

BLAKE PIERCE



w a t c h i n g

THE MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE--BOOK ONE

The Making of Riley Paige

Блейк Пирс

Watching

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2018

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“A masterpiece of thriller and mystery! The author did a magnificent job developing characters with a psychological side that is so well described that we feel inside their minds, follow their fears and cheer for their success. The plot is very intelligent and will keep you entertained throughout the book. Full of twists, this book will keep you awake until the turn of the last page.” --Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos (re Once Gone) WATCHING (The Making of Riley Paige—Book One) is book #1 in a new psychological thriller series by #1 bestselling author Blake Pierce, whose free bestseller Once Gone (Book #1) has received over 1,000 five star reviews. 22 year old psychology major—and aspiring FBI agent—Riley Paige finds herself in a battle for her life as her closest friends on campus are abducted and killed by a serial killer. She senses that she, too, is being targeted—and that if she is to survive, she must apply her brilliant mind to stop the killer herself. When the FBI hits a dead end, they are impressed enough by Riley’s keen insight into the killer’s mind to allow her to help. Yet the killer’s mind is a dark, twisted place, one too diabolical to make sense of, and one that threatens to bring Riley’s fragile psyche crashing down. In this deadly game of cat and mouse, can Riley survive unscarred? An action-packed thriller with heart-pounding suspense, WATCHING is book #1 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night. It takes readers back 20 plus years—to how Riley’s career began—and is the perfect complement to the ONCE GONE series (A Riley Paige Mystery), which includes 13 books and counting. Book #2 in THE MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE series is also now available!

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Blake Pierce

Watching

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes twelve books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising eight books; of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; and of the new MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, which begins with WATCHING.

An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Blake loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.blakepierceauthor.com to learn more and stay in touch.

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CHAPTER ONE

Riley sat hunched on her bed staring at her psychology book. She couldn't concentrate, not with all the noise in the room. That song was blaring again—Gloria Estefan's "Don't Let This Moment End."

How many times had she heard that stupid song just this evening? It seemed to be blasting out of every dorm room these days.

Riley yelled over the music at her roommate ...

"Trudy, *please* let this moment end! Or this song, anyway. Or just shoot me maybe."

Trudy laughed. She and their friend Rhea were sitting on Trudy's bed on the other side of the room. They'd just finished doing each other's nails and were now waving their hands around in the air to dry them.

Trudy yelled back over the music, "Sure, I will, *not*."

"We're torturing you," Rhea added. "No peace until you go out with us."

Riley said, "It's Thursday night."

"So?" Trudy said.

"So, I've got an early morning class tomorrow."

Rhea said, "Since when do you need sleep?"

"Rhea's right," Trudy added. "I've never known such a night owl in my life."

Trudy was Riley's best friend, a blonde with a huge, goofy grin that charmed pretty much everybody she met, especially guys. Rhea was a brunette—prettier than Trudy and somewhat more reserved by nature, although she tried her best to keep pace with Trudy's gregariousness.

Riley let out a groan of despair. She got up from her bed and walked over to Trudy's CD player, turned the music down, then climbed back onto her bed and picked up the psych book again.

And of course, right on cue, Trudy got up and turned the music back up again—not as loud as before, but still too loud for Riley to be able to concentrate on reading.

Riley slammed her book shut.

"You're going to make me resort to violence," she said.

Rhea laughed and said, "Well, at least it would be a change. If you keep sitting there all scrunched up like that, you'll get stuck in that position."

Trudy added, "And don't go telling us you've got to study. I'm in that psych class too, remember? I know you're reading way ahead in that stupid book—weeks ahead maybe."

Rhea let out a gasp of mock horror. "Reading ahead? Isn't that, like, illegal? Because it sure ought to be."

Trudy nudged Rhea and said, "Riley likes to impress Professor Hayman. She's got a thing for him."

Riley snapped, "I do *not* have a thing for him!"

Trudy said, "Sorry, my mistake. Why *would* you have a thing for him?"

Riley couldn't help thinking ...

Just because he's young and cute and smart?

Just because every other girl in the class has a crush on him?

... but she kept her thoughts to herself.

Rhea held her hand out and studied her nails.

She said to Riley, "How long has it been since you got any action? Sex-wise, I mean."

Trudy shook her head at Rhea.

"Don't ask," she said. "Riley has taken a vow of chastity."

Riley rolled her eyes and told herself ...

Don't even dignify that with a snotty reply.

Then Trudy said to Rhea, “Riley’s not even on the pill.”

Riley’s widened with shock at Trudy’s indiscretion.

“Trudy!” she said.

Trudy shrugged and said, “It’s not like you swore me to secrecy about it or something.”

Rhea mouth had dropped open. Her horror seemed genuine this time.

“Riley. Say it ain’t so. Please, please tell me she’s lying.”

Riley growled under her breath and said nothing.

If only they knew, she thought.

She didn’t like to think about her rebellious teen years, much less talk about them. She’d been lucky not to get pregnant or catch some horrible disease. In college, she’d cooled off a lot of things—including sex, although she always carried a box of condoms in her purse just in case.

Trudy pointedly turned the music back up.

Riley heaved a sigh and said, “OK, I give up. Where do you want to go?”

“The Centaur’s Den,” Rhea said. “We need some serious drinkage.”

“Where else is there?” Trudy added.

Riley swung her legs off her bed and got on her feet.

“Am I dressed OK?” she asked.

“Are you kidding?” Trudy said.

Rhea said, “The Den’s grungy, but not *that* grungy.”

Trudy walked over to the closet and rummaged through Riley’s clothes.

She said, “Do I have to be like your mom or something? Here’s what you need to wear.”

Trudy took out a spaghetti-strapped crop top and a nice pair of jeans and handed them to Riley.

Then she and Rhea went out into the hall to round up some of the girls on their floor to join them.

Riley changed clothes, then stood looking at herself in the long mirror on the closet door. She had to admit, Trudy had picked out a good look for her. The crop top flattered her slender, athletic body. With her long dark hair and hazel eyes she could pass for a college party girl.

Even so, it felt oddly like a costume, not like Riley at all.

But her friends were right, she did spend a lot of time studying.

And surely there was such a thing as overdoing it.

All work and no play ...

She pulled on a denim jacket and whispered to herself in the mirror ...

“Come on, Riley. Get out there and live a little.”

*

When she and her friends opened the door to the Centaur’s Den, Riley was almost overcome by the familiar but suffocating smell of cigarette smoke and the equally suffocating noise of heavy metal music.

She hesitated. Maybe this outing was a mistake after all. Were the grinding chords of Metallica a musical improvement over even the numbing monotony of Gloria Estefan?

But Rhea and Trudy were behind her, and they pushed her on inside. Three other girls from the dorm followed them in, then headed straight for the bar.

Peering through the smoky air, Riley saw some familiar faces. She was surprised to find so many here on a weeknight.

Most of the space was a dance floor where moving beams and sparkles flashed across kids who were happily writhing to a chorus of “Whiskey in the Jar.”

Trudy grabbed both Riley and Rhea by the hands.

“Come on, let’s dance, the three of us!”

It was a familiar tactic—girls would dance together until they caught the eyes of some guys. It wouldn't be long before they'd all be dancing with guys instead of each other—and drinking like crazy.

But Riley was in no mood for that—or for the noise, for that matter.

Smiling, she shook her head and pulled her hand away from Trudy.

Trudy looked hurt for a moment, but it was too loud in here to have an argument about it. Then Trudy stuck her tongue out at Riley and pulled Rhea out onto the dance floor.

Yeah, real mature, Riley thought.

She pushed through the crowd to the bar and bought herself a glass of red wine. Then she headed downstairs, where tables and booths filled a basement room. She found an empty booth where she could sit down.

Riley liked it a lot better down here than upstairs. True, the cigarette smoke was even thicker, enough to sting her eyes. But it was less frenzied, and quieter too, although muffled music from upstairs still thudded down through the floorboards.

She sipped her wine slowly, remembering her reckless teenage drinking all too well. She'd always managed to get whatever she wanted to drink from seedy adult connections in the little town of Larned. Whiskey had been her booze of choice in those days.

Poor Uncle Deke and Aunt Ruth, she thought. Out of her anger and boredom, she'd put them through more than their share of trouble.

She kept telling herself ...

Maybe I'll make it up to them someday.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a male voice.

“Hey.”

Riley looked up and saw a big, muscular, reasonably good-looking guy holding a mug of beer and gazing down at her with a rakish, confident smile.

Riley squinted—an expression that silently asked ...

“Do I know you?”

Of course, Riley knew exactly who it was.

It was Harry Rampling, the quarterback for the university football team.

Riley had seen him take this same approach with lots of girls—presenting himself without introduction, because he took it for granted that he was already known far and wide as God's gift to all the women on campus.

Riley knew that this tactic usually worked. Lanton had a lousy football team, and Harry Rampling wasn't likely to wind up with a career in professional football, but he was a hero here in Lanton all the same, and girls were usually all over him.

She simply stared at him with a quizzical expression, as if she had no idea who he might be.

His smile faded a little. It was hard to tell in the dim light, but Riley suspected that he was blushing.

Then he walked away, apparently embarrassed but unwilling to stoop to the indignity of actually introducing himself.

Riley took a sip of her wine, enjoying her small victory and a bit of solitude.

But then she heard another male voice.

“How did you do that?”

Another guy was standing beside her booth holding a beer. He was well dressed, well built, somewhat older than she was, and he immediately struck Riley as markedly more attractive than Harry Rampling.

“How did I do what?” Riley asked.

The guy shrugged.

“Repulse Harry Rampling like that. You got rid of him without saying a word, not even so much as a ‘fuck off, buster.’ I didn’t know that was even possible.”

Riley felt strangely disarmed by this guy.

She said, “I sprayed myself with jock repellent before I came here.”

As soon as the words were out, she thought ...

Good God, I’m being witty with him.

What the hell did she think she was doing?

He smiled, enjoying the little joke.

He slipped uninvited into the seat across from Riley and said, “My name is Ryan Paige, and you don’t know me from Adam, and I won’t blame you if you forget my name in five minutes or even sooner. I can assure you that I’m eminently forgettable.”

Riley was startled by his audacity.

Don’t introduce yourself, she told herself.

But she said aloud ...

“I’m Riley Sweeney. I’m a senior. Psychology major.”

She felt herself blushing now.

This guy was smooth, all right. And his pickup technique was so casual that it didn’t seem like a technique at all.

Forgettable, hah, Riley thought.

She was already sure she wasn’t going to forget Ryan Paige anytime soon.

Be careful with him, she told herself.

Then she said, “Um—are you a student here at Lanton?”

He nodded and said, “Law school. I’m finishing up this year too.”

He said it as though there was no reason for her to be impressed.

And of course, Riley was impressed.

They sat talking for a while—she didn’t know how long exactly.

When he asked her what she planned to do after graduation, Riley had to admit that she wasn’t sure.

“I’ll look for a job of some kind,” she told him. “I guess I’ll have to figure out a way to go to graduate school if I’m going to work in my field.”

He nodded approvingly and said, “I’ve been making inquiries with several law firms. A couple of them look promising, but I need to consider my next step really carefully.”

As they talked, Riley realized that whenever their eyes met and their gazes held steady for a moment, a slight tingle ran through her body.

Was that happening to him, too? She noticed that he did look away suddenly a few times.

Then, during a lull in the conversation, Ryan finished his beer and said, “Look, I’m sorry to rush off, but I’ve got a class in the morning and some studying to do.”

Riley was almost dumbstruck.

Wasn’t he going to make a pass at her?

No, she thought. *He’s got too much class for that.*

Not that he didn’t have his sights on her—she was sure he did.

But he knew better than to move on her too fast.

Impressive, she thought.

She managed to reply, “Yeah, me too.”

He smiled a sincere-looking smile.

“It was nice to meet you, Riley Sweeney.”

Riley smiled back.

“It was nice to meet you too, Ryan Paige.”

Ryan chuckled and said, “Aw, you remembered.”

Without another word, he got up and left.

Riley's mind boggled at all that hadn't happened. They hadn't exchanged phone numbers, she hadn't mentioned which dorm she was in, and she still had no idea where he lived. And he hadn't even asked her out on a real future date.

It wasn't because he didn't expect there to be a real date, she was sure of that.

No, he was simply confident. He was sure their paths would cross again soon, and he expected chemistry to kick in.

And Riley more than half-believed he was right.

Just then she heard Trudy's voice call out.

"Hey, Riley! Who was the cute guy?"

Riley turned and saw Trudy coming down the stairs, carrying a full pitcher of beer in one hand and a mug in the other. Three other girls from their dorm were tagging along behind her. They all looked pretty drunk.

Riley didn't reply to Trudy's question. She only hoped Ryan was out of earshot by now.

As the girls approached the table, Riley asked ...

"Where's Rhea?"

Trudy looked all around.

"I dunno," she said in a slurred voice. "Where *is* Rhea?"

One of the other girls said, "Rhea went back to the dorm."

"What!" Trudy said. "She left and didn't tell me?"

"She did tell you," another girl said.

The girls were all about to climb into the booth with Riley. Rather than get trapped in there with them, Riley got up from her seat.

"We should all go home," she said.

With a flurry of protests, the girls seated themselves, giggling and obviously settling in for a long night.

Riley gave up on them. She walked upstairs and out the front door. Outside, she took a deep breath of cool, fresh air. It was March and sometimes cold at night here in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, but the chill was welcome after the stuffy, smoke-filled bar.

It was a short, well-lit walk back to the campus and her dorm. She felt that the evening had turned out pretty well. She'd only had a glass of wine, just enough to be relaxing, and there had also been that guy ...

Ryan Paige.

She smiled.

No, she hadn't forgotten his name.

*

Riley was sleeping deeply and dreamlessly when something jarred her awake.

What? she wondered.

At first, she thought maybe someone had shaken her by the shoulder.

But no, that wasn't it.

As she stared into the darkness of her dorm room, she heard the sound again.

A shriek.

A voice filled with terror.

Riley knew that something terrible had happened.

CHAPTER TWO

Riley was out of her bed and on her feet before she was fully awake.

That sound had been horrible.

What was it?

When she switched on the light beside her bed, a familiar voice grumbled from across the room, “Riley—what’s going on?”

Trudy was lying in her own bed fully clothed, shielding her eyes against the light. She obviously had collapsed there in a fairly inebriated state.

Riley had slept right through her roommate’s arrival.

But she was awake now.

So were others in the dorm. She could hear alarmed voices calling out from the rooms nearby.

Riley went into motion, shoving her feet into slippers, pulling on her robe, and opening their room door. She stepped out into the hallway.

Other room doors were swinging open. Girls were poking their heads out, asking what was wrong.

And Riley could see at least one thing that was wrong. About halfway down the hall, a girl was collapsed on her knees, sobbing.

Riley raced toward her.

Heather Glover, she realized.

Heather had been with them at the Centaur’s Den. She’d still been there with Trudy and the others when Riley left.

Now Riley knew—it was Heather she’d heard screaming.

She also remembered ...

Heather is Rhea’s roommate!

Riley reached the sobbing girl and crouched beside her.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “Heather—what happened?”

Sobbing and choking, Heather pointed to the open door next to her.

She managed to gasp ...

“It’s Rhea. She’s—”

Heather suddenly threw up.

Dodging the spray of vomit, Riley stood up and peered into the room door. In the light shining in from the hallway, she could make out something spread out on the floor—a dark liquid. At first she thought it was spilled soft drink.

Then she shuddered ...

Blood.

She’d seen blood pooled like this before. There was no mistaking it for anything else.

She stepped into the doorway and quickly saw that Rhea lay sprawled across her single bed, fully clothed and with her eyes wide open.

“Rhea?” Riley said.

She peered closer. Then she gagged.

Rhea’s throat was slashed almost from ear to ear.

Rhea was dead—Riley knew that for certain.

It wasn’t the first murdered woman she’d seen in her life.

Then Riley heard another scream. For a moment she wondered if the scream might be her own.

But no—it was coming from right behind her.

Riley turned, and there in the doorway stood Gina Formaro. She’d also been partying at the Centaur’s Den that night. Now her eyes were bulging and she was trembling all over, pale with shock.

Riley realized that she herself felt remarkably calm, not scared at all. She also knew that she was probably the only student on the whole floor who wasn't already in a state of panic.

It was up to her to make sure things didn't get even worse.

Riley gently took Gina by the arm and led her out of the doorway. Heather was still there on the floor where she had vomited, still sobbing. And other wandering students were beginning to make their way toward the room.

Riley pulled the room door closed and stood in front of it.

"Stay back!" she yelled at the approaching girls. "Stay away!"

Riley was surprised at the force and authority in her own voice.

The girls obeyed, forming a crowded semicircle around the dorm room.

Riley yelled again, "Somebody call nine-one-one!"

"Why?" one of the girls asked.

Still crouched on the floor with a pool of vomit in front of her, Heather Glover managed to croak out ...

"It's Rhea. She's been murdered."

Suddenly a wild mix of girls' voices exploded in the hallway—some screaming, some gasping, some sobbing. A few of the girls pushed toward the room again.

"Stay back!" Riley said again, still blocking the doorway. "Call nine-one-one!"

One of the girls who owned a little cell phone was carrying it in her hand. She made the call.

Riley stood there wondering ...

What do I do now?

She only knew one thing for certain—she couldn't let any of the girls into the room with the body. There was enough panic on the floor already. It would only get worse if more people saw what was in that room.

She also felt sure that no one was supposed to walk around in ...

In what?

A crime scene, she realized. That room was a crime scene.

She remembered—she was sure it must be from movies or TV shows—that the police would want the crime scene to be as untouched as possible.

All she could do was wait—and keep everybody out.

And so far she was being successful. The semicircle of students began to break up, and girls wandered off into smaller groups, disappearing into rooms or forming little clusters in the hallway to share their horror. There was a lot of crying now, and some low, animal-like wailing. A few more cell phones were appearing, those who owned them calling parents or friends to report their versions of the disaster.

Riley thought that probably wasn't a good idea, but she had no way to stop them. At least they were staying away from the door that she guarded.

And now she was starting to feel her own share of horror.

Images from her early childhood flooded Riley's brain ...

Riley and Mommy were in a candy store—and how Mommy was spoiling Riley!

She was buying her lots and lots of candy.

They were both laughing and happy until ...

A man stepped toward them. He had a weird face, flat and featureless, like something out of one of Riley's nightmares. It took Riley a second to realize that he was wearing a nylon stocking over his head—the kind that Mommy wore on her legs.

And he was holding a gun.

He started yelling at Mommy ...

"Your purse! Give me your purse!"

*His voice sounded as frightened as Riley felt.
Riley looked up at Mommy, expecting her to do as the man said.
But Mommy had turned pale and was shaking all over. She didn't seem to understand what was going on.
"Give me your purse!" the man yelled again.
Mommy just stood there, clutching her purse.
Riley wanted to tell Mommy ...
"Do as the man says, Mommy. Give him your purse."
But for some reason, no words came out of her mouth.
Mommy staggered a little, as if she wanted to run but couldn't make her legs move.
Then there was a flash and a loud, terrible noise ...
... and Mommy fell to the floor, landing on her side.
Her chest was spurting deep red, and the color soaked her blouse and was spreading out in a puddle on the floor ...*

Riley was yanked back to the present by the sound of approaching sirens. The local cops were arriving.

She felt relief that the authorities were here and could take over ... whatever it was that had to be done.

She saw that boys who lived on the second floor were coming down and asking the girls what was going on. They were also in various stages of dress—shirts and jeans, pajamas and robes.

Harry Rampling, the football player who had approached Riley back at the bar, made his way toward where she was standing against the closed door. He pushed past the girls still hovering there and stared at her for a moment.

"What do you think *you're* doing?" he snapped.

Riley said nothing. She saw no point in trying to explain—not with the police about to appear at any second.

Harry smirked a little and took a menacing step toward Riley. He'd obviously been told about the dead girl inside.

"Get out of the way," he said. "I want to see."

Riley stood even more firmly than before.

"You can't go in there," she said.

Harry said, "Why not, little girl?"

Riley stared daggers at him, but she was wondering ...

What the hell do I think I'm doing?

Did she really think she could keep a male athlete from going in there if he decided to?

Oddly enough, she had the feeling that she probably could.

She'd certainly put up a fight, if it came to that.

Fortunately, she heard the clatter of footsteps entering the hall, then a man's voice calling out ...

"Break it up. Let us through."

The clump of students broke up."

Someone said, "Over there," and three uniformed cops made their way toward Riley.

She recognized all of them. They were familiar faces around Lanton. Two of them were men, Officers Steele and White. The other was a woman, Officer Frisbie. A couple of campus cops were also tagging along.

Steele was overweight, and his reddish face made Riley suspect that he drank too much. White was a tall guy who walked with a constant slouch and whose mouth always seemed to be hanging open. Riley didn't think he seemed especially bright. Officer Frisbie was a tall, sturdy woman who had always struck Riley as friendly and good-natured.

“We got a call,” Officer Steele said. He huffed at Riley. “What the hell’s going on here?”

Riley stepped away from the door and pointed to it.

“It’s Rhea Thorson,” Riley said. “She’s—”

Riley found that she couldn’t finish the sentence. She was still trying to get it through her head that Rhea was dead.

She just stepped aside.

Officer Steele opened the door and slouched past her into the room.

Then came a loud gasp as he exclaimed ...

“Oh my God!”

Officers Frisbie and White both hurried inside.

Then Steele reappeared and called out to the onlookers, “I need to know what happened. Right now.”

There was a general murmur of alarmed confusion.

Then Steele fired a series of questions. “What do you know about this? Was this girl in her room all evening? Who else was here?”

More confusion followed, with some girls saying that Rhea hadn’t left the dorm, others saying that she went to the library, others that she’d gone out on a date, and of course a few who said that she’d gone out drinking. Nobody had seen anybody else here. Not until they heard Heather screaming.

Riley took a breath, getting ready to shout the others down and tell what she knew. But before she could speak, Harry Rampling pointed at Riley and said ...

“This girl’s been acting all weird. She was standing right there when I got here. Like maybe she’d just come out the door.”

Steele stepped toward Riley and growled ...

“Is that right? You’ve got some explaining to do. Start talking.”

He seemed to be reaching for his handcuffs. For the first time, Riley started to feel a trace of panic.

Is this guy going to arrest me? she wondered.

She had no idea what might happen if he did.

But the woman cop said sharply to Officer Steele, “Leave her alone, Nat. Can’t you see what she was doing? She was guarding the room, making sure nobody else got in. We’ve got her to thank that the crime scene isn’t hopelessly contaminated.”

Officer Steele backed away, looking resentful.

The woman shouted to the onlookers, “I want everybody to stay exactly where you are. Nobody moves, d’you hear? And keep talking to a minimum.”

There were nods and murmurs of assent from the group.

Then the woman grabbed Riley by the arm and started to escort her away from the others.

“Come with me,” she whispered sharply to Riley. “You and I are going to have a little talk.”

Riley gulped anxiously as Officer Frisbie led her away.

Am I really in trouble? she wondered.

CHAPTER THREE

Officer Frisbie kept a firm grip on Riley's arm the whole way down the hall. They went through a pair of double doors and wound up standing at the base of the stairs. At last the woman released her. Riley rubbed her arm where it hurt a little.

Officer Frisbie said, "Sorry to get rough there. We're in kind of a hurry. First of all, what's your name?"

"Riley Sweeney."

"I've seen you around town. What year are you in college?"

"A senior."

The woman's stern expression softened a little.

"Well, first of all, I want to apologize for how Officer Steele talked to you just now. Poor guy, he really can't help it. It's just that he's ... what's the word my daughter would use? Oh, yeah. A dick."

Riley was too startled to laugh. Anyway, Officer Frisbie wasn't smiling.

She said, "I pride myself on having pretty reliable gut instincts—better than the 'good old boys' I'm stuck working with, anyway. And right now my gut is saying that you're the one person around here who might be able to tell me exactly what I need to know."

Riley felt another wave of panic as the unsmiling woman took out a notepad and got ready to write.

She said, "Officer Frisbie, I really have no idea—"

The woman interrupted her.

"You might be surprised. Just go ahead—tell me about what your night's been like."

Riley was puzzled.

What my night's been like?

What did that have to do with anything?

"From the beginning," Frisbie said.

Riley replied slowly, "Well, I was sitting in my room trying to study, because I've got a class tomorrow morning, but my roommate, Trudy, and my friend Rhea ..."

Riley suddenly fell silent.

My friend Rhea.

She remembered sitting on her bed while Trudy and Rhea had been across the room doing their nails and playing Gloria Estefan too loud and generally making nuisances of themselves, trying to get Riley to go out with them. Rhea had been so lively—laughing and mischievous.

No more.

She'd never hear Rhea's laugh or see her smile again.

For the first time since this horrible thing had happened, Riley felt close to tears. She sagged against the wall.

Not now, she told herself sternly.

She straightened up and took a deep breath and continued.

"Trudy and Rhea talked me into going to the Centaur's Den."

Officer Frisbie gave Riley an encouraging nod and said, "About what time was this?"

"Around nine-thirty, I think."

"And was it just the three of you who went out?"

"No," Riley said. "Trudy and Rhea got some other girls to come. There were six of us all together."

Officer Frisbie was jotting down notes quickly now.

"Tell me their names," she said.

Riley didn't have to stop to think.

“There was me—and Trudy Lanier and Rhea, of course. And Cassie DeBord, and Gina Formaro, and Rhea’s roommate, Heather Glover.”

She stood there silently for a moment.

There must be more, she thought. Surely she could remember something more to tell the police. But her brain seemed stuck on her immediate group—and on the image of her friend dead in that room.

Riley was about to explain that she hadn’t spent much time with the others at the Centaur’s Den. But before she could say anything else, Officer Frisbie abruptly put her pencil and notebook back in her pocket.

“Well done,” she said, sounding very businesslike. “That’s exactly what I needed to know. Come on.”

As Officer Frisbie led her back into the hallway, Riley wondered ...

“Well done”?

What did I even do?

The situation in the hall was the same as before, with a small mob of stunned and horrified students standing around while Officer White looked on. But there were two new arrivals.

One was Dean Angus Trusler, a finicky and easily agitated man who was mingling among the students, getting some of them to tell him what was going on despite their orders not to talk.

The other newcomer was a tall, vigorous-looking older man wearing a uniform. Riley recognized him at once. He was Lanton’s police chief, Allan Hintz. Riley noticed that Officer Frisbie didn’t look surprised to see him—but she didn’t look at all pleased, either.

Standing arms akimbo, he said to Frisbie, “Mind telling us why you’re keeping us waiting, Frisbie?”

Officer Frisbie tossed him a look of barely disguised disdain. It was obvious to Riley that their working relationship was strained at best.

“I’m glad to see someone got you out of bed, sir,” Officer Frisbie said.

Chief Hintz frowned.

Trying his best to look as authoritative as the police chief, Dean Trusler stepped forward and spoke to Hintz sharply.

“Allan, I don’t like the way you and your people are handling this. These poor kids are terrorized enough without being bossed around. What’s this all about—telling them to stay put and stay quiet, with no explanations? Some of them just want to go back to their rooms and try to get some sleep. Some want to get out of Lanton altogether and go home to their families for a while—and who can blame them? Some even wonder if they need to hire lawyers. It’s time you told them what you want from them. Surely none of our students are suspects.”

As the dean kept ranting, Riley wondered how he could be so sure that the murderer wasn’t right here in the hallway. She found it hard to imagine any of the girls committing such a horrible crime. But what about the guys? What about a big tough jock like Harry Rampling? Neither he nor any of the other guys looked like they’d just slashed a girl’s throat. But maybe after a shower and a quick change of clothes ...?

Steady, Riley told herself. *Don’t let your imagination run away with you.*

But if it wasn’t a student, then who could have been in Rhea’s room?

She struggled again to remember if she had seen anyone else with Rhea at the Centaur’s Den. Had Rhea danced with any guy? Had a drink with someone? But Riley still came up with nothing.

Anyway, questions like that didn’t seem to matter. Chief Hintz wasn’t listening to a word Dean Trusler was saying. Officer Frisbie was whispering to him and showing him the notes she’d taken while talking to Riley.

When she finished, Hintz said to the group, “OK, listen up. I want five of you to come to the common room.”

He rattled off the names Riley had given to Officer Frisbie, including her own.

Then he said, “The rest of you, go to your rooms. Guys, that means go back to your floor. Everybody stay put for the night. Don’t go outside this building until you’re notified otherwise. And don’t plan on leaving the campus anytime soon. We’re likely to have questions for many of you.”

He turned to the dean and said, “Make sure all the students in the building get the same message.”

The dean’s mouth was hanging open with dismay now, but he managed to nod his assent. The hall was filled with murmurs of confused dissatisfaction as the girls obediently dispersed to their rooms and the guys headed back upstairs.

Chief Hintz and Officers Frisbie and White led Riley and her four friends down the hall. Along the way, Riley couldn’t help but glance into Rhea’s room. She glimpsed Officer Steele probing around inside. She couldn’t see the bed where she had found Rhea, but she was sure that the body was still there.

It didn’t seem right somehow.

How long till they take her away? she wondered. She hoped they had at least covered her up, hidden the horrible slashed throat and open eyes from view. But she supposed the investigators had more important things to attend to. And maybe they were all used to such sights anyhow.

She was sure that she would never forget the sight of Rhea dead and that pool of blood on the floor.

Riley and the others went obediently into the well-furnished common room and sat down on various chairs and sofas.

Chief Hintz said, “Officer Frisbie and I are going to talk with each of you individually. While we do, I don’t want any of the rest of you to talk to each other. Not one word. Do you hear me?”

Without even glancing at each other, the girls nodded nervously.

“And for now, don’t even use your phones,” Hintz added.

They all nodded again, then just sat there staring at their hands, at the floor, or off into space.

Hintz and Frisbie led Heather into the adjoining dorm kitchen while Officer White stood slouching vigilantly over Riley, Trudy, Cassie, and Gina.

After a few moments, Trudy broke the silence. “Riley, what the hell—?”

White interrupted, “Be quiet. Chief’s orders.”

Silence fell again, but Riley saw that Trudy, Cassie, and Gina were all staring at her. She looked away.

They think it’s my fault they’re here, she realized.

Then she thought—maybe it was true, maybe she shouldn’t have spilled their names. But what was she supposed to do, lie to a police officer? Still, Riley hated the distrustful vibes she was getting from her friends. And she couldn’t really blame them for feeling that way toward her.

What kind of trouble are we in, anyway? Just for going out together?

She was especially worried about Heather, who was still in the kitchen answering questions. The poor girl had been especially close to her roommate, Rhea. Of course, this was a nightmare for everybody, but Riley couldn’t begin to imagine how hard it must be for Heather.

Soon they heard the dean’s voice stammering uneasily over the dorm’s PA system.

“This is Dean Trusler. I—I’m sure all of you know by now that something terrible just happened on the girls’ floor. You have orders from Police Chief Hintz to stay in your rooms tonight and not leave the dorm. A police officer or a campus official might come by your room to talk with you. Be sure to answer any and all questions. For now, don’t plan on leaving campus tomorrow, either. You’ll all be getting additional notification soon.”

Riley remembered something else the chief had said ...

“We’re likely to have questions for many of you.”

He was starting with Riley and the other four girls right now.

It was starting to make sense to her. After all, they'd been together with Rhea shortly before she was killed. But what did Hintz think the girls might know?

What does he think I might know? she wondered.

Riley couldn't imagine.

At last, Heather came out of the kitchen, accompanied by Officer Frisbie. Heather looked pale and sick, as if she might start vomiting again. Riley wondered—where was Heather going to spend the night? She couldn't very well go back to the room she had shared with Rhea.

As if overhearing Riley's thoughts, Officer Frisbie said, "Heather is going to spend the rest of the night in the RA's room."

Heather walked shakily out of the common room. Riley was glad to see that the resident assistant met her at the doorway.

Officer Frisbie called for Gina to come into the kitchen, where Hintz was still waiting. Gina got up stiffly and followed the woman through the swinging door, leaving Riley, Trudy, and Cassie sitting in uncomfortable silence. It seemed to Riley that time had slowed down as they waited.

Finally, Gina reemerged. Without a word to the others, she walked through the common room and out the other door. Then Officer Frisbie asked for Cassie, who went next into the kitchen.

Now there were only Riley and Trudy sitting there in chairs across from each other. As they waited, Trudy kept giving Riley angry and reproachful glances. Riley wished she could explain what she had said during her short conversation with Officer Frisbie. All she'd done was answer a simple question. She hadn't accused anyone of doing anything bad.

But Officer White was still looming over them, and Riley couldn't say a single word.

Finally, Cassie came out of the kitchen and went back to her room, and Trudy was next to be called into the kitchen.

Riley was now alone with Officer White, feeling isolated and afraid.

With nothing to distract her, she kept flashing back to poor Rhea's body, her wide open eyes, and the pool of blood. Now those images were mixed with memories of her own mother lying dead—so long ago, but still so horribly vivid in her mind.

How could something like that be happening here and now, in a college dormitory?

This can't be real, she thought.

Surely she wasn't really sitting here bracing herself to answer questions that she couldn't possibly know the answers to.

Surely one of her best friends hadn't just been savagely murdered.

She had almost convinced herself of the unreality of the moment when Officer Frisbie led Trudy out of the kitchen. With a sullen expression, Trudy left the common room without so much as a glance at Riley.

Officer Frisbie nodded at Riley, who got up and obediently followed her into the kitchen.

This can't be happening, she kept telling herself.

CHAPTER FOUR

Riley sat down at the table in the kitchen, across from Chief Hintz. For a moment the chief just stared across at her, holding his pencil over a notepad. Riley wondered if she was supposed to say something.

She glanced up and saw that Officer Frisbie had positioned herself off to one side, leaning against a counter. The woman had a rather sour expression on her face, as if she wasn't very happy with the interviews. Riley wondered if Frisbie was annoyed by the girls' responses or by the way her boss had been asking questions.

Finally the chief said, "First of all, did the victim ever give you any reason to think she feared for her safety?"

Riley was jolted by that word ...

Victim.

Why couldn't he just refer to her as Rhea?

But she needed to answer his question.

Her mind raced back over recent conversations, but she only remembered innocuous exchanges like the one she and Trudy and Rhea had had earlier tonight about whether Riley was on the pill.

"No," Riley said.

"Did anyone wish her ill? Was anyone angry with her recently?"

The very idea seemed odd to Riley. Rhea was—had been—so pleasant and amiable that Riley couldn't imagine anyone being mad at her for more than a few minutes.

But she wondered ...

Did I miss any signs?

And had the other girls told Hintz anything Riley herself didn't know?

"No," Riley said. "She got along with pretty much everybody—as far as I knew."

Hintz paused for a moment.

Then he said, "Tell us what happened when you and your friends arrived at the Centaur's Den."

A rush of sensations came back to Riley—Rhea and Trudy physically pushing her through the door into the thick fog of cigarette smoke and the deafening music ...

Did she need to get into all that?

No, surely Hintz only wanted to hear bare-boned facts.

She said, "Cassie and Heather and Gina headed straight to the bar. Trudy wanted me to dance with her and Rhea."

Hintz was reviewing notes he'd taken from the other girls, who of course had told him what they'd known about Riley's actions, including the fact that Riley had left them to go downstairs.

"But you didn't dance with them," he said.

"No," Riley said.

"Why not?"

Riley was startled. Why could her reluctance to dance possibly matter, anyway?

Then she noticed Officer Frisbie giving her a sympathetic look and shaking her head. It seemed obvious now that the woman thought Hintz was being a bit of an asshole, but there really wasn't anything she could do about it.

Riley said slowly and carefully, "I just ... well, I wasn't in much of a party mood. I'd been trying to study, and Rhea and Trudy had pretty much dragged me there. So I bought a glass of wine and headed on downstairs."

"Alone?" Hintz asked.

"Yeah, alone. I sat down in a booth by myself."

Hintz thumbed through his notes.

“So you didn’t talk to anyone else while you were at the Centaur’s Den?”

Riley thought for a moment, then said, “Well, Harry Rampling came over to my table ...”

Hintz smiled a little at the mention of Harry’s name. Riley realized that, like most of the community, the chief probably thought pretty highly of the school’s quarterback.

He asked, “Did he sit down with you?”

“No,” Riley said. “I brushed him off.”

Hintz frowned with disapproval, apparently annoyed that any girl would have the poor judgment to reject a true hero like Harry Rampling. Riley was starting to feel a little exasperated. Why was her taste in guys any business of Hintz’s, anyway? What did it have to do with what had happened to Rhea?

Hintz asked, “Did you talk to anyone else?”

Riley gulped.

Yes, she *had* talked to someone else.

But was she going to get the guy in trouble by talking about him?

She said, “Um ... a law student came over to my booth. He sat down with me and we talked for a while.”

“And then?” Hintz asked.

Riley shrugged.

“He said he had studying to do, and he left.”

Hintz was jotting down some notes.

“What was his name?” he asked.

Riley said, “Look, I don’t see why he’s important. He was just another guy at the Centaur’s Den. There’s no reason for you to think—”

“Just answer my question.”

Riley swallowed hard and said, “Ryan Paige.”

“Had you met him before?”

“No.”

“Do you know where he lives?”

“No.”

Riley was momentarily glad that Ryan had managed to keep himself so mysterious, without giving her so much as his address or phone number. She saw no reason why she should be answering any questions about him at all, and she sure didn’t want to get him into any trouble. It seemed almost kind of stupid that Hintz was pushing her about it. And Riley could tell by how Officer Frisbie rolled her eyes that she felt the same way.

Hintz tapped his pencil eraser against the table and asked, “Did you see Rhea Thorson with anybody in particular at the Centaur’s Den? Aside from the friends you went with, I mean?”

Riley was starting to feel more frustrated than nervous.

Didn’t Hintz understand anything she’d been saying?

“No,” she said. “Like I said, I went off by myself. I didn’t see Rhea at all after that.”

Hintz kept tapping his eraser, looking at his notes.

He asked, “Does the name Rory Burdon mean anything to you?”

Riley thought quickly.

Rory ...

Yes, the first name was familiar, anyway.

She said, “Rhea seemed to be kind of interested in him, I guess. I saw her dancing with him a few other times at the Centaur’s Den.”

“But not tonight?”

Riley fought down a sigh. She wanted to say ...

How many times do I have to tell you, I didn’t see Rhea at all after I got there?

Instead, she simply said, “No.”

She figured Rory must have been there tonight as well, and that the other girls had told Hintz they'd seen Rhea hanging on him.

"What do you know about him?" Hintz asked.

Riley paused. What little she did know seemed too trivial to mention. Rory was a tall, skinny, awkward guy with thick glasses, and all the girls except Riley had teased Rhea for being interested in him.

She said, "Not much, except he lives off campus somewhere."

She realized that Hintz was just staring at her again, as if he expected her to say something more.

Does Hintz consider him a suspect? she wondered.

Riley was sure that the chief was way off base if he did suspect Rory. The guy had struck her as shy and gentle, not the least bit aggressive.

She was about to say so to Hintz, but the police chief glanced down at the papers in front of him and moved on with his questions.

"When did you leave the Centaur's Den?" he asked.

Riley made the best guess she could about the time—it had been pretty late.

Then Hintz said, "Did you see any of your friends before you left?"

Riley remembered the girls staggering down the stairs, and how Trudy had been carrying the pitcher of beer when she'd asked ...

"Hey, Riley! Who was the cute guy?"

Riley said, "Trudy and Heather and Gina and Cassie all came downstairs. They said Rhea had already gone. That was when I left."

As Hintz jotted down notes, Riley's head started to fill with questions of her own. She remembered asking where Rhea was, and Trudy had said ...

"I dunno. Where is Rhea?"

... and then Heather had said ...

"Rhea went back to the dorm."

Riley wondered—what did Heather or any of the other girls know about Rhea's departure?

Did they know whether she had left the Centaur's Den alone or not?

And what had they told Hintz about it?

Riley wished she could ask, but knew that she mustn't.

"Did you leave the bar alone?" Hintz asked.

"Yeah," Riley said.

"And you walked all the way back to the dorm alone?"

"Yeah."

Hintz's frown deepened as he glared at her.

"Are you sure that was wise? The school offers an escort service for crossing the campus at night. Why didn't you call for it?"

Riley gulped. This seemed to her like the first really good question Hintz had asked so far.

She said, "I guess I always felt safe walking on campus at night. But now ..."

Her voice faded.

Now things are really different, she thought.

Hintz frowned again.

"Well, I hope you use better judgment in the future. Especially when you've been drinking too much."

Riley's eyes widened.

"I only had one glass of wine," she said.

Hintz squinted at her. She could tell by his expression that he thought she was lying. The other girls must have admitted to drinking a lot, and he assumed that Riley had as well.

She resented his attitude, but she quickly told herself that whatever Hintz thought of her didn't matter right now. It would be stupid and petty of her to get pissed off about it.

Hintz kept jotting things down and said, "That will be all—for now. You must obey the same rules as everybody else in the dorm. Stay in your room tonight. Don't plan on leaving the campus until you're notified otherwise. We might want to ask you more questions soon."

Riley was oddly startled.

Is that it? she wondered.

Was the interview really over?

Because she sure still had questions, even if Hintz didn't.

One question in particular had been welling up in her mind ever since she had discovered Rhea's body. She remembered stepping into Rhea's dimly lit room and seeing her severed throat and her wide open eyes—but she hadn't stopped to really look closely at her body.

In a halting voice, she said to Hintz ...

"Could you tell me ... do you know ..."

She suddenly realized how hard it was going to be to even ask the question.

She continued, "Before she died ... before she was killed ... was Rhea ...?"

She couldn't bring herself to say the word ...

Raped.

And from Hintz's blank expression, Riley could tell that he really couldn't figure out what she was trying to ask.

Fortunately, Officer Frisbie did understand.

She said, "I can't say for sure—the medical examiner is still on his way here. But I don't think she was sexually assaulted. It looked to me like her clothes weren't disturbed during the attack."

Breathing a little easier, Riley gave Frisbie a look of silent gratitude.

The woman nodded slightly, and Riley left the kitchen.

As Riley headed out of the common room, she found herself wondering yet again what the other girls had told Hintz—for example, whether Rhea had left the bar alone or not. Did they know anything about what had happened to Rhea that Riley didn't know? After all, they'd been with her until she'd decided to leave.

As Riley walked down the hall, she saw that a couple of campus cops were standing outside Rhea's room door, which was now taped off with crime scene tape. She shuddered at the thought that Rhea's body was still in there, awaiting the arrival of the medical examiner. Riley found it hard to imagine anyone sleeping in that room ever again—but of course, it wouldn't be vacant forever.

Riley opened the door to her room, which was dark inside except for some light spilling in from the hall. She saw Trudy turn over in her bed to face the wall.

She's still awake, Riley thought.

Maybe now they could talk, and Riley could get some answers to her questions.

Riley closed the door and sat down on her own bed and said, "Trudy, I was wondering if maybe we could talk about our interviews."

Still facing the wall, Trudy replied ...

"We're not supposed to talk about it."

Riley was startled by the sharp, icy tone of Trudy's voice.

"Trudy, I don't think that's true, at least not anymore. Hintz didn't say anything like that to me."

"Just go to sleep," Trudy said.

Trudy's words cut through Riley painfully. And suddenly, for the first time, Riley felt tears welling up in her eyes, and a sob rose up in her throat.

It was bad enough that Rhea had been brutally murdered.

Now her best friend was angry with her.

Riley got under the covers. Tears streaked down her face as something began to dawn on her ...

Her life had been changed forever.
She couldn't yet begin to imagine how.

CHAPTER FIVE

The next morning Riley sat in the university auditorium along with other glum-looking students. Although the general campus mood was depressed, she had to wonder if everybody else there felt as miserable as she did. She thought that some of them looked more annoyed than saddened. A few seemed nervous, as though they were frightened by every movement around them.

How do we ever get over something like this? she wondered.

But of course, not everyone had been close to Rhea. Not everyone had even known her. They would surely be horrified at the thought of a murder on campus, but for many of them it wouldn't be personal.

It was personal for Riley. She couldn't shake off the horror that had hit her at the sight of Rhea's ...

She couldn't bring herself to think the words she needed. She couldn't yet think of her friend as a dead body, in spite of what she had seen last night.

The all-campus assembly today seemed completely disconnected from what had happened. It also seemed to be dragging on forever, making her feel even worse.

Chief Hintz had just finished giving a stern lecture about campus safety and promising the killer would soon be apprehended, and now Dean Trusler was going on and on about how to get things back to normal here at Lanton University.

Good luck with that, Riley thought.

Classes were canceled for today, Trusler said, but they would resume on Monday. He said he understood if some students might not feel ready to go back to classes so soon, and also if some of them might want to go home to be with their families for a few days, and the school's counselors were ready to help everybody deal with this horrible trauma, and ... and ... and ...

Riley tuned out and stifled a yawn as the dean rattled earnestly on, not saying anything useful as far as she was concerned. She'd barely slept at all last night. She had just drifted off to sleep when the medical examiner's team had noisily arrived. Then she'd stood in her doorway watching in silent horror as the team carted away a sheet-covered form on a gurney.

Surely, she'd thought, *that can't be someone who was laughing and dancing hours ago. That can't really be Rhea.*

Riley hadn't gone to sleep at all after that. She couldn't help but envy Trudy, who seemed to have been out cold the whole night—probably, Riley guessed, from all the alcohol she had consumed earlier.

Early this morning the dorm resident assistant had announced this meeting over the intercom. Trudy had still been in bed when Riley left. When Riley had come to the assembly, she hadn't seen Trudy anywhere in the auditorium.

Riley looked around now, but still didn't spot her. Maybe she was still in bed.

She's not missing much, Riley thought.

She also didn't see Rhea's roommate, Heather, anywhere. But Gina and Cassie were sitting a couple of rows ahead of her. They'd brushed past Riley on the way in to the meeting—apparently still mad at her for giving their names to the cops.

Last night Riley had understood why they might feel that way, but now it was starting to seem childish. It was also extremely hurtful. She wondered if her friendships were ever going to mend.

Right now, that "normal" the dean was talking about seemed gone forever.

At long last the meeting came to an end. As the students poured out of the building, reporters were waiting outside. Right away they descended on Gina and Cassie, asking them all kinds of questions. Riley guessed that they'd managed to find out who Rhea's companions had been that night before her murder.

If so, they probably knew about Riley too. But so far they hadn't spotted her. Maybe it was a lucky thing that Gina and Cassie had brushed Riley off this morning. Otherwise, she'd be right there with them, stuck answering impossible questions.

Riley quickened her step to avoid the reporters, wending her way among the other students. As she went, she could hear the reporters prodding Gina and Cassie over and over with the same question ...

"How do you feel?"

Riley felt a tingle of anger.

What kind of question is that? she wondered.

What did they expect Gina and Cassie to say in reply?

Riley had no idea what she herself would say—except maybe to tell the reporters to leave her the hell alone.

She was still awash in confused and terrible feelings—numbing shock, lingering disbelief, gnawing horror, and so much else. The worst feeling of all was a kind of guilty relief that she hadn't met Rhea's fate.

How could she or her friends put any of that into words?

What business did anyone have asking them that, anyway?

Riley made her way to the cafeteria in the student union. She hadn't had any breakfast yet, and was just starting to realize she was hungry. At the buffet she scooped up some bacon and eggs and poured herself some orange juice and coffee. Then she looked around for a place to sit.

Her eyes quickly fell on Trudy, who was sitting alone at a table, facing away from the others in the room and eating her own breakfast.

Riley gulped anxiously.

Did she dare try to join Trudy at the table?

Would Trudy even talk to her?

They hadn't exchanged a single word since last night when Trudy had bitterly told Riley to go to sleep.

Riley summoned up her courage and maneuvered her way across the room to Trudy's table. Without saying anything, she put her tray on the table and sat down beside her roommate.

For a few moments Trudy kept her head low, as if she didn't notice Riley's presence.

Finally, without looking at Riley, Trudy said, "I decided to skip the meeting. How was it?"

"It sucked," Riley said. "I should have skipped it too."

She thought for a moment, then added, "Heather wasn't there either."

"No," Trudy said. "I hear her parents came this morning and took her straight home. I guess nobody knows when she'll be coming back to school—or even *if* she'll be coming back."

Trudy finally looked at Riley and said, "Did you hear about what happened to Rory Burdon?"

Riley remembered how Hintz had asked her about Rory last night.

"No," she said.

"The cops showed up at his apartment late last night pounding on his door. Rory had no idea what was going on. He didn't even know what had happened to Rhea. He was scared to death he was going to get arrested, and he didn't even know why. The cops questioned him until they eventually figured out that he wasn't their guy, and then they left."

Trudy shrugged slightly and added, "The poor guy. I shouldn't have mentioned his name to that stupid police chief. But he just kept asking all these questions, I didn't know what else to say."

A silence fell between them. Riley found herself thinking about Ryan Paige, and how she'd mentioned his name to Hintz. Had the cops also paid Ryan a visit last night? It didn't seem unlikely, but Riley hoped not.

Anyway, she felt relieved that Trudy was at least willing to talk to her. Maybe now Riley could explain.

She said slowly, “Trudy, when the cops first got there, that woman cop asked me what I knew, and I couldn’t lie about it. I had to say you’d been out last night with Rhea. I also had to tell her about Cassie and Gina and Heather.”

Trudy nodded. “I get it, Riley. You don’t need to explain. I understand. And I’m sorry ... I’m sorry I treated you like ...”

Suddenly Trudy was quietly sobbing, her tears falling freely into her breakfast tray.

She said, “Riley, was it my fault? What happened to Rhea, I mean?”

Riley could hardly believe her ears.

“What are you talking about, Trudy? Of course not. How could it be your fault?”

“Well, I was so stupid and drunk last night, and I wasn’t paying any attention to what was going on, and I don’t even remember when Rhea left the Centaur’s Den. The other girls said she left alone. Maybe if I ...”

Trudy’s voice faded away, but Riley knew what she was leaving unsaid ...

“... maybe if I’d just walked Rhea home.”

And Riley, too, felt a terrible pang of guilt.

After all, she might well ask herself the same question.

If she hadn’t gone off by herself at the Centaur’s Den, and *if* she’d been around when Rhea got ready to leave, and *if* she’d offered to walk Rhea home ...

That word, *if* ...

Riley had never imagined how awful a word could be.

Trudy kept crying quietly, and Riley didn’t know what to do to make her feel better.

She half-wondered why she wasn’t crying herself.

Of course, she had cried in her own bed last night. But surely she hadn’t cried enough—not over something this terrible. Surely there was still more crying in store for her.

She sat picking at her breakfast as Trudy wiped her eyes and blew her nose and settled herself down a bit.

Trudy said, “Riley, the thing I keep wondering is *why*? Why Rhea, I mean? Was it something personal? Did somebody hate her enough to kill her? I don’t see how that’s even possible. Nobody hated Rhea. Why would anybody hate Rhea?”

Riley didn’t reply, but she’d been wondering the same thing. She also wondered whether the cops had found any answers yet.

Trudy continued, “And was it somebody we know who killed her? Is maybe one of us next? Riley, I’m scared.”

Again, Riley didn’t reply.

She felt sure, though, that Rhea had known her murderer. She didn’t know why she was sure—it wasn’t like she was a cop or knew anything really about criminals. But something in her gut told her that Rhea had known and trusted her killer—right up until it had been too late to save herself.

Trudy looked at Riley steadily, then said, “You don’t seem to be scared.”

Riley felt taken aback.

For the first time, it dawned on her ...

No, I’m not scared.

She’d been feeling every other sort of awful emotion in the world—guilt, grief, shock—and yes, horror. But her horror was somehow different from fear for her own life. The horror she felt was for Rhea herself, horror at the awfulness of what had happened to her.

But Riley wasn’t afraid.

She wondered—was it because of what had happened to her mother all those years ago, the sound of that gunshot, the sight of all that blood, the incomprehensible loss she still struggled with even today?

Had the most terrible trauma she had ever suffered made her stronger than other people?

For some reason, she almost hoped not. It didn't seem quite right to be strong like that, strong in ways that other people weren't.

It just didn't seem quite ...

It took Riley a few seconds to think of the word.

Human.

She shivered just a little, then said to Trudy, "I'm heading back to the dorm. I really need to get some sleep. Want to come with me?"

Trudy shook her head.

"I just want to sit here for a while," she said.

Riley got up from her chair and gave Trudy a quick hug. Then she emptied her breakfast tray and left the student union. It wasn't a long walk back to the dorm, and she was relieved not to see any reporters along the way. When she got to the front door of the dorm, she paused for a moment. Now it occurred to her why Trudy hadn't wanted to come back with her right now. She just wasn't ready to face the dorm again.

As Riley stood at the door, she too felt weird about it. Of course, she'd spent the night there. She lived there.

But having spent some time outside, where a return to normality had been declared, was *she* ready to go back inside the building where Rhea had been killed?

She took a deep breath and walked on in through the front door.

At first she thought she felt OK. But as she continued into the hallway, the feeling of strangeness deepened. Riley felt as if she were walking and moving underwater. She headed straight to her own room and was about to open the door when her eyes were drawn toward the room farther down the hallway, the room that Rhea and Heather had shared.

She walked to it and saw that the door was shut and sealed off with police tape.

Riley stood there, suddenly feeling horribly curious.

What did it look like in there right now?

Had the room been cleaned up since she'd last seen it?

Or was Rhea's blood still there?

Riley was seized by an awful temptation—to ignore that tape and open that door and walk right inside.

She knew better than to give in to that temptation. And of course the door would be locked.

But even so ...

Why do I feel this way?

She stood there, trying to understand this mysterious urge. She began to realize—it had something to do with the killer himself.

She couldn't help thinking ...

If I open that door, I'll be able to look into his mind.

It made no sense, of course.

And it was a truly terrifying idea—to look into an evil mind.

Why? she kept asking herself.

Why did she want to understand the killer?

Why on earth did she feel such unnatural curiosity?

For the first time since this whole terrible thing had happened, Riley suddenly felt really afraid

...

... not *for* herself, but *of* herself.

CHAPTER SIX

The following Monday morning, Riley felt deeply uneasy as she slipped into her seat for her advanced psychology class.

It was, after all, the first class she'd attended since Rhea's murder four days earlier.

It was also the class she'd been trying to study for before she and her friends had gone to the Centaur's Den.

It was sparsely attended today—many students here at Lanton didn't feel ready to get back to their studies just yet. Trudy was here too, but Riley knew that her roommate was also uncomfortable with this rush to get back to “normal.” The other students were all unusually quiet as they took their places.

The sight of Professor Brant Hayman coming into the room put Riley a bit more at ease. He was young and quite good-looking in a corduroy-clad academic sort of way. She remembered Trudy telling Rhea ...

“Riley likes to impress Professor Hayman. She's got a thing for him.”

Riley cringed at the memory.

She certainly didn't want to think she had a “thing” for him.

It was just that she'd first studied with him back when she'd been a freshman. He hadn't been a professor yet, just a graduate assistant. She'd thought even then he was a wonderful teacher—informative, enthusiastic, and sometimes entertaining.

Today, Dr. Hayman's expression was serious as he put his briefcase on his desk and looked at the students. Riley realized that he was going to get right to the point.

He said, “Look, there's an elephant in this room. We all know what it is. We need to clear the air. We need to discuss it openly.”

Riley held her breath. She felt sure she wasn't going to like what was going to happen next.

Then Hayman said ...

“Did anybody here know Rhea Thorson? Not just as an acquaintance, not just someone you'd sometimes run into on campus. Really well, I mean. As a friend.”

Riley cautiously put up her hand, and so did Trudy. Nobody else in the classroom did.

Hayman then asked, “What kinds of feelings have the two of you been going through since she was killed?”

Riley cringed a little.

It was, after all, the same question she had overheard those reporters asking Cassie and Gina on Friday. Riley had managed to avoid those reporters, but was she going to have to answer that question now?

She reminded herself that this was a psychology class. They were here to deal with these kinds of questions.

And yet Riley wondered ...

Where do I even begin?

She was relieved when Trudy spoke up.

“Guilty. I could have stopped it from happening. I was with her at the Centaur's Den before it happened. I didn't even notice when she left. If only I'd just walked her home ...”

Trudy's voice trailed off. Riley gathered up the nerve to speak.

“I feel the same way,” she said. “I went off to sit by myself when we all got to the Den, and I didn't pay any attention to Rhea. Maybe if I had ...”

Riley paused, then added, “So I feel guilty too. And something else. Selfish, I think. Because I wanted to be alone.”

Dr. Hayman nodded. With a sympathetic smile he said, “So neither of you walked Rhea home.”

After a pause, he added, “A sin of omission.”

The phrase startled Riley a little.

It seemed oddly ill-suited to what Riley and Trudy had failed to do. It sounded too benign, not nearly dire enough, hardly a matter of life and death.

But of course, it was true—as far as it went.

Hayman looked around at the rest of the class.

“What about the rest of you? Have you ever done—or failed to do—the same sort of thing in a similar situation? Have you ever, shall we say, let a female friend walk somewhere alone at night when you really ought to have walked her home? Or maybe just neglected to do something that might have been important to someone else’s safety? Not taken away somebody’s car keys when they’d had a drink too many? Ignored a situation that might have resulted in injury or even death?”

A confused murmur passed among the students.

Riley realized—it was really a tough question.

After all, if Rhea hadn’t been killed, neither Riley nor Trudy would have given their “sin of omission” a moment’s thought.

They’d have forgotten all about it.

It was hardly any surprise that at least some of the students found it hard to remember one way or the other. And the truth was, Riley herself couldn’t remember for sure about herself. Had there been other times when she’d neglected to look out for someone’s safety?

Might she have been responsible for the deaths of others—if it weren’t for sheer dumb luck?

After a few moments, several reluctant hands went up.

Then Hayman said, “What about the rest of you? How many of you just can’t remember for sure?”

Almost all the rest of the students raised their hands.

Hayman nodded and said, “OK, then. Most of you may well have made the same mistake at one time or another. So how many people here feel guilty for the way you acted or the thing you probably should have done but didn’t do?”

There was more confused muttering and even a few gasps.

“What?” Hayman asked. “None of you? Why not?”

One girl raised her hand and stammered, “Well ... it was different because ... I suppose because ... nobody got killed, I guess.”

There was a general murmur of agreement.

Riley noticed that another man had stepped into the classroom. It was Dr. Dexter Zimmerman, the chairman of the Psychology Department. Zimmerman seemed to have been standing just outside the door listening to the discussion.

She’d had one class with him the semester before last—Social Psychology. He was an older, rumpled, kindly-looking man. Riley knew that Dr. Hayman looked up to him as a mentor—almost idolized him, actually. A lot of students did too.

Riley’s own feelings about Professor Zimmerman were more mixed. He’d been an inspiring teacher, but somehow she didn’t relate to him the way most others did. She wasn’t sure exactly why.

Hayman explained to the class, “I asked Dr. Zimmerman to stop by and take part in today’s discussion. He should really be able to help us out. He’s just about the most insightful guy I’ve ever known in my life.”

Zimmerman blushed and chuckled a little.

Hayman asked him, “So what do you make of what you just heard from my students?”

Zimmerman tilted his head and thought for a moment.

Then he said, “Well, at least some of your students seem to think there’s some kind of moral difference at work here. If you neglect to help someone and they get hurt or killed, it’s wrong—but

it's all right if there don't happen to be any bad consequences. But I don't see the distinction. The behaviors are identical. Different consequences don't really change whether they're right or wrong."

A hush fell over the classroom as Zimmerman's point started to sink in.

Hayman asked Zimmerman, "Does that mean that *everybody* here should be wracked with guilt right along with Riley and Trudy?"

Zimmerman shrugged.

"Maybe just the opposite. Does feeling guilty do anybody any good? Is it going to bring the young woman back? Maybe there are more appropriate things for all of us to be feeling right now."

Zimmerman stepped in front of the desk and made eye contact with the students.

"Tell me, those of you who weren't very close to Rhea. How are you feeling toward these two friends of hers right now—Riley and Trudy?"

The classroom was silent for a moment.

Then Riley was astonished to hear a few sobs break out in the classroom.

One girl said in a choked voice, "Oh, I just feel so awful for them."

Another said, "Riley and Trudy, I wish you didn't feel guilty. You shouldn't. What happened to Rhea was terrible enough. I just can't imagine the pain you're feeling right now."

Other students echoed their agreement.

Zimmerman gave the class an understanding smile.

He said, "I guess most of you know that my specialty is criminal pathology. My life's work is about trying to understand a criminal's mind. And for the last three days, I've been struggling to make sense of this crime. So far, I'm only really sure of one thing. This was personal. The killer knew Rhea and wanted her dead."

Again, Riley struggled to comprehend the incomprehensible ...

Someone hated Rhea enough to kill her?

Then Zimmerman added, "As awful as that sounds, I can assure you of one thing. He won't kill again. Rhea was his target, no one else. And I'm confident the police will find him soon."

He leaned against the edge of the desk and said, "I can tell you one other thing—wherever the killer is right now, whatever he's doing, he's not feeling what all of you seem to be feeling. He is incapable of sympathy for another person's suffering—much less the actual *empathy* I sense in this room."

He wrote down the words "sympathy" and "empathy" on the big whiteboard.

He asked, "Would anybody care to remind me of the difference between these two words?"

Riley was a bit surprised that Trudy raised her hand.

Trudy said, "Sympathy is when you care about what somebody else is feeling. Empathy is when you actually *share* somebody else's feelings."

Zimmerman nodded and jotted down Trudy's definitions.

"Exactly," he said. "So I suggest that all of us put aside our feelings of guilt. Focus instead on our capacity for empathy. It separates us from the world's most terrible monsters. It's precious—most of all at a time like now."

Hayman seemed to be pleased with Zimmerman's observations.

He said, "If it's OK with everybody, I think we should cut today's class short. It's been pretty intense—but I hope it has been helpful. Just remember, you're all processing some pretty powerful feelings right now—even those of you who weren't very close to Rhea. Don't expect the grief, shock, and horror to go away anytime soon. Let them run their course. They're part of the healing process. And don't be afraid to reach out to the school's counselors for help. Or to each other. Or to me and Dr. Zimmerman."

As the students got up from their desks to leave, Zimmerman called out ...

"On your way out, give Riley and Trudy a hug. They could use it."

For the first time during the class, Riley felt annoyed.

What makes him think I need a hug?

The truth was, hugs were the last things she wanted right now.

Suddenly she remembered—this was the thing that had turned her off about Dr. Zimmerman when she had taken a class with him. He was way too cuddly for her taste, and he was all touchy-feely about lots of things, and he liked to tell students to hug each other.

That seemed kind of weird for a psychologist who specialized in criminal pathology.

It also seemed odd for a man so big on empathy.

After all, how did he know whether she and Trudy wanted to be hugged or not? He hadn't even bothered to ask.

How empathetic is that?

Riley couldn't help think that the guy was a phony deep down.

Nevertheless, she stood there stoically while one student after another gave her a sympathetic hug. Some of them were crying. And she could see that Trudy didn't mind this attention at all. Trudy kept smiling through her own tears with every hug.

Maybe it's just me, Riley thought.

Was something wrong with her?

Maybe she didn't have the same feelings as other people.

Soon all the hugging was over, and most of the students had left the room, including Trudy. So had Dr. Zimmerman.

Riley was glad to have a moment alone with Dr. Hayman. She walked up to him and said, "Thanks for the talk about guilt and responsibility. I really needed to hear that."

He smiled at her and said, "Glad to be of help. I know this must be very hard for you."

Riley lowered her head for a moment, gathering up her nerve to say something she really wanted to say.

Finally she said, "Dr. Hayman, you probably don't remember, but I was in your Intro to Psych course back in my freshman year."

"I remember," he said.

Riley swallowed down her nervousness and said, "Well, I've always meant to tell you ... you really inspired me to major in psychology."

Hayman looked a bit startled now.

"Wow," he said. "That's really nice to hear. Thank you."

They stood looking at each other for an awkward moment. Riley hoped she wasn't making a fool of herself.

Finally Hayman said, "Look, I've been paying attention to you in class—the papers you write, the questions you ask, the ideas you share with everybody. You've got a good mind. And I've got a feeling ... you've got questions about what happened to your friend that most of the other kids don't think about—maybe don't even *want* to think about."

Riley gulped again. He was right, of course—almost uncannily right.

Now this is empathy, she thought.

She flashed back to the night of the murder, when she'd stood outside Rhea's room wishing she could go inside, feeling as if she'd learn something important if she could only walk through that door at that very moment.

But that moment was gone. When Riley had finally been able to go inside, the room was all cleaned up, looking as if nothing had ever happened there.

She said slowly ...

"I really want to understand ... *why*. I really want to know ..."

Her voice faded. Did she dare say tell Hayman—or anybody else—the truth?

That she wanted to understand the mind of the man who had murdered her friend?

That she almost wanted to *empathize* with him?

She was relieved when Hayman nodded, seeming to understand.

“I know just how you feel,” he said. “I used to feel the same way.”

He opened a desk drawer and took out a book and handed it to her.

“You can borrow this,” he said. “It’s a great place to start.”

The title of the book was *Dark Minds: The Homicidal Personality Revealed*.

Riley was startled to see that the author was Dr. Dexter Zimmerman himself.

Hayman said, “The man is a genius. You can’t begin to imagine the insights he reveals in this book. You’ve simply got to read it. It might change your life. It sure changed mine.”

Riley felt overwhelmed by Hayman’s gesture.

“Thank you,” she said meekly.

“Don’t mention it,” Hayman said with a smile.

Riley left the classroom and broke into a trot as she headed out of the building toward the library, eager to sit down with the book.

At the same time, she felt a twinge of apprehension.

“*It might change your life,*” Hayman had told her.

Would that be for the better, or for the worse?

CHAPTER SEVEN

In the university library, Riley sat down at a desk that was in a little enclosure. She put the book on the desk and sat staring at the title—*Dark Minds: The Homicidal Personality Revealed*, by Dr. Dexter Zimmerman.

She wasn't sure why, but she was glad she had chosen to start reading the book here rather than in her dorm room. Perhaps she simply didn't want to be interrupted or be asked what she was reading and why.

Or maybe it was something else.

She touched the cover and felt a strange tingling ...

Fear?

No, that couldn't be it.

Why would she be frightened of a book?

Nevertheless, she felt apprehensive, as if she was about to do something forbidden.

She opened the book and her eyes fell on the first sentence ...

Long before committing a murder, the killer has the potential to commit that murder.

As she read the author's explanations for that statement, she felt herself slipping into a dark and terrible world—an unfamiliar world, but one that she felt mysteriously fated to explore and try to understand.

Turning the pages, she was introduced to one murderous monster after another.

She met Ted Kaczynski, nicknamed the "Unabomber," who used explosives to kill three people and injure twenty-three others.

And then there was John Wayne Gacy, who loved to dress as a clown and entertain children at parties and charitable events. He was liked and respected in his community, even while he secretly went about sexually assaulting and murdering thirty-three boys and young men, many of whose bodies he hid in the crawl space of his house.

Riley was especially fascinated with Ted Bundy, who eventually confessed to thirty murders—although there might have been many more. Handsome and charismatic, he had approached his female victims in public places and easily won their trust. He described himself as "the most cold-hearted son of a bitch you'll ever meet." But the women he killed had never recognized his cruelty until it was too late.

The book was full of information about such killers. Bundy and Gacy had been remarkably intelligent, and Kaczynski had been a child prodigy. Both Bundy and Gacy had been raised by cruel, violent men, and they had suffered brutal sexual abuse when they'd been young.

But Riley wondered—what had turned them into killers? Plenty of people were traumatized in childhood without turning to murder.

She pored over Dr. Zimmerman's text looking for answers.

According to his assessment, homicidal criminals knew right from wrong, and they were also aware of the possible consequences for their actions. But they were uniquely able to shut off that awareness in order to commit their crimes.

Zimmerman also wrote what he had said in class—that killers lacked any capacity for empathy. But they were excellent imposters who could feign empathy and other ordinary feelings, making them hard to spot—and often likeable and charming.

Nevertheless, there were sometimes visible warning signs. For example, a psychopath was often someone who loved power and control. He expected to be able to attain grandiose, unrealistic goals without much effort, as though success was simply his due. He'd use any means to achieve those goals

—nothing was out of bounds, however criminal and cruel. He typically blamed other people for his failures, and he lied easily and frequently ...

Riley's mind boggled at Zimmerman's wealth of information and insights.

But as she read, she kept thinking about the first sentence in the book ...

Long before committing a murder, the killer has the potential to commit that murder.

Although murderers were different in many ways, Zimmerman seemed to be saying that there was a certain kind of person who was destined to kill.

Riley wondered—why weren't such people spotted and stopped before they could even get started?

Riley was anxious to keep reading and find out whether Zimmerman had any answers to that question. But she glanced at her watch and realized that a lot of time had passed since she'd fallen under the book's spell. She had to go right now, or she'd be late for her next class.

She left the library and headed across campus, clutching Dr. Zimmerman's book as she walked along. About halfway to her class, she couldn't resist the pull of the book, and she flipped it open and skimmed parts of the text as she walked.

Then she heard a male voice say ...

"Hey, watch out!"

Riley stopped in her tracks and looked up from her book.

Ryan Paige was standing on the sidewalk right in front of her, grinning at her.

He seemed highly amused by Riley's distracted state of mind.

He said, "Wow, that must be some book you're reading. You almost plowed right into me there. Could I have a look?"

Thoroughly embarrassed now, Riley handed him the book.

"I'm impressed," Ryan said, thumbing through a few pages. "Dexter Zimmerman is a flat-out genius. Criminal law isn't my focus, but I took a couple of classes with him as an undergrad, he really blew me away. I've read some of his books, but not this one. Is it as good as I figure it must be?"

Riley simply nodded.

Ryan's smile faded.

He said, "Terrible thing, what happened to that girl Thursday night. Did you happen to know her?"

Riley nodded again and said, "Rhea and I were in the same dorm—Gettier Hall."

Ryan looked shocked.

"Wow, I'm so sorry. It must have been awful for you."

For a moment Riley flashed back to the scream that woke her up on that horrible night, the sight of Heather collapsed and sick in the hall, the blood on the dorm room floor, Rhea's wide open eyes and slashed throat ...

She shuddered and thought ...

He's got no idea.

Ryan shook his head and said, "The whole campus is on edge—has been ever since it happened. The cops even came by my place that night, woke me up, asked me all kinds of questions. Can you believe it?"

Riley cringed a little.

Of course she could believe it. After all, she was the one who gave Ryan's name to the police.

Should she admit it? Should she apologize?

While she was trying to decide, Ryan shrugged and said, "Well, I guess they must have talked to lots of guys. I hear she was at the Centaur's Den that night, and of course I was too. They were doing

their job. I understand. And I sure hope they catch the bastard who did this. Anyway, what happened to me is no big deal—not compared to how this must be for you. Like I said, I’m really, really sorry.”

“Thanks,” Riley said, looking at her watch.

She hated to be rude. In fact, she’d been hoping to run into this handsome guy again. But right now she was going to be late for class—and besides, she somehow wasn’t in the state of mind to enjoy even Ryan’s company.

Ryan handed the book back to her, as if he understood. Then he tore a small piece of paper out of a notebook and jotted something down.

A bit shyly, he said, “Look, I hope this doesn’t seem to be out of line, but ... I just thought I’d give you my phone number. Maybe you’d just like to talk sometime. Or not. It’s up to you.”

He handed her the bit of paper and added, “I wrote my name down too—in case you’d forgotten.”

“Ryan Paige,” Riley said. “I hadn’t forgotten.”

She recited her own phone number for him. She worried that it must seem brusque of her to tell him her number instead of writing it down for him. The truth was, she was glad to think she might see him again. She was just having trouble acting all friendly to anybody new right now.

“Thanks,” she said, putting the paper in her pocket. “I’ll see you later.”

Riley brushed right past Ryan and headed toward her class.

She heard Ryan call out behind her, “I hope so.”

*

As the rest of the school day passed, Riley read snatches of Zimmerman’s book whenever she got a chance. All day long she couldn’t help wondering—might Rhea’s killer be like Ted Bundy, a charming man who had managed to engage Rhea’s trust?

She remembered what Dr. Zimmerman had said in class that morning ...

“The killer knew Rhea and wanted her dead.”

And unlike Bundy, Rhea’s killer was finished. He would seek no other victims.

At least according to Dr. Zimmerman.

He seemed so positive, Riley thought.

She wondered how he could be so certain.

Later that evening, Riley and Trudy were in their dorm room studying quietly together. Little by little, Riley started feeling restless and impatient. She wasn’t sure why.

Finally she got up from her desk, put on her jacket, and headed for the door.

Trudy looked up from her homework and asked, “Where are you going?”

“I don’t know,” Riley said. “Just out for a little while.”

“Alone?” Trudy asked.

“Yeah.”

Trudy shut her book and looked at Riley anxiously.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” she asked. “Maybe I should come along. Or maybe you should call the campus escort service.”

Riley felt a surprising burst of impatience.

“Trudy, that’s ridiculous,” she said. “All I want to do is take a little walk. We can’t live like this—always afraid something awful might happen. Life has to go on.”

Riley was startled by the sharpness of her own words. And she could see by Trudy’s expression that her feelings were hurt.

Trying to speak more gently, Riley said, “Anyway, it’s not very late. And I won’t stay out long. I’ll be safe. I promise.”

Trudy didn’t reply. She silently opened her book and started reading again.

Riley sighed and walked out into the hallway. She stood there for a few moments wondering ...
Where do I want to go?
What do I want to do?
Slowly came a vague realization ...
I want to go back.
She wanted to know how Rhea's death had happened.

CHAPTER EIGHT

With relentless questions about Rhea's death dogging her mind, Riley stood still and looked up and down the dorm hallway.

This was where it started, she thought.

She found herself picturing the place on Thursday night, the moment after she reluctantly agreed to go to the Centaur's Den with her friends.

She had just put on her denim jacket over a flattering crop top and stepped out into the hallway. Trudy and Rhea had been rounding up the other girls for their outing—Cassie, Gina, and Heather.

Riley remembered the bustle of immature excitement in the air—the promise of drinking, dancing, and maybe some guys.

She also remembered how disconnected she'd felt from all that.

She retraced the group's steps down the hall and continued on outside.

It was already dark out—not as dark as it had been that night, but the lamps along the pathways were on, so it was easy for Riley to visualize how things had looked at the time.

As she walked the way they had all taken, Riley remembered lagging behind the others, tempted to head back to her room to resume her studies. Cassie, Gina, and Heather had clustered together, chattering and giggling. Rhea and Trudy had walked side by side, playfully punching each other in the arm over some joke that Riley hadn't been able to hear.

Riley kept visualizing all that had happened as she followed their route off campus and into the surrounding streets. Soon she arrived at the entrance to the Centaur's Den, as they had that night. She remembered being pushed ahead into the smoky, noisy bar.

As she walked on inside now, the place was markedly less crowded than it had been that night. It was also quieter. Alanis Morissette's "Uninvited" was playing on the jukebox, softly enough for Riley to be able to hear the nearby cracking of billiard balls. And there were no moving light beams or sparkles flashing over the empty dance floor.

But Riley could vividly remember the din and chaos of that night—how "Whiskey in the Jar" had blared so loudly that the whole place vibrated, and how Heather, Cassie, and Gina had headed straight toward the bar, and how Trudy had grabbed both Riley and Rhea by the hands and yelled over the music ...

"Come on, let's dance, the three of us!"

As she stood looking at the now-empty dance floor, Riley remembered shaking her head and pulling her hand away, and how Trudy had looked hurt and then stuck out her tongue at her and then went right on dancing with Rhea.

Had that been the last time Riley had seen Rhea—at least alive?

She remembered heading downstairs to be by herself. The next time she'd seen her friends was when they'd come stumbling drunkenly down the stairs and Trudy had been wielding a full pitcher of beer.

Riley had asked Trudy ...

"Where's Rhea?"

Trudy hadn't known, but one of the other girls—Heather, Riley thought—had said that Rhea had already gone back to the dorm.

Riley swallowed hard at the realization—yes, the last time she had ever seen Rhea alive was right here on this dance floor.

She felt a renewed rush of guilt, and the awfulness of that word *if* ...

If maybe I'd just stayed and danced with them ...

But she reminded herself of what Dr. Zimmerman had said about guilt—that it wasn't going to bring Rhea back ...

“Focus instead on our capacity for empathy.”

Riley wondered—was that what she was trying to do right now, by reliving what she and her friends had gone through that night?

Was she trying to empathize?

If so, with whom?

She had no idea.

All she knew was that her curiosity was growing by the moment.

She simply wanted to *know*—without really having any idea what she expected to find out.

Riley turned away from the dance floor and noticed a couple of guys playing pool. One of them was Harry Rampling, the football player who had approached her downstairs that night.

Riley watched as Harry took a pool shot that didn't put any balls in any pockets. Riley thought it was a dumb shot. She was a pretty good pool player herself.

Then Harry made eye contact with her and sneered a little.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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