

(THIS IS A PREQUEL TO THE SYDNEY RILEY PROVINCETOWN MYSTERY SERIES)

The way it all started, I probably should have figured out how it would end.

But here's the thing: I'm not exactly known for my prescience. In fact, it's pretty amazing that I've been instrumental, over the past few years, in solving over eight murders. Most people wonder how I did it at all. (Some people wonder how I manage to stumble my way through any given day at all, but that's another issue altogether.)

I wasn't thinking of becoming an amateur crime-solver. I wasn't thinking of moving to a place they call Land's End, at the very tip of Cape Cod. All I was thinking of, really, was what we could have for dinner.

And it all went downhill from there.

We were living in an absolutely gorgeous house on a side street off Mass. Ave. in North Cambridge, Massachusetts: polished wood and stained glass and a fanlight over the front door. Not our house; it belonged to Noah's aunt, who played with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. When the orchestra wasn't on tour or out at Tanglewood for the summer, she lived downtown with one of the oboists. The family house, she had declared, could stay in the family, at least until she was ready to retire.

None of which stopped her from charging us a hefty amount of rent on the place, but it was well worth every dime. I loved that house. In the springtime, the tiny back garden was filled with forsythia; in the fall, our neighbor across the street "did" Halloween, adding something new and spooky to her house and front porch every day. It was like living in a storybook.

And for a long time, the story was a good one.

Noah was supposed to be home for dinner—the first time in over two weeks, after a string of long shifts in the ER during which we were lucky if we saw each other at all, much less shared a meal—and I was determined to make it memorable. Which pretty much meant take-out, because the closest I got to any stove was watching the Great British Baking Show. I got off the Red Line at Cambridge's Central Square—three stops before my usual terminus—and hit Mary Chung's. Mary herself was supervising the dining room and pulled out a pad of paper when she saw me come in. "Two *suan la chow show*," she said. "Two dun-dun noodles, no shredded chicken. Spicy pickled cabbage. Spicy green beans."

Wait, it's supposed to mean something if the restaurant owner knows your order by heart?

I handed over cash—Mary doesn't do payment cards—and settled down to wait, scrolling through my phone and thinking about a cat. Fran, one of the other faculty members, had just had a baby, and her cat kept trying to attack the child. "He's used to being an only cat," she said to me.

"He still is an only cat," I pointed out.

"Not in *his* mind," she said.

I looked at the photo on the phone she kept thrusting under my nose. "Yep. It's a cat," I acknowledged.

"He needs you, Sydney," she said.

"Maybe. But do I need him?"

"Of course you do. You're lonely."

"I am not. I have a husband. We live together."

"He lives with you when he isn't living at Mass. General," she said. "You need someone at home. What you need is a *cat*."

I thought about it. "I'll think about it," I said.

Mary gave me my order, and I bundled up again against the wind and was home setting the table—with candles, I was going all-out—and getting ready to reheat the Chinese food when my phone rang, Noah's photo on the screen. "Tell me you're on your way," I said.

"Bad news, Sydney."

I took a deep breath. I never wanted to be the kind of wife who nags, but we hadn't had dinner together in... I had no idea in *how* long, it was that long. "Why?" I asked.

"Clark's not making it in," he said. "The snowplow couldn't reach his house, he's still digging out."

"It snowed last *night*!" I said, and there it was, that awful nagging whine in my voice. But Clark had had all day to dig out of his suburban home to make it to the hospital for his shift. I hated him, both for not going in to the ER and for the way I was feeling—and sounding—in response.

"I know," Noah said.

I gave in. It wasn't his fault. It wasn't ever his fault. That was part of the problem. "You sound tired, sweetheart."

"I am. It's been insane today. You'd think Boston, they'd have learned to drive in the snow by now and not have to crash into each other. But no." He paused. "I'm sorry, I really am."

I tried for lighthearted. "You'll be sorrier when you hear I went to Mary Chung's," I said.

"*Suan la chow show*?"

I nodded, even though he couldn't see me. "Dun-dun noodles," I added. "Spicy pickled cabbage."

"I wish you hadn't," he said, and there was a depth of sadness in his voice that couldn't have been all about the food. "Of all places, I wish—"

"It'll reheat tomorrow," I said briskly. "Or you can take it in with you next shift."

He cleared his throat. "The thing is, that's why I'm calling, I'm probably not—well, actually, I'm not—I don't think I'm coming home at all," he said.

There was a moment of silence. I hadn't heard him right. I couldn't have heard him right. I went to my fallback advice for myself: *Breathe. Just breathe...* "What?"

Another pause. "Sydney—well, sorry, I know maybe this feels sudden, but it's been coming on for a while. It's just, I've been thinking about this a lot, about us, you know, our marriage, and you have to admit that for a while now we haven't been—"

"No," I interrupted him. "No. You are not doing this on the phone." *Not with Mary Chung's on the table. Not here. Not now.* "Listen. You're exhausted, I can hear it in your voice. When are you off shift? I can call in sick tomorrow. We can talk about it. We can—"

"I've met someone," Noah said.

And, just like that, it was over.

I didn't call in sick.

I dumped the Chinese food into the rubbish and opened a bottle of Côtes du Rhône and pretty much disappeared into it for the rest of the night. The next morning I stared at the faces of the other people on the subway on my way out to UMass, and wondered how many of them had recently broken up with somebody.

Fran, my colleague-with-a-cat, was waiting. "So? What do you think?"

I jammed the key into my office door. "I think all men suck," I said.

She was undeterred. "That's why you need a cat."

I glared at her. "So *it* can run away, too?"

She followed me into the office. "What's going on, Sydney? Did you and Noah have a fight?"

"No. You have to care about somebody to fight with them," I said. God, had I really said that? I sounded like every maudlin self-absorbed heroine in all the romance novels my mother read. "He's met somebody. He's in love." I sketched air-quotation marks around the phrase. I think people who use air-quotation marks are a little too precious. And here I'd done it anyway. What was I turning into?

"Somebody? Who?"

"A nurse." I sat down behind my desk. "How cliché can you get? The strong brave competent ER doctor and the impressionable supportive ER nurse." I shook my head. "He's in love with a *nurse*, Fran."

"Maybe he'll come to his senses," she said uncertainly. "Don't think the worst. Maybe it's just—you know, a fling. An affair. You can get couples counseling. Divorce is a big step—"

"Didn't you hear me? He's in love with someone else. He wouldn't have told me if it were just a fling." And how many others *hadn't* he told me about, the ones that didn't make him call and say he was never coming back?

She moved some books off the bench across from me and sat down too. "What are you going to do?"

"Are you on about that cat *again*? Don't you think I have other—"

She interrupted me smoothly. "You live in his family house," she said.

I just stared at her. In my whole wretched night of panicking because I couldn't even conceive of a future without Noah in it, because I had thought we were happy together—all right, over-extended, maybe, too occupied with work, sure, but happy all the same—I hadn't given a thought to the practicality of the thing.

This woman wasn't just moving into my marriage, she was going to move into my house, too. And there was nothing I could do about it. "I thought we were happy," I said, and even I could hear the misery in my voice.

"You were," Fran said. "You *were* happy. Really. Both of you. Seriously, Sydney. You were married, what—ten years?"

"Eleven," I said. "But who's counting?"

"You don't see it now," she began, and I held up a hand. "No," I said. "You are *not* going to tell me to cherish the memories of all the good times. You are not going to say that this will really work out for the better. You are *not*."

She shrugged and stood up. “I’m here if you want to talk,” she said, and paused at the door. “And I still say you need a cat.”

But I didn’t. I needed Noah.

How had my well-ordered life spiraled into a series of scenes from a soap opera? We’d made a good couple, Noah and me. We went to symphony concerts. We donated money to the homeless shelter. We went camping in the summer. What did an ER nurse have that I didn’t?

Well, apparently she had my husband, for starters.

What do I do now?

Breathe. Just breathe.

In the end, I couldn’t teach. I got myself up to the classroom and stood in front of eighteen undergraduates and realized I didn’t have the faintest idea which course it was. Classical Hollywood Cinema? Political Cinema Across Cultures? Ghostly Doubles and Evil Twins?

I went to my department head and he listened to me and shrugged and said he’d get a TA to cover my classes for two weeks. Two weeks wasn’t nearly enough, but short of quitting altogether it was the best deal going. I took the subway back to North Cambridge and spent some time sitting on the edge of the bed thinking all the thoughts you shouldn’t think. *What’s she like? Did she ever come to our house? Did he ever sleep with her in this bed? Is she beautiful? Does she make him laugh? What do they call each other?*

I finally managed to get myself together and threw some pretty random clothes into a suitcase and put it in my car. Our car. Screw you, Noah, I thought viciously as I drove away. The Beemer was as much mine as his, anyway.

I headed out for the highway without any coherent thought about where I might go. I turned south for the excellent reason that there was a pileup northbound—and all I could think of was, they’re transporting to the ER, to Noah—and I slammed the car around and headed south. And then I saw the signs for Cape Cod.

I’d never been to Cape Cod. I decided it was a sign in more ways than one.

Driving is a lot like meditating—well, once you get out of the immediate urban traffic scene, that is. The sun was bright and the highway stretched forward and everything looked like a scene out of a calendar—blindingly blue sky, fresh virgin snow, icing on all the trees. It seemed so out of place. How could the earth—how dare the earth—look so good, when my world had just come crashing down around me? Was Noah looking out the window of the staff room at this same beautiful day? Was Nameless Nurse sliding up next to him so he could put his arm around her shoulder?

I put on NPR to drown out the thoughts. I was on an adventure, I told myself. I was going someplace new. I had two weeks of unscheduled time ahead of me, and I didn’t have to think about Noah if I didn’t want to.

That worked—for about ten minutes. Then I was back to obsessing. Had I done anything wrong? Was it because of my mother, she who descended on us from New Hampshire from time to time and demanded to know when we were finally going to do what she referred to as “starting a family,” which was the absolute last thing on either of

our minds? I could hear Noah. “Precognition isn’t an imperative,” he said. “I save more lives in the ER than I’ll ever bring into the world.”

“Not the same thing,” my mother pointed out, which meant, of course, that she couldn’t hold and coo over and take ownership of all the lives he was putting right. She’d been bad enough, pestering us to get married, and now—as far as I was concerned—she could wait until hell froze over.

Well, hell had just frozen over. But it had nothing to do with having children.

I’d crossed the Sagamore Bridge and had been running along Route 6 without much noticing what I was passing. The late-morning was fine and the signs flashed by with names that were intriguing, but not enough to stop the thoughts whirling around my brain. Marstons Mills. Yarmouth Port, Dennis Port, Harwich Port—you could tell the ocean was there, even if you couldn’t see it. Skaket Beach. Coast Guard Beach. Marconi Beach. English-sounding towns: Brewster, Eastham, Wellfleet. And then finally, without really realizing how I’d done it, I was at the end of the line.

Provincetown. Next stop, Portugal.

I found a place to park the car in a large parking area by the wharf—there weren’t a lot of other cars around, or people either, for that matter—and pulled on my wooly hat and mittens and started walking. Down to the end of the pier, where brightly colored fishing boats were tied up, the water sloshing against their sides, and seabirds floated placidly on the surface, bobbing up and down with its movements. The air was frigid but the sun was warm. I walked back slowly, filling my lungs, trying to feel in the moment. This was a beautiful place.

This wasn’t Cambridge.

Nope: not going there. I reached the main street and had to make a decision: left or right?

I turned right on a whim and changed my life.

Nothing much was actually open. We were on the back edge of January, with spring still a glimmer of a dream in the future, and already the sun was inching its way toward the horizon. I had better, I decided, find a place to stay tonight before it got dark.

There didn’t seem to be a lot of options.

The one exception was a building that looked like it was born of a Victorian mother and a seafaring father—turrets and decks galore, and a walkway leading through an arch and finally to a door: the Race Point Inn. The door was blessedly unlocked; my fingers were getting too cold to knock.

I entered a warm, beautiful lobby, exquisitely elegant, with the same polished wood I loved in our house and wide boards on the floor. The reception area looked like it had come off the Titanic, and there was an exceptionally handsome young man was standing behind it. It all felt a tiny bit over the top and very, very appropriate. “Welcome to the Race Point Inn,” he said. “Would you care to check in, or are you here for tea?”

“Tea?” I was startled.

“We serve tea daily at four o’clock,” he said smoothly. “Cucumber sandwiches, scones, the lot. You haven’t been here before, have you?”

I shook my head. Not sure I was up for the gentility of a tea ceremony. “Just a room for the night,” I said. “And someplace I can get something hot—without all the fuss?”

He smiled. “Of course.”

The room was lovely. I was going to have to go back to the car to get my suitcase, of course, but that could wait. I stood at the window staring out at the harbor as the sun set, the light touching everything with gold that dissolved into gray, and wondered what it would be like to see that every day. The fellow at reception had given me a brochure, and I looked at it now: an artist’s colony, this was. If that light was anything to go by, I could see why.

I didn’t really want to face anyone, but I had some practical matters to attend to. Something hot to drink. My suitcase. And I had a feeling another bottle of wine was going to be in order. I headed downstairs and into a lounge area that was empty except for a large bearded man looking through a stack of papers. I nodded to him and sat in one of the chairs; a moment later the young man—who’d said his name but I’d immediately forgotten it—brought me a tray with a mug and a pot of what turned out to be hot chocolate, rich and dark, with a marshmallow on the side. I was enchanted.

The man with the beard looked up. “Kyle, can I get some more coffee when you have a chance?”

“Sure, boss.”

The bearded man looked at me and we exchanged meaningless smiles and he went back to his papers. I stirred my hot chocolate. I never drank hot chocolate. Part of this new adventure, I told myself, and then another picture intruded, a ski trip out to Colorado, me and Noah and a couple we knew, sitting together in front of the massive stone fireplace. I was drinking hot chocolate, curled up against Noah, we were all laughing...

I didn’t even realize the sob was audible. I didn’t realize I was crying at all. But the big bearded man was suddenly on the sofa next to me and offering me a box of tissues, and I was immediately embarrassed. More soap-opera stuff. I never do soap-opera stuff. “I’m sorry,” I managed to say. “I didn’t mean—”

“It’s all right. Here, have another.” I took a tissue and wiped my eyes, effectively smearing my mascara all over my face. He turned away from me. “Kyle! Bring me a glass of water, please!”

“I don’t... usually... do this,” I managed to say. It came out in three different breaths.

“Then that’s why you are now,” he said comfortably. “Just relax. Ah, here’s some water. Would you like to take a sip?”

I took the glass from him. “You’re being very nice,” I said. “I didn’t mean to—”

“I know,” he said. “Drink some more.”

He had a deep bass voice, a rumble really, that was somehow incredibly comforting: stranger as father-figure. I drank some more.

He said, casually, “My name is Barry. What’s yours?”

By that time I was pretty sure the tears were at bay—at least for the moment. “Sydney,” I said. “I don’t do this. I just—my husband left me last night.”

Barry looked startled. “Permanently?”

The word was a trigger, and I started crying again. He put an arm around me, awkwardly, and left it there, patting my shoulder in an avuncular and totally ineffective manner. Young Kyle came in and sat on my other side. He actually said, “there, there.”

I think that’s what broke me out of it. These guys who had never met me before and who no doubt had other ways to be spending their winter afternoon were sitting with this strange woman approaching middle age who was crying her eyes out.

I pulled it together. “I’m sorry,” I said again. I am of the generation that apologizes for everything. Noah used to say I’m a closet Canadian.

“Don’t be, honey,” said Kyle. “Are you kidding? Me, I need a great big cry at least once a week.”

“At least,” Barry agreed.

“You stop now, you,” Kyle said to him, with an unmistakably camp gesture.

I said the first stupid thing that came out of my mouth. “You’re gay.”

“You noticed? What gave me away?” He was laughing, and I managed a shaky smile in return. “See! There you go, honey. Nothing like a big old queen to perk you right up! Now, do you want some more hot chocolate? Or maybe something a little stronger?”

“Stronger would be good,” I said, bemused.

“Bring her a glass of Hennessy,” Barry told him.

“Right you are.”

We sat for a moment in silence, the fire crackling a few feet away. I blew my nose energetically and started to say something, but Barry shook his head. “Don’t say you’re sorry again,” he said. “It’s what we’re here for.”

“What, you and—Kyle? Here to comfort unhappy people?”

He smiled gravely. “Provincetown.”

“All right,” said Kyle, coming around the sofa and pushing a snifter of amber liquid into my hands. “That’ll warm you right up.”

He was right. As the brandy went down I could feel the warmth spreading inside and, slowly, the feeling of despair lifting. “Thank you.”

“Now, honey, I have to go back to work, or my boss will fire me,” Kyle said briskly. “But remember, I’m the one checked you in, and you didn’t have a suitcase. Do you need us to get you some—necessities?”

I wondered, fleetingly, what qualified as necessities in Kyle’s book. “It’s in my car,” I said. “I have to go and—”

Barry said, “Give us the keys. Where’re you parked?” And as I fumbled them out of my purse, he said to Kyle, “Send Jonathan down to pick it up, okay? He can put it in the garage and take her suitcase up to her room. Where do you have her?”

“Two-sixteen.”

“Okay.” He turned to me. “The car?”

“It’s in the big lot by the pier,” I said. “A BMW. I don’t remember the plate number. But, really, this is far too much...”

It was like fighting a tsunami. Kyle had the keys and was gone in a flash, and Barry sat back, giving me some room, watching me. “Do you want to tell me?” he asked.

“You have better things—”

“This is what I do,” he said.

“What, help damsels in distress? You get a lot of them around here?”

“You’d be surprised,” he said, and there was a definite twinkle about him. “I own this place. The Race Point Inn. And like I said—a lot of people have been here before to heal from something. Broken hearts. Broken immune systems. Broken lives.”

Of course; I’d heard, somewhere, that Provincetown had been a destination for gay men dying of AIDS back in the 1980s. I hadn’t been old enough to know about it then—but of course I had, since. This town was no stranger to pain.

So I told him. I told him far more than I’d ever have imagined telling a stranger. I told him about meeting Noah at the farmer’s market in Somerville and going to concerts at the Middle East in Cambridge and him finishing up his residency and staying on in emergency medicine because he liked saving lives, because death was the enemy and he’d never give in without a fight. About teaching at UMass. About the house in North Cambridge. And about Mary Chung’s and the telephone call and the ER nurse. “So I just got in the car and drove,” I said. “I’ve never even been to the Cape before.”

“Yet you found your way here.”

I squinted at him. “What’re you saying—this was meant, or something?”

He shrugged. Somehow a couple more brandies had materialized in our hands; he was looking into his as though it were going to tell him something. “They call this place Land’s End,” he said, almost meditatively. “The thing about a place like this, is nobody comes here by accident. We’re not a stop on the way anywhere else. For people to come here, it has to be pretty deliberate. A choice.”

“So you’re saying it *was* meant.”

Barry smiled. “Only you can tell that. I’m just observing that at a crisis point in your life, you were drawn here. In the middle of winter. When you’re thinking about the most basic components of your life, where you want to live, what you want to do, who you want to be.” He shrugged. “Maybe we can help.”

“How do you know I want to change anything?”

“Don’t you?”

I took a deep, somewhat shaky breath. Did I? Not really. Really, what I wanted was to go on living in my beautiful house in North Cambridge with my funny, kind, loving husband, and to carry on with my usually fulfilling job. That was what I wanted. *Sorry, wrong answer, thank you for playing.*

It was what I wanted, and it was what I’d lost. So what was behind Door Number Two?

“I don’t know what I want,” I said. “I didn’t think I’d be making—decisions—like this. Not now.” Not ever, actually.

He nodded. “If you haven’t been to the Cape before, then you don’t know about Race Point. That’s what I named the inn after. You might want to drive out and see it tomorrow. There’s a lighthouse you can see from a distance, and a beach. It’s called Race Point because of there’s a race there—a race is where a bay encounters the sea. It usually gets a little choppy there. Like life.”

I looked at him sharply, but he had his eyes on the fire. “It gets a little crazy here in the summertime,” he said. “You’re right to come out now, to see it when it really does feel like the fishing village it used to be. This time of year, you can go to the grocery store and recognize most people there by sight. But summers are crazy. The town fills up. The party never ends.” He smiled. “You should look around while you’re here. It’s not a bad place if you need a hug. Hypothetically speaking, of course.”

“Of course.” I took a sip of brandy. “Hypothetically speaking, what do people here do for a living?”

“Work for me?” He laughed. “Work in the hospitality industry, mostly. It might look quiet to you now, but Commercial Street in the summer? There’s a restaurant or a coffee shop or a handcraft store every few feet. I’d say at least eighty percent of the town makes its living off the tourist trade, one way or another, and the other twenty percent are municipal workers or real estate agents, who wouldn’t be here except for the eighty percent. And the artists are part of the eighty, too, because they might do art to soothe their souls, but they sell to the tourists.”

“So that’s the summer. What about now?”

“Now, Sydney, we only have about eight or ten hotels or B&Bs open, maybe six restaurants, a couple of shops. Some people go on unemployment. Some people go to Florida or California and do what they do here, only there.”

“You’re always open?”

He nodded. “We’re lucky,” he said. “We have a Michelin-rated restaurant. People come and stay here just for that. It’s easier to get a table in the winter.”

“I can imagine.” I followed his gaze, watched the flames for a moment. I cleared my throat. “I teach,” I said. “I’m an instructor at UMass, Boston. I teach film studies.”

He nodded, unperturbed.

I tried again. “Even if I wanted to move here, I don’t know how I could fit in. And I couldn’t commute.”

“Teachers,” said Barry, “are good at planning, aren’t they? At organization?”

“I suppose so,” I said. I didn’t see where that was going.

“I need someone who’s good at planning,” said Barry. “We’ve extended our events and wedding offerings, and Mike—he’s my manager—can’t organize it all and run the inn at the same time.”

“What are you saying?” I asked. “You’re offering me a *job*? As a *wedding planner*?”

“And you can stay here while you look for an apartment,” said Barry. “It’s a good time of year; we have extra rooms.”

I stared at him. Just like that. You follow whatever will’o’the wisp leads you somewhere and you find a place where people have come to heal for decades and you’re offered a new life. One night you’re raging in despair and the next day something opens up in front of you.

Something scary. Leaving everything—everything—behind. “I’ll go out and look at Race Point tomorrow,” I said, but my voice wasn’t as shaky as before.

Barry nodded. “You do that,” he said.

I was talking to my mother on the telephone, an activity I tried to avoid most of the time but sometimes found inevitable. “I don’t understand why Noah won’t give you a second chance,” she was saying.

“To do what? Appeal to him? No, thanks,” I said.

“You know what I mean,” she said. “Don’t take a tone with me, Sydney. You know I don’t like it when you take a tone.”

"I'm not taking a tone, Ma," I said. "I'm telling you about my life. I thought you'd be interested."

She didn't rise to the bait. "And what is this place, anyway?" she demanded. "Provincetown?"

"Provincetown," I corrected. "It's on Cape Cod. There are beaches. You can come visit." *Please don't come visit.*

"I don't understand why you can't stay where you were," she said. "At least until the lease runs out. It's as much your house as his."

"It isn't, Ma. He's giving me my half of the deposit back."

"And I don't understand why you have to give up your job," she went on. "I like telling people my daughter's a professor."

"I wasn't a professor, Ma. No one gets tenure anymore."

"It's still what I told people," she said stubbornly. "I don't understand—"

I cut her off. Sometimes it's the only way. "It's all decided, Ma. My furniture's in storage. My car is packed." Not *our* car; Noah had paid me half the cost of the Beemer, too. I'd bought a small green Honda. I probably should name it.

In the meantime, though, I liked saying, "my car." My furniture; my car, my apartment. "Oh, and one more thing," I said.

"What?" She sounded like she was anticipating Armageddon.

"I have a cat," I said, poking my finger in through the mesh of the pet-carrier. "I have to change his name, though. His name is Doctor. I really can't live with that."

She had a suggestion. "Pookie," she said. "I used to have a cat named Pookie, back before you were born."

I'd been an afterthought in my parents' life, born eight years after my sister. I wondered how Pookie fit into the family dynamics. It was also the most revolting name I could imagine.

I studied the cat, sitting placidly on the front seat of the little green Honda, a pile of last-minute books and papers behind and under it. Sticking out was a paperback copy of *A Doll's House*. "Ibsen," I said, suddenly inspired. "I'm going to name him Ibsen."

And then I disconnected the call, started the engine, and set out on my new life.

The End