wasn’t. I want to enjoy my life. You should take some time to enjoy your life too.”

Riley could hear an all-too-familiar tone in his voice.

He’s back in playboy mode again, she thought.

He was relishing his new liaison, pulling away from Riley and his family. He’d seemed like a changed man recently – more committed and responsible. She should have realized all along that it wouldn’t last. He hadn’t changed at all.

“What are you going to do now?” she asked.

Ryan sounded relieved to be getting his feelings out at last.

“Look, this whole thing of going back and forth between your house and mine – it’s not really working for me. It feels too temporary. I think I’d better leave.”

“April’s going to be upset,” Riley said.

“I know. But we’ll work something out. I’ll keep spending time with her. And she’ll be OK. She’s been through worse.”

Ryan’s glibness was making Riley angrier by the second. She felt ready to explode.

“And what about Jilly?” Riley said. “She’s become very fond of you. She’s come to count on you. You help her with lots of things, like her homework. She needs you. She’s going through so many changes, and it’s hard for her.”

There was another pause. Riley knew that Ryan was getting ready to say something she really wasn’t going to like.

“Riley, Jilly was your decision. I admire you for it. But I never signed up for it. Somebody else’s troubled teenager is too much for me. It’s not fair.”

For a moment, Riley was too furious to speak.

Ryan was back to thinking about no one’s feelings but his own.

The whole thing was hopeless.

“Come over here and get your things,” she said through clenched teeth. “Be sure to come when the girls are in school. I want everything of yours out of here as soon as possible.”

She hung up the phone.

She got up from her desk and paced the room, seething with anger.

She wished she had some outlet for her rage, but there wasn’t a thing she could do right now. She was in for a sleepless night of it.

But tomorrow, she could do something to let off steam.

CHAPTER FOUR

Riley knew that an attack was coming, and it was going to be up close and sudden. And it could come from anywhere in these labyrinthine spaces. She worked her way carefully along a narrow hallway of the abandoned building.

But memories from last night kept intruding ...

"I need some space," Ryan had said.

"This whole family thing – I thought I was ready for it, but I wasn't."

"I want to enjoy my life."

Riley was angry – not just with Ryan, but with herself for letting such thoughts distract her.

Stay focused, she told herself. *You've got a bad guy to take down.*

And the situation was grim. Riley's younger colleague Lucy Vargas had already been wounded. Riley's longtime partner Bill Jeffreys had stayed with Lucy. They were both around a corner behind Riley, holding off approaching shooters. Riley heard a three-round burst from Bill's rifle.

With danger lurking ahead of her, she couldn't look back to see what was happening.

"What's your situation, Bill?" she called out.

Now she heard a series of semiautomatic shots.

"One down, two more to go," Bill called to her. "I'll take these guys out, no problem. And I've got Lucy covered, she'll be OK. You keep your eyes forward. That guy in front is good. Real good."

Bill was right. Riley couldn't see the shooter up ahead, but he'd already hit Lucy, who was an excellent markswoman herself. If Riley didn't take him out, he was likely to kill all three of them.

She kept her M4 carbine raised and ready. She hadn't handled an assault weapon in a long time, so she was still getting used to its bulk and weight.

Before her lay the hallway with all its doors standing open. The shooter could be in any one of those rooms. She was determined to find him, to blow him away before he could do any more damage.

Riley crept along near the wall, moving toward the first doorway. Hoping he was in there, she stood clear of the opening, reached out with the weapon, and fired a three-round burst inside. The gun jerked sharply in her hands. Then she stepped in front of the doorway and fired another three-round burst. This time she pressed the stock against her shoulder, which absorbed the recoil.

She lowered her weapon and saw that the room was empty. She whirled to make sure the hallway was still clear, then stood there for a moment considering her next move. Aside from being dangerous, checking from room to room like this was going to cost precious ammo. But right now, she seemed to have no choice. If the shooter was in one of those rooms, he was poised to kill whoever tried to pass the open doorway.

She paused for a moment to monitor her own physical reactions.

She was agitated, nervous.

Her pulse was pounding.

She was breathing hard and fast.

But was it from adrenaline or anger from last night?

Again she remembered ...

"What if I am seeing someone else?" Ryan had said.

"Riley, we never made any agreement to be exclusive."

He'd told her the woman's name was Lina.

Riley wondered how old she was.

Probably too young.

Ryan's women were always too young.

Damn it, stop thinking about him! She was reacting like some stupid rookie.

She had to remind herself of who she was. She was Riley Paige, and she was respected and admired.

She had years of training and fieldwork under her belt.

She'd been to hell and back over and over again. She'd taken lives and she'd saved lives. She was always cool in the face of danger.

So how could she let Ryan get to her like this?

She physically shook herself, trying to push the distractions out of her head.

She crept toward the next room, fired a burst around the doorframe, then stepped directly into the doorway and pulled the trigger again.

At that very moment, her rifle jammed.

"Damn," Riley grumbled aloud.

By a stroke of luck, the shooter wasn't in this room either. But she knew that her luck might run out at any second. She put down the M4 and drew her Glock pistol.

Just then, a flash of motion caught her eye. He was there, in that doorway just ahead, his rifle aimed directly at her. Instinctively, Riley hit the floor and rolled, avoiding his gunfire. Then she came up to a kneeling position and fired three times, bracing herself against the recoil with every round. All three bullets hit the shooter, who fell backward to the floor.

"Got him!" she yelled back at Bill. She watched the figure carefully and saw no sign of life. It was over.

Then Riley stood up and removed her VR helmet with its goggles, headphones, and microphone. The fallen shooter disappeared, along with the maze of hallways. She found herself in a room about the size of a basketball court. Bill was standing nearby, and Lucy was getting to her feet. Bill and Lucy were also taking off their helmets. Like Riley, they were wearing lots of other gear, including straps around their wrists, elbows, knees, and ankles that tracked their movements in the simulation.

Now that her companions weren't simulated puppets, Riley paused for a moment to appreciate their real-life presence. They seemed like an odd pair – one of them mature and solid, the other young and impulsive.

But they were both among her favorite people in the world.

Riley had already worked with Lucy in the field more than once, and she knew that she could count on her. The dark-skinned, dark-eyed young agent always seemed to sparkle from inside, radiating energy and enthusiasm.

By contrast, Bill was Riley's age, and although his forty years were slowing him a little, he was still a topnotch field agent.

He's also still pretty good-looking, she reminded herself.

For a moment she wondered – now that things were tanking between her and Ryan, maybe she and Bill might ...?

But no, she knew that was a terrible idea. In the past, she and Bill had both made clumsy efforts to start something serious, and the results had always been a disaster. Bill was a great partner and an even greater friend. It would be stupid to spoil all that.

"Good work," Bill said to Riley. He was grinning broadly.

"Yeah, you saved my life, Agent Paige," Lucy said, laughing. "I can't believe I let myself get shot, though. I missed that guy when he was right in front of me!"

"That's part of what this system is for," Bill told Lucy, patting her on the back. "Even very experienced agents tend to miss their targets at close range, within ten feet. VR helps you deal with those kinds of problems."

Lucy said, "Well, there's nothing like taking a virtual bullet in the shoulder to teach you that lesson." She rubbed her shoulder, where the equipment had delivered a slight sting to let her know she was hit.

"It's better than a real one," Riley said. "Anyway, I wish you a speedy recovery."

“Thanks!” Lucy said, laughing again. “I’m feeling better already.”

Riley holstered the model pistol and picked up the fake assault rifle. She remembered the sharp recoil that she’d felt firing both weapons. And the nonexistent abandoned building had been detailed and vivid.

Even so, Riley felt strangely empty and unsatisfied.

But that certainly wasn’t the fault of either Bill or Lucy. And she was grateful that they’d taken some time this morning to join her in this exercise.

“Thanks for agreeing to do this with me,” she said. “I guess I needed to blow off some steam.”

“Feel better?” Lucy asked.

“Yeah,” Riley said.

It wasn’t true, but she figured a little lie wouldn’t hurt.

“How about the three of us go get a cup of coffee?” Bill asked.

“Sounds great!” Lucy said.

Riley shook her head.

“Not today, thanks. Some other time. You two go ahead.”

Bill and Lucy left the huge VR room. For a moment, Riley wondered whether maybe she should go with them after all.

No, I’d be lousy company, she thought.

Ryan’s words kept echoing through her mind ...

“Riley, Jilly was your decision.”

Ryan really had some nerve, turning his back on poor Jilly.

But Riley wasn’t angry now. Instead, she felt achingly sad.

But why?

Slowly she realized ...

None of it’s real.

My whole life, everything’s fake.

Her hopes for becoming a family again with Ryan and the kids had just been an illusion.

Just like this damned simulation.

She fell to her knees and started to sob.

It took a few minutes for Riley to pull herself together. Grateful that no one had spotted her collapse, she got to her feet and headed back to her office. As soon as she stepped inside, her desk phone started ringing.

She knew who was calling.

She was expecting it.

And she knew that the conversation wasn’t going to be easy.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Hello, Riley,” a woman’s voice said when Riley picked up the phone.

It was a sweet voice – quavering and feeble with age, but friendly.

“Hello, Paula,” Riley said. “How are you?”

The caller sighed.

“Well, you know – today’s always hard.”

Riley understood. Paula’s daughter, Tilda, had been killed on this day twenty-five years ago.

“I hope you don’t mind my calling,” Paula said.

“Of course not, Paula,” Riley assured her.

After all, Riley had initiated their rather peculiar relationship years ago. Riley had never actually worked on the case that included Tilda’s murder. She had gotten in touch with the victim’s mother long after the case had gone cold.

This annual call between them had been a ritual for years.

Riley still found it strange, having these conversations with someone she’d never met. She didn’t even know what Paula looked like. She knew that Paula was sixty-eight now. She had been forty-three, just three years older than Riley, when her daughter was murdered. Riley imagined her as a kindly, gray-haired, grandmotherly figure.

“How is Justin?” Riley asked.

Riley had talked to Paula’s husband a couple of times, but had never gotten to know him.

Paula sighed again.

“He passed away last summer.”

“I’m sorry,” Riley said. “How did it happen?”

“It was sudden, completely out of the blue. It was an aneurysm – or maybe a heart attack. They offered to do an autopsy to determine which it was. I said, ‘Why bother?’ It wasn’t going to bring him back.”

Riley felt terrible for the woman. She knew that Tilda had been her only daughter. The loss of her husband couldn’t be easy.

“How are you coping?” Riley asked.

“One day at a time,” Paula said. “It’s lonely here now.”

There was a note of almost unbearable sadness in her voice, as if she felt ready to join her husband in death.

Riley found such loneliness hard to imagine. She felt a burst of gratitude to have caring people in her life – April, Gabriela, and now Jilly. Riley had endured fears of losing all of them. April had been seriously endangered more than once.

And of course, there were wonderful old friends, like Bill. He had also faced more than his share of risks.

I won’t ever take them for granted, she thought.

“And how about you, dear?” Paula asked.

Maybe that was why Riley felt as though she could talk with Paula about things that she couldn’t with most people.

“Well, I’m in the process of adopting a thirteen-year-old girl. That’s been an adventure. Oh, and Ryan came back for a while. Then he took off again. Another sweet young thing caught his eye.”

“How awful for you!” Paula said. “I was lucky with Justin. He never strayed. And I suppose in the long run he was lucky too. He went quickly, no lingering pain or suffering. I hope when my time comes ...”

Paula’s voice trailed off.

Riley shuddered.

Paula had lost a daughter to a killer who had never been brought to justice.

Riley had also lost someone to a killer who was never found.

She spoke slowly.

“Paula ... I still have flashbacks about it. Nightmares too.”

Paula replied in a kindly, caring voice.

“I don’t suppose that’s surprising. You were little. And you were there when it happened. I was spared what you went through.”

That word *spared* startled Riley.

It didn’t seem to her that Paula had been *spared* in any way.

True, Paula hadn’t been forced to watch her daughter die.

But surely losing one’s only child was even worse than what Riley had suffered.

Paula’s capacity for selfless empathy always astonished Riley.

Paula kept on speaking in a soothing voice.

“Grief never goes away, I don’t suppose. Maybe we shouldn’t want it to. What would we become if I forgot Justin or you forgot your mother? I don’t ever want to become that hard. As long as I still hurt and grieve, I feel human ... and alive. It’s a part of who we both are, Riley.”

Riley blinked back a tear.

As always, Paula was telling her exactly what she needed to hear.

But as always, it wasn’t easy.

Paula continued, “And look at what you’ve done with your life – protecting others, pursuing justice. Your loss has helped make you who you are – a champion, a good and caring person.”

A single sob broke out of Riley’s throat.

“Oh, Paula. I wish things didn’t have to be like this – for either of us. I wish I could have – ”

Paula interrupted.

“Riley, we talk about this every year. My daughter’s killer will never be brought to justice. It’s nobody’s fault, and I don’t blame anybody. Least of all you. It was never your case to begin with. It’s not your responsibility. Everybody else did the best they could. The best thing you can do is just talk to me. And that makes my life ever so much better.”

“I’m sorry about Justin,” Riley said.

“Thank you. It means a lot to me.”

Riley and Paula agreed to talk again next year, then ended the call.

Riley sat quietly alone in her office.

Talking with Paula was always emotionally difficult, but most of the time it made Riley feel better.

Today Riley only felt worse.

Why was that?

Too much is going wrong, Riley realized.

Today, all the troubles in her life seemed to be linked together.

And somehow, she couldn’t help blaming herself for all the loss, for all the pain.

At least she didn’t feel like crying anymore. Crying certainly didn’t help. Besides, Riley had some routine paperwork to do today. She settled down at her desk and tried to work.

*

Later that afternoon, Riley drove straight from Quantico to Brody Middle School. Jilly was already waiting on the sidewalk when Riley pulled up to the curb.

Jilly jumped into the passenger seat.

“I’ve been waiting here for fifteen minutes!” she said. “Hurry! We’ll be late for the game!”

Riley chuckled a little.

"We're not going to be late," she said. "We're going to be just in time."

Riley drove on toward April's high school.

As she drove, Riley began to worry again.

Had Ryan come to the house during the day to pick up his things?

And when and how was she going to break the news to the girls that he was gone?

"What's the matter?" Jilly asked.

Riley hadn't realized that her face had betrayed her feelings.

"Nothing," she said.

"It's not nothing," Jilly said. "I can tell."

Riley held back a sigh. Like April and Riley herself, Jilly was nothing if not observant.

Should I tell her now? Riley wondered.

No, this wasn't the time. They were on their way to watch April play in a soccer game. She didn't want to ruin the afternoon with bad news.

"It's really nothing," she said.

Riley parked at April's school minutes before the game was to start. She and Jilly headed toward the viewer stands, which were already pretty crowded. Riley realized that maybe Jilly was right – maybe they should have arrived sooner.

"Where can we sit?" Riley asked.

"Up there!" Jilly said, pointing to the top level, where some space was still available. "I'll be able to stand up against the back railing and see everything."

They climbed up the bleachers and took their seats. In a matter of minutes, the game started. April was playing midfield, obviously having a great time. Riley noticed right away that she was an aggressive player.

As they watched, Jilly commented, "April says she wants to really develop her game skills during the next couple of years. Is it true that soccer might get her a college scholarship?"

"If she really works at it," Riley said.

"Wow. That's cool. Maybe I can do that too."

Riley smiled. It was wonderful that Jilly was taking such a positive view of the future. In the life she'd left behind, Jilly had had little to hope for. Her prospects had been grim. She almost certainly wouldn't have finished high school, let alone think about college. A whole world of possibilities was opening up for her.

I guess I do some things right, Riley thought.

As Riley watched, April got inside her defender's position and made a beautiful corner kick that slammed past the opposing goalkeeper. She'd scored the first goal of the game.

Riley leaped to her feet, cheering and clapping.

As she cheered, Riley recognized another girl on the team. It was April's friend Crystal Hildreth. Riley hadn't seen Crystal in quite some time. The sight of the girl stirred up some complicated emotions.

Crystal and her father, Blaine, used to live right next door to Riley and her family.

Blaine was a charming man. Riley had gotten romantically interested in him, and he in her.

But all that ended a few months ago when something terrible happened. Then Blaine and his daughter had moved away.

Riley really, really didn't want to be reminded of those awful events.

She looked around the crowd. Since Crystal was playing, Blaine was surely here somewhere. But at the moment, she couldn't see him.

She hoped she wouldn't have to meet him.

*

Halftime arrived and Jilly ran off to talk to some friends she had spotted.

Riley noticed that she had a text message. It was from Shirley Redding, the real estate agent she had contacted about selling her father's cabin.

It read ...

Good news! Call me right away!

Riley made her way out of the stands and dialed the agent's number.

"I've looked into the sale," the woman said. "The property should bring in well over a hundred thousand dollars. Perhaps twice that."

Riley felt a tingle of excitement. That kind of money would be a huge help for the girls' college plans.

Shirley continued, "We need to talk over details. Is now a good time?"

It wasn't, of course, so Riley made arrangements to talk to her tomorrow. Just as she ended the call, she saw someone making his way through the crowd toward her.

Riley recognized him right away. It was Blaine, her former neighbor.

She noticed that the good-looking, smiling man still had a scar on his right cheek.

Riley's heart sank.

Did he blame Riley for that scar?

She couldn't help blaming herself.

CHAPTER SIX

Blaine Hildreth felt a rush of conflicting emotions as he made his way through the crowd. He had spotted Riley Paige when she stood up to cheer. She looked as vital and striking as ever, and he found himself automatically going toward her at the halftime break. Now she was looking back at him as he approached, but he couldn't tell much from her expression.

How did she feel about seeing him?

And how did he feel about seeing her?

Blaine couldn't help flashing back to a traumatic day more than two months ago ...

He was sitting in his own living room when he heard a terrible racket next door.

He rushed over to Riley's townhouse and found the front door partially open.

He charged inside and saw what was going on.

A man was attacking April, Riley's daughter. The man had thrown April on the floor, and she was squirming and twisting, beating him with her fists.

Blaine rushed toward them and pulled the attacker off April. He struggled with the man, trying to subdue him.

Blaine was taller than the attacker, but not stronger, and not nearly as agile.

He kept swinging his fists at the man, but most of his blows missed, and the ones that connected made no apparent impact.

Suddenly, the man landed a crashing punch to Blaine's abdomen. The wind exploded out of Blaine's lungs. He buckled over and couldn't breathe.

Then the attacker delivered a swift kick to his face ...

... and the world went black.

The next thing Blaine knew, he was in the hospital.

And now, as he was approaching Riley, Blaine was shaking a little from the memory.

He tried to steady himself.

When he reached Riley, he didn't know what to do. Shaking hands seemed a bit ridiculous. Should he give her a hug?

He saw that Riley's face was red with embarrassment. She didn't seem to know what to do either.

"Hi, Blaine," Riley said.

"Hi."

They stood there staring at each other for a moment, then laughed a little at their own awkwardness.

"Both of our girls are playing well today," Riley said.

"Yours especially," Blaine said.

April's goal early in the game had really impressed him.

"Are you here with anybody?" Riley asked.

"No. And you?"

"Just Jilly," Riley said. "You don't know her, I guess. Jilly is ... well, it's a long story."

Blaine nodded.

"I've heard about Jilly from my daughter," he said. "Adopting her is really a great thing to do."

Blaine remembered something else Crystal had told him. Riley was trying to get back together with Ryan. Blaine wondered how that was going. Ryan wasn't here at the game, anyway.

Rather shyly, Riley said, "Listen, we're sitting up in the back of the stands. We've got some extra room. Would you like to watch the rest of the game with us?"

Blaine smiled.

"I'd like that," he said.

They made their way to the bleachers and climbed up to the back. A thin young girl smiled as she saw Riley approach. But she didn't look happy when she noticed that Blaine was with her.

"Jilly, this is my friend Blaine," Riley said.

Without saying a word, Jilly got up from the bench and started to walk away.

"Sit with us, Jilly," Riley said.

"I'm going to sit with my friends," Jilly said, pushing past them and continuing down the stairs. "They can squeeze me in."

Riley looked shocked and dismayed.

"I'm sorry," she said to Blaine. "That was very rude."

"It's OK," Blaine said.

Riley sighed as they both sat down.

"No, it's not OK," she said. "A whole lot of things aren't OK. Jilly's mad because I'm sitting with someone who's not Ryan. He had moved back in with us, and she'd gotten very attached to him."

Riley shook her head.

"Now Ryan's moving out again," she said. "I haven't had a chance to tell the girls yet. Or maybe I just haven't found the nerve. They're both going to be crushed."

Blaine felt a little relieved that Ryan wasn't in the picture. He had met Riley's handsome ex-husband a couple of times, and the man's arrogance had put him off. Besides that, he had to admit, he was hoping that Riley was free of romantic relationships.

But he felt also guilty for reacting that way.

The game quickly started again. Both April and Crystal were playing well, and Blaine and Riley cheered from time to time.

But through it all, Blaine kept thinking about the last time he'd seen Riley. It was soon after he returned home from the hospital. He'd knocked on her door to tell her that he and Crystal were moving away. Blaine had given Riley a lame excuse. He'd said that the townhouse was too far from the restaurant that he owned and managed.

He'd also tried to make it sound like the move was no big deal.

"It'll be like nothing has changed," he'd told her.

It wasn't true, of course, and Riley hadn't bought it.

She'd been visibly displeased.

This seemed like as good a time as any to broach the subject.

In a hesitant voice, he said, "Listen, Riley, I'm sorry about how things were the last time I saw you. When I told you we were moving, I mean. I wasn't at my best."

"No need to explain anything," Riley said.

But Blaine felt very differently.

He said, "Look, I think we both know the reason Crystal and I moved."

Riley shrugged.

"Yeah," Riley said. "You were scared for your daughter's safety. I don't blame you, Blaine. I really don't. You were only being sensible."

Blaine didn't know what to say. Riley was right, of course. He'd been scared for Crystal's safety, not his own. He was also scared for Crystal's mental well-being. Blaine's ex-wife, Phoebe, was an abusive alcoholic, and Crystal was still dealing with the emotional scars of that relationship. She didn't need any new traumas in her life.

Riley knew all about Phoebe. She'd actually rescued Crystal from one of Phoebe's drunken rages.

Maybe she really does understand, he thought.

But he couldn't tell how she really felt.

Just then, their daughters' team scored another goal. Blaine and Riley clapped and cheered. They watched the game in silence for a few moments.

Then Riley said, “Blaine, I admit I was disappointed with you when you moved. Maybe even a little angry. I was wrong. It wasn’t fair of me. I’m sorry about what happened.”

She paused, then continued.

“I felt terrible about what happened to you. And guilty. I still do. Blaine, I – ”

For a moment, she seemed to struggle with her thoughts and feelings.

“I can’t help but feel that I bring danger to everyone who crosses my path. I hate that about my job. I hate that about myself.”

Blaine started to object.

“Riley, you mustn’t – ”

Riley stopped him.

“It’s true, and we both know it. If I were my neighbor, I’d want to move too. At least, as long as I had a teenager in the house.”

At that moment, a play went wrong for their daughters’ team. Blaine and Riley groaned along with the rest of the home crowd.

Blaine was starting to feel somewhat reassured. Riley sincerely didn’t seem to hold his moving against him – at least not anymore.

Could they reawaken the interest they once had for each other?

Blaine gathered up his nerve and said, “Riley, I’d love to treat you and your kids to a dinner at my restaurant. You can bring Gabriela too. She and I could swap Central American recipes.”

Riley sat quietly for a moment. She looked almost as if she hadn’t heard.

Finally she said, “I don’t think so, Blaine. Things are just too complicated right now. Thanks for asking, though.”

Blaine felt a pang of disappointment. Not only was Riley turning him down, but she didn’t seem to be leaving any future possibilities open.

But there was nothing to be done about it.

He watched the rest of the game with Riley in silence.

*

Riley was still thinking about Blaine over dinner that evening. She wondered if maybe she’d made a mistake. Maybe she should have accepted his invitation. She liked him and missed him.

He’d even invited Gabriela, which was sweet. As a restaurateur, he had appreciated Gabriela’s cooking in the past.

And Gabriela had made a typically delicious Guatemalan meal tonight – chicken in onion sauce. The girls were enjoying it and chattering about this afternoon’s soccer victory.

“Why didn’t you come to the game, Gabriela?” April asked.

“You’d have enjoyed it,” Jilly said.

“Sí, I enjoy the *fútbol*,” Gabriela said. “Next time I will come.”

This seemed to Riley like a good time to mention something.

“I’ve got good news,” she said. “I talked to my Realtor today, and she thinks that selling your grandfather’s cabin should bring in quite a bit of money. It should really help with college plans – for both of you.”

The girls were pleased and talked about that for a while. But soon Jilly’s mood seemed to darken.

Finally Jilly asked Riley, “Who was that guy at the game with you?”

April said, “Oh, that was Blaine. He used to be our neighbor. He’s Crystal’s dad. You’ve met her.”

Jilly ate in sullen silence for a few moments.

Then she said, “Where’s Ryan? Why wasn’t he at the game?”

Riley gulped anxiously. She'd noticed earlier that Ryan had come to the house during the day to take his things. It was time to tell the girls the truth.

"There's something I've been meaning to tell everybody," she began.

But she had trouble finding the right words.

"Ryan ... says he needs some space. He's – "

She couldn't bring herself to say more. She could see by the girls' faces that she didn't need to. They understood all too well what she meant.

After a few seconds of silence, Jilly burst into tears and fled the room, hurrying upstairs. April quickly followed to console her.

Riley realized that April was accustomed to Ryan's on and off attentions. These disappointments must still hurt, but she could handle them better than Jilly could.

Sitting at the table with only Gabriela, Riley started feeling guilty. Was she completely incapable of maintaining a serious relationship with a man?

As if reading her thoughts, Gabriela said, "Stop blaming yourself. It is not your fault. Ryan is a fool."

Riley smiled sadly.

"Thanks, Gabriela," she said.

It was exactly what she needed to hear.

Then Gabriela added, "The girls need a father figure. But not someone who will come and go like that."

"I know," Riley said.

*

Later that evening, Riley looked in on the girls. Jilly was in April's room, silently doing homework.

April looked up and said, "We're OK, Mom."

Riley felt a flood of relief. As sad as she felt for both girls, she was proud that April was comforting Jilly.

"Thank you, sweetheart," she said, and quietly closed the door.

She thought that April would talk to her about Ryan whenever she felt ready. But Jilly might have a harder time of it.

As she went back downstairs, Riley found herself thinking about what Gabriela had said.

"The girls need a father figure."

She looked at the phone. Blaine had made it clear that he would like to get their relationship going again.

But what would he actually expect of her? Her life was packed full with kids and work. Could she really include anyone else in it right now? Would she just disappoint him?

But, she admitted, I do like him.

And he clearly liked her. Surely there had to be room in life for...

She picked up the phone and dialed Blaine's home number. She was disappointed to get his answering machine, but not surprised. She knew that his work at the restaurant often kept him away from home at nights.

At the sound of the beep, Riley left a message.

"Hi, Blaine. This is Riley. Listen, I'm sorry if I acted a little distant at the game this afternoon. I hope I didn't seem rude. I just want to say, if your dinner offer still stands, count us in. Give me a call whenever you can to let me know."

Riley immediately felt better. She went to the kitchen and poured herself a drink. As she sat sipping it on the living room couch, she found herself remembering her conversation with Paula Steen.

Paula had seemed at peace with the fact that her daughter's killer would never be brought to justice.

"It's nobody's fault, and I don't blame anybody," Paula had said.

Those words now troubled Riley.

It just seemed so unfair.

Riley finished her drink, took a shower, and went to bed.

She'd barely fallen asleep when the nightmares started.

*

Riley was just a little girl.

She was walking through some woods at night. She was scared, but she wasn't sure why.

After all, she wasn't really lost in the woods.

The woods were close to a highway, and she could see cars going back and forth. The glow from a streetlight and a full moon both lit her way among the trees.

Then her eyes fell on a row of three shallow graves.

The dirt and stones that covered the graves were shifting and heaving.

Women's hands clawed their way out of the graves.

She could hear their muffled voices say ...

"Help us! Please!"

"I'm just a little girl!" Riley answered tearfully.

Riley snapped awake in bed. She was trembling.

It's just a nightmare, she told herself.

And it wasn't especially surprising that she'd dream about the Matchbook Killer's victims the night after she'd talked to Paula Steen.

She took several long, deep breaths. Soon she felt relaxed again, and her consciousness started to fade into sleep.

But then ...

She was still just a little girl.

She was in a candy store with Mommy, and Mommy was buying her lots of candy.

A scary man wearing a stocking over his head came toward her.

He pointed a gun at Mommy.

"Give me your money," he told Mommy.

But Mommy was too scared to move.

The man shot Mommy in the chest, and she fell down right in front of Riley.

Riley started screaming. She whirled around looking for someone to help.

But suddenly, she was in the woods again.

The women's hands were still groping out of the three graves.

The voices were still calling ...

"Help us! Please!"

Then Riley heard another voice beside her. This one sounded familiar ...

"You heard them, Riley. They need your help."

Riley turned and saw Mommy. She was standing right there, her chest bleeding from her bullet wound. Her face was deathly pale.

"I can't help them, Mommy!" Riley cried. "I'm just a little girl!"

Mommy smiled.

"No, you're not just a little girl, Riley. You're all grown up. Turn around and look."

Riley turned and found herself looking into a full-length mirror.

It was true.

She was a woman now.

And the voices were still calling out ...

“Help us! Please!”

Riley’s eyes snapped open again.

She was shaking even more than before, and gasping for breath.

She remembered something that Paula Steen had said to her.

“My daughter’s killer will never be brought to justice.”

Paula had also said ...

“It was never your case to begin with.”

Riley felt a new sense of determination.

It was true – the Matchbook Killer hadn’t been her case before.

But she could no longer leave it to the past.

At long last, the Matchbook Killer had to be brought to justice.

It’s my case now, she thought.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Riley had no more nightmares that night, but even so her sleep was restless. Surprisingly, she felt wide awake and energized when she got up the next morning.

She had work to do that day.

She got dressed and went downstairs. April and Jilly were in the kitchen eating a breakfast that Gabriela had made for them. The girls both looked sad, but not as devastated as they'd been yesterday.

Riley saw that a place had been set at the table for her, so she sat down and said, "Those pancakes look wonderful. Pass them over, please."

As she ate her breakfast and drank coffee, the girls began to look more cheerful. They didn't mention Ryan's absence, instead chatting about other kids at school.

They're tough, Riley thought.

And they'd both gotten through their share of tough times before now.

She was sure that they'd pull through this crisis about Ryan as well.

Riley finished her coffee and said, "I do have to get to the office."

She stood up and kissed April on the cheek, and then Jilly.

"Go catch some bad guys, Mom," Jilly said.

Riley smiled.

"I'll be sure to do that, dear," she replied.

*

As soon as she got to her office, Riley opened up computerized files on the twenty-five-year-old case. As she scanned old newspaper stories, she remembered reading some of them when they had first appeared. She'd been a teenager at the time, and the Matchbook Killer had seemed like the stuff that nightmares were made of.

The murders had happened here in Virginia near Richmond, with just three weeks in between each death.

Riley opened up a map and found Greybull, a small town off of Interstate 64. Tilda Steen, the last victim, had lived and died in Greybull. The other two murders had taken place in the towns of Brinkley and Denison. Riley could see that all the towns lay within about a hundred miles of each other.

Riley closed the map and looked at the newspaper stories again.

One banner headline screamed ...

MATCHBOOK KILLER CLAIMS THIRD VICTIM!

She shuddered a little.

Yes, she remembered seeing that headline from many years ago.

The article went on to describe the panic that the murders had struck throughout the area – especially among young women.

According to the article, the public and the police were both asking the same questions:

When and where was the killer going to strike next?

Who was going to be his next victim?

But there had been no fourth victim.

Why? Riley wondered.

It was a question that law enforcement had failed to answer.

The murderer had seemed like a ruthlessly motivated serial killer – the type who was likely to keep right on killing until he was caught. Instead, he had simply disappeared. And his disappearance had been as mysterious as the killings themselves.

Riley began to pore over old police records to refresh her memory.

The victims didn't seem to be connected in any way. The killer had used much the same MO for all three murders. He'd picked up young women in bars, driven them to motels, and killed them. Then he'd buried their bodies in shallow graves not far from the murder scenes.

The local police had had no trouble locating the bars where the victims had been picked up and the motels where they had been killed.

As some serial killers do, he had left clues for the police.

With all of the bodies, he had left matchbooks from the bars and notepaper from the motels.

Witnesses at the bars and motels were even able to give fairly good descriptions of the suspect.

Riley pulled up the composite sketch that had been created years ago.

She saw that the man looked fairly ordinary, with dark brown hair and hazel eyes. As she read witness descriptions, she noticed a few more details. Witnesses had mentioned that he looked strikingly pale, as if he worked at a job that kept him indoors and out of the sun.

The descriptions hadn't been very detailed. Even so, it seemed to Riley as though the case shouldn't have been all that tough to crack. But somehow it had been. The local police never found the killer. The BAU took over the case, only to conclude that the killer had either died or left the area. Continuing the search nationwide would be like looking for a needle in a haystack – a needle that might not even exist.

But there had been one agent, a master at cracking cold cases, who had disagreed.

"He's still in the area," he had told everybody. *"We can find him if we just keep looking."*

But his bosses hadn't believed him, and they wouldn't back him up. The BAU had let the case go cold.

That agent retired from the BAU years ago and moved to Florida. But Riley knew how to get in touch with him.

She reached for her desk phone and dialed his number.

A moment later, she heard a familiar rumbling voice. Jake Crivaro had been her partner and mentor back when she joined the BAU.

"Hello, stranger," Jake said. "Where the hell have you been? What have you been doing with yourself? You don't call, you don't write. Is that any way to treat the lonely, forgotten old buzzard who taught you everything you know?"

Riley smiled. She knew he didn't mean it. After all, they'd seen each other fairly recently. Jake had even come out of retirement to help her with a case just a couple of months ago.

She didn't ask, *"How have you been?"*

She remembered his litany the last time she'd asked.

"I'm seventy-five years old. 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?"

Asking him would only get him started complaining all over again.

The truth was, he was still physically spry, and his mind was as sharp as ever.

"I need your help, Jake," Riley said.

"Music to my ears. Retirement stinks. What can I do for you?"

"I'm looking into a cold case."

Jake chuckled a little.

"My favorite kind. You know, cold cases were a specialty of mine back in the day. They still are, as a kind of hobby. Even in retirement, I can collect and review stuff that nobody solved. I'm

a regular packrat that way. Do you remember that ‘Angel Face’ killer in Ohio? I solved that one a couple of years ago. It had been cold for more than a decade.”

“I remember,” Riley said. “That was some good work for an over-the-hill old codger.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere. So what have you got for me?”

Riley hesitated. She knew that she was about to stir up unpleasant memories.

“This case was one of yours, Jake,” she said.

Jake fell silent for a moment.

“Don’t tell me,” he finally said. “The Matchbook Killer case.”

Riley almost asked, “*How do you know?*”

But it was easy to guess the answer.

Jake was obsessed with past failures, especially his own. Doubtless he was keenly aware of the anniversary of Tilda Steen’s death. He’d probably also noted the anniversaries of the other victims’ deaths. Riley guessed that they probably haunted him every year.

“That was before your time,” Jake said. “Why do you want to dredge up all that ancient history?”

She heard bitterness in his voice – the same bitterness she remembered hearing from him when she was still a young rookie. He’d been furious with the powers-that-be for shutting the case down. He’d still been bitter when he retired a few years later.

“You know I’ve been in touch with Tilda Steen’s mother over the years,” Riley said. “I talked to her just yesterday. This time ...”

She paused. How could she put it into words?

“It hit me harder than usual, I guess. If nobody does anything, the poor woman will die without her daughter’s killer getting brought to justice. I don’t have any other cases going and I ...”

Her voice trailed off.

“I know just how you feel,” Jake said, his voice suddenly sympathetic. “Those three dead women deserved better. Their families deserved better.”

Riley felt relieved that Jake shared her feelings.

“I can’t do much without BAU support,” Riley said. “Do you think there’s any way I could reopen the case?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Let’s get right to work.”

Riley could hear Jake’s fingers rattling on his computer keyboard as he brought up his own files.

“What went wrong when you worked on it?” Riley asked.

“What *didn’t* go wrong? My theories didn’t fit with anybody else’s at the BAU. The area was fairly rural back then, just three little small towns. Even so, along an interstate that close to Richmond, there were plenty of transients. The Bureau just decided it must have been some drifter who moved along. My gut told me something different – that he lived in the area and might live there still. But nobody cared what my gut had to say.”

While he was typing, he grumbled, “I might have cracked this thing years ago if it weren’t for my shit-for-brains partner.”

Riley had heard about Jake’s incompetent partner, who had been fired before Riley joined the BAU.

She said, “I hear he screwed up almost everything he touched.”

“Yeah, literally. In one of the bars, he handled a drinking glass the killer had touched, smeared up the fingerprints but good.”

“Weren’t there any fingerprints on the napkins or the matchbooks?”

“Not after being covered with dirt in a shallow grave. The guy screwed up royally. He should’ve been fired right then and there. He didn’t last long, though. Last I heard he was working in a convenience store. Good riddance.”

Riley heard a pause in Jake’s typing. She guessed that he now had all his materials ready at hand.

“OK, now close your eyes,” Jake said.

Riley shut her eyes and smiled. He was going to put her through much the same exercise she had taught to her students. She had learned it from him in the first place.

Jake said, "You're the killer, but you haven't killed anybody yet. You just walked into McLaughlin's Pub in Brinkley, and you've just introduced yourself to a girl named Melody Yanovich. You've put some moves on her, and things seem to be going pretty smoothly."

She began to see things from the killer's point of view. The scene playing out clearly in her mind.

Jake said, "There's a little bowl of matchbooks on the bar. In the middle of your pickup, you grab one and pocket it. Why?"

Riley could practically feel the little matchbook between her fingers. She imagined herself tucking it into her shirt pocket.

But why? she wondered.

When the case had been open, there had been a fairly commonsensical theory about that. The killer had left matchbooks from the bars and notepaper from the motels on the victims' bodies to taunt the police.

But now she realized – Jake didn't think so.

And now she didn't either.

She said, "He didn't even know he was going to kill her – at least not when he was in McLaughlin's Pub, not that first time. He picked up the matchbook as a souvenir of his impending conquest, a trophy for the good time he expected to have."

"Good," Jake said. "Then what?"

Riley could clearly visualize the killer helping Melody Yanovich out of his car and escorting her into the motel room.

"Melody was willing, and he was feeling confident. As soon as they got into the room, she went to the bathroom to get ready. Meanwhile, he picked up a piece of notebook paper with the motel logo – for the same reason he'd picked up the matchbook, as a souvenir. Then he took off his clothes and got under the covers. Soon Melody came out of the bathroom ..."

Riley paused to get a clearer picture.

Had the woman been naked right then?

No, not exactly, Riley thought.

"Melody came out with a towel wrapped around her. Right then he started to get uneasy. He'd had trouble performing in the past. Was he going to have that problem again this time? She climbed into bed with him and pulled off the towel and ..."

"And?" Jake coaxed.

"And he knew then and there – he couldn't do it. He was ashamed and humiliated. He couldn't let the woman get away knowing that he'd failed. A burning rage took him over completely. His fury wiped away his humanity. He grabbed her by the throat and strangled her in the bed. She died very quickly. His rage ebbed away, and he realized what he'd done, and he was seized by guilt. And ..."

Riley's mind hurried through the rest of the crime. The killer had not only buried the victims in shallow graves, but he'd put the graves close to streets and highways. He knew perfectly well that the bodies would be found. In fact, he'd made sure of it.

Riley's eyes snapped open.

"I get it, Jake. When he first picked up the matchbooks and pieces of notepaper, he was only collecting souvenirs. But after the murders, he used them for something different. He left them with the bodies to *help* the police, not to taunt them. He wanted to be caught. He didn't have the nerve to turn himself in, so leaving clues was the best he could do."

"You're catching on," Jake said. "My guess is, both of the first two murders played out pretty much exactly that way. Now take a look at the local police summary of the murders."

Riley looked at the report on her computer screen.

“How was the last murder different?” Jake asked.

Riley scanned the text. She didn’t notice anything she hadn’t known already.

“Tilda Steen was fully clothed when he buried her. It seemed that he hadn’t tried to have sex with her at all.”

Jake said, “Now tell me what it says about the cause of death for all three victims.”

Riley quickly found it in the text.

“Strangulation,” she said. “The same for all of them.”

Jake grunted with dismay.

“That’s where the locals went wrong,” he said. “The first two, Melody Yanovich and Portia Quinn, were both definitely strangled. But I found out from the medical examiner – there weren’t any bruises on Tilda Steen’s neck. She’d been suffocated but not strangled. What does that tell you?”

Riley’s brain clicked along, processing this new information.

She closed her eyes again, trying to imagine the scene.

“Something happened when he got Tilda into that motel room,” Riley said. “She confided something to him, maybe something she’d never told anybody else. Or maybe she told him something about himself he wanted to hear. She suddenly became ...”

Riley paused.

Jake said, “Go ahead. Say it.”

“*Human* to him. He felt guilty for what he was *going* to do. And in a twisted way ...”

It took Riley a moment to put her thoughts together.

“He decided to kill her as an act of mercy. He didn’t strangle her with his hands. He did it more gently. He overpowered her on the bed and suffocated her with a pillow. He felt so remorseful that ...”

Riley opened her eyes.

“... he didn’t ever kill again.”

Jake let out a grunt of approval.

He said, “That was the same conclusion I came to back in the day. I still think it. I believe he’s still in that general area, and he’s still haunted by what he did all those years ago.”

A word started echoing through Riley’s mind ...

Remorse.

Something suddenly seemed crystal clear to her.

Without stopping to think, she said, “He’s still remorseful, Jake. And I’ll bet anything he leaves flowers on the women’s graves.”

Jake chuckled with satisfaction.

“Good thinking,” he said. “That’s what I always liked about you, Riley. You get the psychology, and you know how to turn it into action.”

Riley smiled.

“I learned from the best,” she said.

Jake grumbled his thanks for the compliment. She thanked him and ended the call. She sat in her office thinking.

It’s up to me.

She had to hunt down the killer and bring him to justice once and for all.

But she knew she couldn’t do it alone.

She needed help just getting the BAU to reopen the case.

She rushed out into the hall and headed for Bill Jeffreys’ office.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Bill Jeffreys was enjoying an unusually quiet morning at BAU when his partner burst into his office. He immediately recognized the expression on her face. This was how Riley Paige looked when she was excited about a new case.

He gestured toward the chair on the other side of his desk, and Riley sat down. But as he listened attentively to her description of the murders, Bill grew puzzled about her enthusiasm. Even so, he made no comment while she gave him the complete rundown of her phone conversation with Jake.

“So what do you think?” she asked Bill when she finished.

“About what?” Bill asked.

“Do you want to work the case with me?”

Bill squinted with uncertainty.

“Sure, I’d like to, but ... well, the case isn’t even open. It’s out of our hands.”

Riley took a deep breath and said cautiously, “I was hoping you and I could fix that.”

It took Bill a moment to catch her meaning. Then his eyes widened and he shook his head.

“Oh, no, Riley,” he said. “This one is long gone. Meredith isn’t going to be interested in opening it up again.”

He could see that she also had doubts, but she was trying to hide them.

“We’ve got to try,” she said. “We can solve this case. I know it. Times have changed, Bill. We’ve got new tools at our disposal. For instance, DNA testing was in its infancy back then. Now things are different. You’re not working another case right now, are you?”

“No.”

“Neither am I. Why not give it a shot?”

Bill gazed at Riley with concern. In less than a year his partner had been reprimanded, suspended, and even fired. He knew that her career had sometimes hung by a thread. The only thing that had saved her was her uncanny ability to find her prey, sometimes in unorthodox ways. That skill and his occasional covering for her had kept her in the BAU.

“Riley, you’re asking for trouble,” he said. “Don’t rock the boat.”

He could see her bristle at that and immediately regretted his choice of words.

“OK, if you don’t want to do it,” she said, getting up from her chair, turning, and heading for his office door.

*

Riley hated that phrase. “*Don’t rock the boat.*”

After all, she was a boat-rocker to the core. And she knew perfectly well that it was one of the things that made her a good agent.

She was on her way out of Bill’s office when he called, “Wait a minute. Where are you going?”

“Where do you think I’m going?” she called back.

“OK, OK! I’m coming!”

She and Bill hurried down the hall toward the office of Team Chief Brent Meredith. Riley knocked on their boss’s door and heard a gruff voice call out, “Come in.”

Riley and Bill stepped inside Meredith’s spacious office. As always, the team chief cut a daunting presence with his large physique and his black, angular features. He was hunched over his desk poring over reports.

“Make it quick,” Meredith said without looking up from his work. “I’m busy.”

Riley ignored Bill’s worried glance and boldly sat down beside Meredith’s desk.

She said, “Chief, Agent Jeffreys and I want to reopen a cold case, and we wondered if – ”
Still focused on his papers, Meredith interrupted.

“Nope.”

“Huh?” Riley said.

“Request denied. Now if you don’t mind, I’ve got work to do.”

Riley stayed seated. She felt momentarily stymied.

Then she said, “I just got off the phone with Jake Crivaro.”

Meredith slowly lifted his head and looked at her. A smile formed on his lips.

“How is old Jake?” he asked.

Riley smiled too. She knew that Jake and Meredith had been close friends back during their early days at the BAU.

“He’s grouchy,” Riley said.

“He always was,” Meredith said. “You know, that old bastard could be downright intimidating.”

Riley suppressed a chuckle. The very idea that Meredith would find anybody intimidating was rather funny. Riley herself had never been intimidated by Jake at all.

She said, “Yesterday was the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Matchbook Killer’s last murder.”

Meredith swiveled toward her in his chair, starting to look interested.

“I remember that one,” he said. “Jake and I were both field agents back then. He never got over not being able to solve it. We talked about it over drinks a lot.”

Meredith folded his hands together and looked at Riley intently.

“So Jake gave you a call about it, eh? He wants to reopen the case, come out of retirement?”

Riley felt a fleeting impulse to lie. Meredith would surely be more open to the idea if he thought it came from Jake. But she just couldn’t do it.

“I called him, sir,” she said. “But it was already on his mind. It always is this time of year. And we talked through some possibilities.”

Meredith leaned back in his chair.

“Tell me what you’ve got,” he said.

She quickly collected her thoughts.

“Jake thinks the killer is still in the general area of the killings,” she said. “And I trust Jake’s hunches. We think he was consumed by guilt – probably still is. And I had this idea that he might regularly leave flowers on the grave of the last victim, Tilda Steen. So that’s something new to check out.”

Riley could tell by Meredith’s face that he was getting interested.

“That could be a really good lead,” he said. “What else have you got?”

“Not much,” she said. “Except Jake mentioned a glass that had been picked up as evidence.”

Meredith nodded.

“I remember. His idiot rookie partner ruined the fingerprints.”

Riley said, “It’s probably still in the evidence locker. Maybe we can get some DNA off of it. That wasn’t much of an option twenty-five years ago.”

“Good,” Meredith said. “What else?”

Riley thought for a moment.

“We’ve got an old composite sketch of the killer,” she said. “It’s not all that good. But maybe our tech guys could age the picture, come up with some ideas about what he might look like now. I could turn it over to Sam Flores.”

Meredith didn’t say anything right away.

Then he looked at Bill, who was still standing near the doorway.

“Have you got any cases going, Agent Jeffreys?”

“No.”

“Good. I want you to work this case with Paige.”

Without another word, Meredith turned his attention back to his reports.

Riley looked at Bill. Like her, he was gaping with surprise.

“When do we start?” Bill asked Meredith

“Five minutes ago,” Meredith said, waving them away. “What’s the matter with you two? Quite wasting time. Get to work.”

Riley and Bill hurried out of the office, excitedly talking about how to get things underway.

CHAPTER NINE

A little while later, Riley was relaxing as Bill drove the FBI car to the town of Greybull, where Tilda Steen had been killed. Riley felt good to be working on a new case, especially one of her own choosing.

It was a warm, sunny day. She felt as though her troubles and anxieties were fading behind her. Now that she had time to clear her head, Riley was beginning to feel quite differently about Ryan's departure.

Why would she want him to stay, anyway?

She certainly didn't want him sleeping over now that he was seeing somebody else.

And it was wrong to let the girls keep living with an illusion that he was truly part of their family.

Things could be worse, she thought.

Ryan might have hung around for a much longer time, only to eventually crush the girls' hopes and expectations even more hurtfully.

Good riddance, she thought.

Just then, Riley's phone buzzed. She saw that the call was from Blaine. It took her a second to remember that she'd left a message with him just last night, belatedly accepting his dinner offer. So much had happened this morning, it felt like much more time had passed since she'd made that call.

She answered the phone. Blaine sounded upbeat and cheerful.

"Hi, Riley. I got your message. Yeah, the offer still stands."

"Thanks," Riley said. "I'm glad."

"So when do you and your family want to come over to the restaurant? Tonight, maybe?"

Riley hated to put the whole thing on hold. But what else could she do?

"Blaine, I'm out of town right now, working on a case. I'll be back later today, but I might have to keep working."

"How about tomorrow, then?" Blaine asked.

Riley suppressed a sigh. Things had gotten awkward fast. The last thing she wanted was for Blaine to think she was pushing him away again. But with a new case underway, she simply didn't know when she would be able to accept his invitation.

The awkwardness was compounded by Bill's glances at her from behind the wheel. It was obvious from his mischievous grin that he'd heard who she was talking to.

Riley felt herself blush.

She said, "Blaine, I'm so sorry. I just don't know right now when it'll be possible."

Blaine didn't reply. Riley knew that he must feel a bit puzzled. After all, she had sounded so eager in her message. She figured that honesty was the best approach.

"I'm not being coy, Blaine. I'm really not. I promise, when this case gets settled, we'll come to your restaurant the first chance we get. And we'll return the invitation. Gabriela will cook up something wonderful for you and Crystal."

Now she could hear a smile in Blaine's voice.

"Great. I'll let you get back to work, then."

They ended the call. Bill's grin widened, and Riley's blush deepened.

"So who was that?" Bill asked.

"Mind your own business," Riley said with a slight giggle.

Bill let out a peal of laughter.

"No, I don't think I will, Riley. I think I still qualify as your best friend. I'm supposed to be nosy. That was Blaine, wasn't it? Your nice handsome neighbor."

Riley silently nodded.

Bill said, "So are you going to tell me what's going on, or what? The last I heard, Blaine had moved across town and you were trying to fix things up with Ryan."

Riley remembered how hotly Bill had protested when she told him that she and Ryan were getting back together.

"Do I need to remind you of everything that guy did to hurt you?" Bill had said. *"Because I can remember every detail."*

"Whatever you do, don't say 'I told you so.'"

"Why not?" Bill asked.

Riley sighed aloud now.

There's no use fighting it, she thought.

There was nothing she could do except swallow her pride.

"Because you did. Tell me so. And you were right. Ryan's the same old insufferable, unreliable Ryan."

"He bailed on you, huh? I'm sorry to hear that." He sounded genuinely sympathetic. "It must be tough on the kids."

Riley couldn't bring herself to tell him how true that was.

"Anyway," Bill said, "I'm glad you're finally giving 'Mr. Right' a chance."

Riley groaned with exasperation. She wanted to throw something at him. Instead, she joined in his laughter.

Her phone buzzed again. She saw that it was a message from Sam Flores.

Riley was glad to have her attention snapped back to the job at hand. Before they'd left Quantico, she and Bill had talked to Sam Flores, the head of the lab team. They asked him to get right to work looking for DNA on the glass and aging the old composite sketch.

Riley checked her tablet computer. Sure enough, Sam had sent her some new sketches of the suspect.

"He sent the new pics," Riley said.

"How do they look?"

"They're not much to look at, but they'll do," Riley said.

Riley compared the sketches Sam and his team had put together to the old sketch. The original hadn't been very lifelike. The artist had been too careful. In Riley's experience, a little imagination and creativity sometimes helped capture a suspect's personality.

Still, Riley could see that Sam and his tech people had done a good job with what they had to work with. They'd tried to cover a range of possibilities. In one of the sketches, the man looked much as he had in the old sketch, except with more lines and wrinkles and graying hair. In another, he had put on more weight, and his jowls drooped. A third showed him with a beard and mustache.

Riley knew better than to show all three new sketches to potential witnesses at the same time. They'd only get confused. She had to choose just one of them.

She had a hunch that the sketch that most closely resembled the original would be the best one to work with. She didn't know exactly why. Something about the original's expression suggested someone who might not deliberately change his appearance over the years. Also, the man seemed to have a distinctly thin body type. Riley guessed that he wouldn't have put on much weight.

Of course, she could be completely wrong. But she knew that it was best to trust her instincts.

Just then they pulled into the sleepy little town of Greybull. Riley figured that it had a population of less than a thousand people.

"Where's our first stop?" Bill asked.

"The cemetery," Riley said.

She gave Bill directions, and they arrived at the cemetery within minutes. Riley brought up a map of the cemetery on her tablet. She and Bill got out of the car and wended their way among the tombstones.

Soon they found the grave that they were looking for. It was marked by a modest, average-sized stone with the inscription ...

TILDA ANN STEEN

beloved friend and daughter

1972–1992

The dates startled Riley. Of course she already knew that Tilda had been twenty when she'd been killed. But Riley hadn't really stopped to think that Tilda would be forty-five if she were still alive. What might her life have been like? Would she have stayed in this little town and raised a family, or would she have gone far away and pursued an altogether different kind of life? Riley had no idea. And the truth was, nobody would ever know.

Riley suddenly felt more determined than ever.

I've just got to solve this case.

Riley saw that two sets of flowers decorated the grave. One was a little bucket of daffodils in cheerfully mixed shades of yellow, orange, and white.

"Those are pretty," Bill said, pointing to the daffodils. "Do you think they're what we're looking for?"

Riley didn't think so. The flowers didn't look store bought.

She leaned down and opened a little note that was tied to the bucket handle. The message was short, simple, and heartfelt.

Dear Tilda,

Honey, I still miss you. I'll always miss you. I'll always love you.

Mother

"They're from Tilda's mother," Riley told Bill. "I'm sure the flowers are from Paula's own garden." She could imagine Paula carefully cultivating a bed of bulbs she'd planted in a sunny area for early blooms.

"Does Paula live here in Greybull?" Bill asked.

"No. Tilda's parents moved away soon after the murder. Paula still lives in Virginia, though, over on the other side of Richmond. Her husband died last year."

Riley felt a pang of sympathy as she remembered Paula telling her on the telephone ...

"What would we become if I forgot Justin or you forgot your mother? I don't ever want to become that hard."

Paula had always struck Riley as a brave person. But she knew that Paula was also intensely private.

How lonely she must be! Riley thought.

The other flowers were a more formal bouquet with gladiolas and carnations – an arrangement that might come from a florist. They were held in a plastic cone that had been stuck into the ground.

Obviously thinking about fingerprints, Bill put on plastic gloves and picked up the cone of flowers, then emptied out the water. He put the arrangement in a plastic bag that he'd brought along for this very purpose.

A voice called out. "What are you folks doing there?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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