

## *Riley*

### Chapter One

Riley Cotswald sat at her desk staring at the blank screen in front of her. What do I write? she wondered. That's a stupid question, came an immediate reply from somewhere in her head. Questioning myself about writing never helped anything. The only thing that matters is putting words on paper. I learned this with my first book.

She turned her head away from the screen and peered through the window of her small D.C. apartment. The sky was a Washingtonian blue, she observed, and if she looked down just a bit she could see the cherry blossoms beginning to burst. Just like me, she hoped.

But she did not feel herself bursting; all she felt was stuck at her desk, like a child in detention.

Knowing that distraction and procrastination were the two big things that worked against her getting anywhere with her writing, she forced herself to turn back to her computer screen. She had been able to do this earlier in her life, and she always associated writing with a special kind of experience, a mystical or even a spiritual one, whatever that meant. It was something she couldn't put into words; the irony of that was not lost on her nonreligious self.

I can do this, she told herself; and she forced herself to place her hands over the keys. The only way to start is to start, she thought. And so she believed.

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and commanded her fingers to move.

They weren't listening.

Riley leaned back in her chair. This is harder than I remembered.

She lectured herself: It doesn't matter that you have no idea what to write about. Remember when you started? When you wrote that first book? The one that sold? The one that allowed you to write full time? It wasn't that long ago; just a year ago you were on a book tour, touting your image as an up-and-coming young author. And you promised yourself and your publisher that you would produce another. That is why you are here. To produce another saleable book.

She sighed. Back then, what felt like ages ago, writing just seemed to flow and took on a life of its own. All Riley had to do was channel it and type. This was, of course, the narrative she told herself. The fact is she cannot really remember how she did it. Not exactly.

But this mystical narrative seemed to her to be largely true, although in a corner of her mind she thought perhaps the whole experience was romanticized a bit by time. She believed that's how it should happen. Magically. The stories are inside me, and all I need to do is make my fingers move across the keyboard. The narrative will take care of itself.

But maybe not. Maybe there is some other way. An outline? A summary? No. Writing is an art. Being creative is just that: an act of creation, one that required, even demanded, discipline, but one which at base was artistic, creative. So create! Write!

She tried to stop thinking and closed her eyes once more. She knew what she was doing. All these thoughts were just distractions. And the more self-critical the thoughts, the more distracted she became and the further away she came from the act of creation.

Riley sprang out of her chair to move, to breathe, to stop the pattern of useless thinking that was preventing her from doing the writing she most wanted to do. She walked around her small apartment. If Cameron were there, she would engage him somehow; she would whine to him. She wouldn't call it whining, but that's what it would be. It was always whining. It was saying out loud what went through her head, albeit in a more articulate voice. She would berate herself, and he would reassure her, no matter how dismal she judged her life to be at that moment or how crippled she felt putting words to paper. Or how little he actually understood what she was saying.

On reflection, that seemed like one of the best reasons to be with someone: having someone to complain to. And to have that person reassure you, even if you knew that the soothing words were insincere, as in Cameron's case. He tried to be sympathetic, but that trait did not seem to exist on his genome; the fact was dismal on the listening end. She shook her head. She didn't need to go there.

Riley sat back down and repositioned her fingers over the keyboard. She took yet another deep breath. In the back of her mind, she could hear a familiar voice: *Scream all you want, young lady. If this is what you want, this is what you must do. It's as simple as that.*

She straightened her shoulders. *Okay, this is what I want, so this is what I must do.* She replaced her fingers over her keyboard and started typing.

*Adam Wilkerson did not want to do what he knew he needed to do.*

She sat back and checked in with herself. *This is more like it.*

*He had been thinking about it for weeks, maybe even months. Definitely months. A year? Could be a year. He tried to avoid it; in fact, he tried everything he could think of to shield himself and his wife from what he needed rather than wanted to tell her. He wondered about how she would take it. He didn't think she would take it well.*

*Adam was sitting at home, waiting for his wife to return. It was Saturday; she had gone shopping. Where or for what he had no idea. It was hard to imagine that she really needed anything. He thought she was just killing time until . . . until what? Until night fell and she could go to sleep and forget her own unhappiness for a few hours. That is, if she slept. That nocturnal pleasure has been coming hard for Mrs. Wilkerson recently. Adam knew this all too well; his wife wasn't the only one lying awake in silence at night. What he didn't know was what to do about it.*

Touchy ground, Riley mused. She felt herself pale a bit, and she noticed her hands were sweaty. Anxiety, she knew. And maybe excitement. Perhaps both. She did not take her eyes off the screen.

*Adam wondered, even at this late date, if there were some way to avoid this, to somehow give his marriage yet another lease on life. Then he could avoid the discussion he promised himself he would have. But his mind was blank. He had tried everything. He tried being assertive and firm and then warm and kind; he tried to be inviting and disclosing and a little removed and distant. Nothing, absolutely nothing helped impede the belief that had been growing in his mind that he was just out of gas. By which he meant that the marriage was out of gas. No more fuel in the tank. Running on empty. The relationship platitudes were coming fast enough to fill a silly daytime advice show.*

Riley leaned back in her chair without taking her eyes off the screen. This was a habit of focus: looking at the screen was still writing, even if her hands were not tapping on the keys. She knew the anxiety was there and she knew why. She didn't want to give her nervousness any space; nor did she want to draw comparisons to her current life. She was sure that would make it harder for her to write.

So she didn't give in. Her eyes did not stray from the screen; she forced herself to continue.

*He was fidgety. He jumped up from his chair and headed for the kitchen. Maybe he should eat something, but he wasn't really hungry. He was mostly just anxious. When he thought about his relationship with Suzanne, all her many positive qualities filled his mind. She was attractive, charming, and liked by almost everyone who knew her. She was respected in the community and was unfailingly kind. She would go out of her way for people she scarcely knew. Everyone who knew the two of them thought that Adam was a lucky man indeed.*

*But he didn't feel lucky. He felt hollow. Passion was gone, sex was infrequent and undiscussed. If he did allude to sexual contact, he was met by his lovely wife with silence. Not just silence, but stony silence. Maybe even something more potent than silence. Something more deliberate, as if she were willfully refusing to understand what he was talking about. He frowned as he opened the refrigerator door.*

*And the kicker was that even all that no longer made him angry. It was just part of the growing emptiness that was taking over his life, making him numb. And it was just another piece of evidence that the relationship was faltering. No, worse than that: it was dying.*

*There was a time when this did make him angry. He hated it when Suzanne just shut the door on sensitive or delicate topics. He would get mad; he would say so, sometimes in a hostile way, sometimes in a kind way. To the extent that one can express anger kindly. But none of that made a difference. Ever. If he asked her straightforwardly if she were still interested in him, she would dutifully say yes, but those words coming out of her mouth never felt as if they matched up with the message she seemed to broadcast beyond them, which sounded to his mind something like 'No, I am not interested, but I don't want to rock the boat. And I don't want to talk about this again, ever.' But those words never*

*came out of her mouth. She just got more and more remote. Gradually, as if she had a plan that would one day result in her . . . what? He didn't know. But it felt deliberate, which was all the more galling.*

*Adam realized he had been staring into the open refrigerator for some time. He closed the door, not registering a single item his eyes may have scanned during the time the door was open. He was right: he wasn't hungry.*

*He turned around and left the kitchen. He returned to his desk in the small den where he worked on domestic stuff: paying the bills, doing correspondence, banking—anything that could be done on a computer, which included almost everything he did at home. He glanced at the clock on the desk. It would be another hour before she said she would be home. He wondered absently if he had the nerve to go through with it.*

Suddenly, Riley pushed back from her desk and took her eyes off the computer screen. She realized she was shivering a bit in the warm room. Maybe this is all a little too close. She didn't know how it would work out with Adam and Suzanne, but she had a pretty good idea of how it was working out with Riley and Cameron, the husband from whom she had been separated for some months.

Like Adam, Riley stood up and went to the kitchen. But she only wanted a drink of water, something to quench the thirst she felt inside her, a thirst she was pretty sure would not be slaked by a sip or two of tap water.

What she was thirsting for the most was elusive. In her real life, she was the one who sat around wanting to speak the obvious truth to Cameron, who seemed eternally tone deaf about anything but his natural inclination toward happiness. It came so easy to him; it drove her crazy. Riley never quite grasped the root or the nature of his sunny disposition. Why was he so impossibly happy? He smiled a lot; he was seldom nonplussed; he put a good spin on everything. On those rare occasions when he absolutely could not avoid his emotions, as when he was watching a tear jerker or heard about the death of a friend or a national tragedy, he would shed a tear or two, but very briefly and, if it lasted more than a couple seconds, apologetically. Riley had never seen anything like it. And then he would return to his preternaturally happy default state. At first this was charming to her.

“That drove me crazy,” she whispered aloud. As she said it, she felt her words confirmed by a roiling in the pit of her stomach, something she often felt when she and Cameron were living together. She decided that the water would have to do in the quenching department. Whatever else she was really thirsting for would have to wait.

It was not completely lost on Riley that she was writing this story to help herself. One of her several therapists had suggested that she do this: that she use her talents as a writer to at least try to understand distressing events in her life, especially her relational life. Maybe, just maybe, said the Master of No Promises, it would provide some relief; and if not relief, then clarification. She wondered absently which therapist had told her that. It must have been the one before last, but honestly she couldn't recall.

Riley hated that therapist.

Despite her several forays into therapy, Riley was able to attain neither clarity nor resolution. Sure, sometimes therapy was consoling, as it might be to speak with a good friend about what's bothering you. And arriving at insight was occasionally fascinating. But despite those moments, the issues that plagued her remained for the most part unchanged and endlessly frustrating. As the consolation faded and the insights lost their initial charge, the same tacit but powerful desire to be fixed in some magical, mystical way reasserted itself. She kept waiting to be cured, when it was the waiting itself that was precisely the problem, a concept that finally, after years of struggling, dawned on her one day in an unusually candid moment. This desire, the belief, the fervent hope that a little more work would do it, that a little more therapeutic attention would change her and her world was hard to shake. It was not only a belief, it was an assumption. Why else put yourself through all that work examining the nooks and crannies of your psyche? And the harder she worked, the stronger the belief. Until that same loathsome therapist sat back in his too comfortable chair and labeled it magical thinking.

Magical thinking?

Yes, Riley. Magical thinking. The kind that we all do as children, when we believe that, for instance, if we wish for something really, really hard, it will come true. Most people grow out of it around, say, age seven or eight. Ten is late.

Left unsaid was that thirty was beyond the pale.

No wonder she hated him.

Why is this so hard for me to get? If I want my life to be different, I have to do something to make it different. Simple. In theory.

No matter how much personal responsibility she tried to shoulder, nothing could shake her desire and belief that she needed something more, something from outside herself. As much as she liked to write, no amount of writing filled that need; nor did it give her surcease from the constant internal self-criticism to which she was so prone. At least therapy gave her some clarity about that.

What do you expect? This is life on earth. For the most part, for the gigantic part, it is conditioned and unfree, as averred, she recalled, by Daoists everywhere.

Another thought that did not give her peace of mind.

I don't think it's peace of mind I'm looking for. Curious thought. Of course, everyone wants a measure of peace, but peace is just an absence of turmoil. It sounds boring. Maybe it's not peace at all I want. It is something more complex, more nuanced, more . . . she didn't know what.

She sat back down and looked at the blinking cursor. She glanced at the clock. It was close enough to four o'clock, the time she set in her schedule to stop writing for the day. She had started late today mostly because she had been avoiding starting altogether. But she finally did and was feeling a tiny bit self-satisfied. Her schedule—the one she would initiate in full force tomorrow—was to remain at work three hours in the morning and three hours in the afternoon. An hour break for lunch, but few if any other breaks during the day. Bathroom breaks were okay, as was getting up to get something to drink. But not to eat or to snack or call anyone, unless it was writing-related. She knew herself well enough to know that any one of the endless distractions available to her would derail a day's productivity. To her this was a Spartan schedule, and she hoped it would be good for production and for the focus she needed if she was going to please her publisher. And herself. But every ancient, lazy, vaguely formed impulse in her body had to be disciplined daily for her to pull it off. As much as she loved writing, she hated the discipline part. In fact, at the moment, she hated everything.