

Cerrídwen Press

BLIND JUSTICE



KELSY GEORGE

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Blind Justice

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Kelsy George

Dedication

To my mother and father

Without them believing in me every step of my life, I would never have tried a lot of things I've enjoyed over the years, including and especially, my writing.

For my husband

...who, for three and a half long years, put up with the highs and lows of living with a writer, listening to the rants and raves, rewriting paragraphs when they didn't sound right, and lived the "in sickness and in health" part of our marriage vows. Without him, there would be no book. Without him, there would have been no plot. (He and I sat on a frozen, sandy beach in mid-March, 2003, with snow banks still melting around us and played "what if" with an idea I had. Out of that afternoon came the plot for *Blind Justice*.) Without him, I probably wouldn't have had the patience to make it this far. Without him, I might not have continued to the next one. I owe him my thanks for a lot of things.

...and

To the rest of the gang who helped me through three years of making this the story it is—Pat Whitfield, Barb Nielsen, Solveig McLaren and the Golden Heart judges who thought this story deserved to final—twice.

There is no way a writer can know everything about everything so we rely on experts to fill in the blanks. Thanks to Wally Lind and his Crimewriters loop for answering my questions and giving me the straight goods when I needed it.

And my eternal gratitude to the doctors and nurses on the Cardiac Care Unit of the Sturgeon General Hospital, St. Albert, Alberta and the rehabilitation crew at the Glenrose for seeing me through the summer of 2004. Thanks all!

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Western Channel: Christopher Hill

Etta Mae

"Let us bow our heads and pray together," he intoned in a soft, somber voice. She'd looked at him with adoration, his presence warm, comforting. She took the hand he extended across the small table, his touch surreal, her pulse accelerating, flattered by the attention he gave her. She was his "chosen one of the flock".

Before Etta Mae Carvone joined his little congregation, she'd never imagined the joy of being saved. Sometimes frightened by the fiery sermons, she was always drawn back by the authoritative yet reassuring voice. She was a moth to his flame.

He'd asked her out, told her he wanted to make her part of his life. He was a man of the cloth, a minister of God, but he'd been a man, first and foremost, with her. He'd told her to forget he was a preacher. Instead, she should look at him as the man she could take home to her mother. The man who would bring happiness to her world.

This date tonight was the first he'd taken her on. It was supposed to have been supper in a new restaurant around the corner from his house, then he'd apologized and told her he had to do a little work on his sermon and would make supper for her in his home. She'd been tentative. She was nervous. But she knew there was nothing to worry about.

He was a man of the cloth after all, a man she could trust, a man she could love. How could she possibly be scared or nervous? If she couldn't trust Peter, didn't know she was safe with him, who could she be sure of? She had found the perfect man and when she took him home to meet her mama, then her mama would understand.

He continued his offering of grace. His voice rose, wailed, "It is the time of decision, who and when to punish."

She couldn't restrain a sudden chill down her spine. He'd withdrawn his hand a few moments before. While her eyes had been closed, her head bent, he'd eased himself to a position at her side. She glanced upward, staring, eyes immense with fear, to see his face now livid with unrestrained fury.

"No, Peter, no..."

He yanked cruelly at her hair. His other hand covered her mouth. She jerked her hand up but he caught her wrist. She wrenched away. Her elbow caught him in the cheek. A fist slammed into the side of her head and she crashed to the floor. Pain flared through her as he turned her over, kneeling to jam his knee into her back. He pulled her arms behind her, wrapped heavy tape around her wrists.

He hit her again, all the while raging, "You were born of evil seed, the Devil's spawn. Now, I shall take you to him."

Chapter One

I thought a lot about Dylan Jones and me, sprawled on a bed draped in pastel-colored satin sheets, making love all night, waking to seduce again as the sun rose. His arms held me all night long. His hands, with sensitive artist's fingers, strummed me like I was some finely tuned instrument, evoking all manner of incredible harmony.

He plucked, I sang.

He stroked, I hummed.

Everything was music. To the strains of the "Triumphal March" from Verdi's *Aida* we soared to new heights. We drove each other hard to completion to the sounds of Ravel's "Bolero", the warm afterglow accompanied by Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata".

That was my fantasy.

Today, it's the real world. His and mine. Discord and despair. Off-key, no harmony.

Energy and vibrations seeped from the walls through the tips of my fingers, telling me I couldn't stay here, not if I wanted to keep my sanity and breakfast.

I'd found pain beyond measure. Sorrow so deep I wanted to weep. Echoes of cruelty I could not bear.

Turning to the blur of blue uniform standing behind me—my face must have told him I had to leave—I was beyond speaking. He took my arm, led me to the door, held it open and lifted the yellow "crime scene, do not cross" tape. I ducked under, almost stumbled onto the porch, heard floorboards creak.

"I think they'll hold," he assured me, still supporting my shaking, spent body. "Are you all right, Miss Benedict?" He asked the question softly, at the same time offering his jacket, which I gratefully accepted. He placed it around my shoulders.

I gasped, took deep breaths, dragged oxygen to my starving brain in hope of fending off faintness. Tasted bile as my stomach rebelled to the twisting, burning grip of fear. Nodding, still unable to speak, I managed only to mouth "thank you" in his general direction.

"You're welcome, anytime," acknowledged my police companion. He was one of the many men, similarly sized, shaped and dressed—from my limited perspective—who protected while he served. This morning it was his duty to drive and stay with me while I *read* what I could from the paper-peeling, paint-flaking walls within the neglected interior of the run-down building. Amidst the rot and ruin, these crumbling partitions were the silent witnesses to the macabre events consummated in this nasty little box of a house.

I wanted them to speak to me. Cry out if they could, shriek vengeance if they must.

I sat on the top step, tucked my knees under my chin and pulled my guardian's bulky jacket around me like a cocoon. There's a thought! I'd emerge, blithely flit away, settle on something flowery and cheerful.

My fingers rubbed gentle circles on the smoothness of the fabric, tracing the front edge, stopping at each buttonhole, the jacket becoming my substitute security blanket. The sun's warmth soothed my face. The air, clear and still, was a welcome relief, and I wished I were anyplace but here. I'd like to be at the ocean, curling my toes in wet sand as the waves washed up on the beach, listening to the terns screech as they dove for fish in the shallows.

I kneaded my temple, ran a hand through short, unruly hair and scrubbed away the sharp odor of Mentholatum from my upper lip. If I were able to look in a mirror, I wouldn't be shocked to find a cadaverous sight looking back—hair unkempt, no makeup, haunted eyes and pallid complexion.

Doors opened, thudded shut. Fuzzy profiles stood for some time at the end of the sidewalk, I presumed beside a car. They talked quietly at first, became louder over some disagreement.

I sniffed something pleasant. My officer stood behind and above me. He'd unwrapped a stick of spearmint gum, bent over and offered me a piece. I took it, popped it in, hoped the flavor would last more than a minute and a half, at least until I got to go home.

"How's he dressed this morning?" I pointed at the figures.

I knew Dylan to be an ultraconservative dresser. Occasionally he might add a dash of the daring—a pale yellow diagonal striped tie instead of maroon, a gray pinstripe in place of plain blue serge double-breasted. It was a departmental joke among the ranks that it was a no-nonsense, kick-ass day when "He's got his school tie on". The forest green neckpiece bore a crest ringed with the Welsh words for honesty, decency and justice.

"He's got it on. Here comes the man," warned my policeman, backing off and assuming his position to my right. His guardian assignment would soon be over.

Three distinct shapes took form, Dylan leading the way as he strode up the walk. Even I couldn't mistake the Welshman. A ramrod six foot five, he towered over most men in a crowd. His head was a dark, wedged outline because, as I knew from long acquaintance with him, the dark hair was cut short behind. A silver streak flared back from a scar at his hairline, a relic of a long-ago knife fight, and hung down over one side of an unlined forehead, above deep lavender eyes in a naturally tanned face.

Before he opened his mouth, I looked forward to his slight accent. A melodic, almost singsong pleasure of sound fought a losing battle with a west coast drawl.

Dylan Jones hadn't got where he was on his looks, best described as rugged or attractive. He made Lieutenant, Homicide Division, on the strength of his well-deserved reputation, renowned among the ranks as a damn good, street-smart cop.

Looking toward the bulky shadows, I inclined my head, just enough to answer his unspoken question. Recently I'd discovered I could converse with Dylan through some kind of thought transference, didn't know if it was some low-level telepathy or a desire to "see" things not always there.

I called myself an "onlooker" — seeing, as well as feeling, things that happened to others. I'd begun to accept I could see what happened as I read an object or a room. I was still trying to get a handle on this new gift so I could use the talent to help others. Now I found myself able to converse silently with the Welshman, something I didn't seem able to do with anyone else.

I sensed he was watching me, silently asking my opinion. Silently I gave him his answer. Yes, Dylan, there had indeed been murder. Yes, there had been abuse, the cruelty going on for many days. No, the man responsible had killed in that hellhole of a house, but he wasn't living there.

The perversions started with humiliating expletives and physical taunts while the victim was restrained. Soon she was forced to beg for mercy while enduring molestation of her most private and sensitive parts. The acts escalated when the killer found release in the "purification" beatings that left broken heads and limbs.

Eventually he reached a point he believed to be "restoration". He referred to it as "time to wrap it up", before dispatching the unconscious, battered woman.

He relished preparing and serving their last supper.

The abuse was his appetizer and main course.

For dessert, he took life.

It always surprised me when I thought of a suspect this harshly, but he may have murdered at least eight women, used their own trusting natures to snare them. Taken each one to his home, shown the unsuspecting a good time for a day or two, and held the poor creature captive.

Once he held the women prisoner, his true colors merged into one — black, the color of evil.

The pain I felt at the primary crime scene was both physical and mental. The victim's sorrow finally overwhelmed her when she realized she'd entered into a death chamber of her own free will.

The cruelty came from the suspect, the predator who lured these women to his home with promises of a pleasant evening — an evening that turned into a horrendous span of days.

Death occurred in a front room on the main floor. Any neighbor with half an ear should have heard the screams and cries of the victims and used the brains God gave them to report the strange happenings. Only the discovery of body parts in the alley behind the house tipped anyone to what had gone on. The suspect must have decided that keeping two bodies in his freezer at the same time made it too crowded. Not enough room for the next poor soul.

Dylan told me later that a city employee dumped an extremely heavy can into his trash compacter. Stunned to see a human arm, the garbage collector heaved his lunch into the grass beside the fence. Recovered, he'd dialed 911. His truck was taken into evidentiary custody. He took the rest of the week off.

By the time Dylan asked me to *read* the house, forensic experts had completed preliminary examination of the murder scene and given permission for limited access. Earlier, my uniformed escort and I began on the upper level. He told me we were instructed to follow a narrow path marked with tape on the floor, from the entrance door to another room facing the street. It was bright inside, illuminated by halogen lights erected by the investigators.

The squalid main and upper floors were littered with broken furniture, fallen plaster, piles of plastic bags and animal excrement.

I'd gagged, the putrid smell enough to repel the curious. Only vermin would consider it home. My policeman said even a surgical mask wouldn't help and placed a small jar near my hand, instructing me to take a dab of the mentholated ointment and wipe it beneath my nostrils. It would keep me from smelling the rot for at least a few minutes.

When we shuffled to where the final moments of each woman had been spent, he told me the investigators were surprised the killing room was so conspicuously clean and sparse in its furnishings. When he mentioned that, my mind immediately pictured an abattoir, dead animals hanging from suspended hooks. There was a small dining table, two wooden chairs, a mattress and two prominent fixtures. A high-backed easy chair sat in the center and a large freezer took up a short wall by the window.

I shivered, thinking about the freezer.

The suspect was the seemingly salt-of-the-earth, caring preacher Reverend Peter Thaddeus from the charismatic congregation around the corner. A man of the cloth. A supposedly religious man who should be helping to heal pain, stop cruelty and put an end to sorrow. Instead, he gratified himself with an extravagance of evil.

Somehow, one of the local newspapers got hold of the suspect's name and, trying for fourth estate sensationalism, had christened him the Preacher. The name stuck and even the Rocklynne Police Department personnel working the case referred to him that way.

As for me, the police wanted to be entirely sure they arrested the right man when they took him into custody. Dylan Jones asked, I complied. My *reading* confirmed everything they knew.

Many in the department considered me "that psychic broad". At least I'd heard myself called that by one of the detectives at the precinct house where I'd waited earlier today. He wasn't aware my hearing was acute enough to hear his muttered, disparaging comment. "That psychic broad" was thirty-one, a university graduate in the studies of art and, later, paranormal activities.

I considered myself a gifted psychic.

I'm also legally blind.

I'd always possessed some psychic ability—enough to convince me to study paranormal activities at the university. Nearly four years earlier, my professor, Kenneth Newman, introduced me to Dylan Jones. It was before I lost my sight. He thought I might be able to help the police department. My disability strengthened my gift and after proving myself to them, I became an often-used resource to the authorities, thanks mainly to Dylan.

As an art teacher, my life became so unbearable I finally quit in frustration.

As a woman, I was learning to live with my handicap. My only concession to my nearly nonexistent sight, the pair of super-strength magnifying glasses I sometimes wore. I imagined how ghastly they must have looked, like a pair of high-powered binoculars sticking out beyond my nose.

I wouldn't use the white cane of the blind, too unsure to turn myself loose on an unsuspecting city. I always feared the consequences of stepping off a curb into the path of something bigger than me. Dylan suggested I apply for a service dog.

I took off the hated, thick lenses, stuck them quickly in my pocket and replaced them with ordinary sunglasses as the posse approached. In that house there'd been so many traps for the unwary or the unsighted they'd been a necessity. I hadn't seen much else, besides dark shapes against a darker background. Not a house for someone who loved life, color and light.

"Hello, Norrie."

The lilt of Dylan's voice made me tingle, his voice more powerful an instrument than anything playing music in any symphony orchestra. The timbre of his baritone literally flowed through the listener—at least if the listener was Norrie Benedict.

He stopped in front of me, stood on the sidewalk, face level with me.

"Hey, Dylan. How goes the battle?" It was my customary greeting, after I once heard him refer to his job as doing battle with crime.

"It goes, it goes," he replied with a resigned sigh and I sensed something was wrong. "Norrie, who the hell dressed you this morning?" he asked flippantly. The sharp intake of breath some distance behind him made me wonder which of the other two men thought Dylan overstepped his bounds with that jibe.

"I did. What did I do this time?" Whenever I showed up in some bizarre color scheme, we went through this routine. Since I lived alone, the bizarre had become the norm.

"Where to start!" he answered me, low enough the others probably couldn't hear. "First, you're wearing red shoes with bright green pants. You've gone and put a dark purple blouse thing on top." Yes, that sounded pretty awful. He stood in front of me, probably to block the view of the two men. I felt his fingers on the buttons of the "purple blouse thing", knew once again I'd also buttoned the thing up crookedly.

"How many holes was I off this time?" I asked. Lately it was two on those occasions I got it wrong. Usually I got it wrong whenever I was upset about a *reading*. I had to learn to be more careful.

"Just one, for a change." He folded the collar back, drew his finger along my jawline. Was it intentional or an accident, I wondered, stifling the urge to lean into his hand and find out. I didn't know who was watching.

"I fired the useless girl who was supposed to help me. Turns out when color-coding my closet, she decided playing a trick on the poor old blind lady would be fun. I think I went out three times in a row dressed like this, or worse. I thought I'd managed to straighten out the mess. Guess not."

"Well, get somebody to help you."

"Yes, boss." I tried to stay in his offhand mood. In the back of my mind a little voice cursed my long-gone aide for having made a fool of me. Again. I did it often enough to myself, I didn't need help. Dylan Jones telling me I looked a mess did nothing for my self-confidence. Until a horrific automobile accident, I never lacked confidence. Now I relied on others when what I really wanted was to be independent. I had no choice but to let someone "do" for me.

All I could see now were degrees of light. Sadly, the specialists, who knew everything about anything, found no cause for my loss. Only one called it "hysterical blindness", a result of overwhelming guilt that I had lived and my parents had not.

I could no longer thrill at drives along the coast, watch the majesty of breakers crashing, feel the spray and taste the salt. I could only hear the sea when I could get there at all.

A simple phone call once filled my car with friends who liked art galleries, museums, live music and dancing. Now, I had to find someone with a car and when I was free, they weren't. I could tell from their voices on the phone they were resentful, and more often than not these days, conveniently unavailable.

The life I'd enjoyed had been fun, exciting and full. Now, it was dull, empty and lonely.

I lost more than my sight in that accident three years ago. I lost my parents, my fiancé and, for a while, I lost my will to live.

Chapter Two

Enough!

That was all the self-pity I could afford to wallow in for one day. Time to get back to the business at hand.

"It was bad in there, Dylan, real bad. Incredible physical pain as well as their mental anguish. I suspect there were more than three murders."

"How many?" he asked softly, quietly, the lilt more pronounced.

I didn't want to answer. "Come on, Dylan, ask me these questions tomorrow, I just want to go home." I spoke loudly enough his associates could hear, in case they had something else to add.

"Just a few answers, then we'll go," he insisted.

I hesitated, tried to decide if I could stay. The warmth from the sun disappeared. A cloud, a shadow? I opted to get on with it. Nothing would be gained by waiting a day.

I sorted out in my head exactly what I'd heard and sensed. "I'm guessing here, but I'd say eight, maybe nine. Eight for sure. But there's something else here as well and it's old, very old."

"What do you mean?"

"There's a lot of rage. I'm not sure where it's coming from, but it's not your suspect. In fact, it may have been directed *at* him."

"You mean somebody abused *him*? How long ago, do you think?"

"I don't know. The more recent things that happened here are coming through to me much stronger than the rage is. It might not even be aimed at the killer, it's just not coming from him."

"All right, come on, I have somebody here you need to meet." Dylan helped me to my feet and I guessed he was about to guide me down the stairs when my guardian called from behind me.

"Miss Benedict, my jacket?" I'd forgotten I was wearing it. Dylan lifted it from my shoulders and a few seconds later hung his own around me. There was comfort to be found in the warmth and scent. On more than one occasion he'd rescued me from myself, now I owed him.

With his arm under my hand, Dylan guided me toward the shadowy figures of the two men who'd been in the car with him. He knew how to lead, getting me where he wanted me.

I just wished he'd lead me down a garden path, take me to a bower where we would make love surrounded by the bouquet of hundreds of flowers atop a bed covered in rose petals.

"Norrie, this is Senior Detective Sergeant Brandon Hawke, to your left, and his partner, Detective Sergeant Martin Jamison."

I jerked back to reality, wondering how my mind managed to forget the terrible minutes I'd spent in the house. And one of these days I'd have to get Dylan to explain about the ranks. Did being "senior detective sergeant" mean Brandon Hawke outranked Detective Jamison?

Dylan kept his hand on top of mine so I couldn't turn and lose track of the group. He knew without my glasses I wouldn't know where the men were standing.

"Detectives, this is Eleanor Benedict. She works for our department whenever her specialty is required. Norrie, these two have a case with a similar M.O. as ours and hope theirs might be related." I listened carefully to Dylan's voice, tried but failed to hear anything other than what he'd told me. On several occasions, I'd had premonitions I questioned him about later and in every instance, I'd been right—I'd heard what he hadn't said out loud, or I'd read his mind. I was never sure which. He was the only person whose mind worked like that with me.

This morning Dylan reported nothing out of the ordinary, just the facts.

"Gentlemen, how can I help you?" I tried for a dignified tone, knowing my mismatched colors probably made me look like a circus clown. If my face were flushed from thinking wildly erotic thoughts of Dylan ravishing me in a bower, dignified was something I'd have trouble achieving.

"I doubt if you can, ma'am," said one of the detectives. "Our precinct captain decided we needed to make sure there wasn't a connection." His manner was cold, heavy with sarcasm. I'm sure he was one of those who thought all psychics should be confined to 1-900 commercials and investigated by the bunko squad. I realized he'd stopped talking and turned my head in his direction, but it seemed he wasn't finished. "We have body parts cut up the same way as the bodies in Dylan's case, and that's all we have. No house to check out, no garbage cans in an alley. Our body parts were found at the garbage collection dumpsite. No hands, just legs, arms and two torsos. They were in pretty bad shape by the time we got them and they don't tell us much forensically. Running the DNA through the federal database will take weeks."

Detective Hawke had to be watching my face, waiting for me to look squeamish. It was the only reason I could think of for his detailed description and the emphasis he put on it.

"When did you find them?" My stomach knotted when he mentioned two torsos. There was something there, I just didn't know what.

"Two weeks ago. From the decomposition, they think death occurred at least a month ago. There's some evidence to suggest the bodies may have been frozen and that's skewing the ME's timeline."

A pain formed behind my eyes. I wanted to go back into the house and *read* one more room. The answer to their case might be there, but I didn't know if I could physically or mentally endure the repercussions. I turned to Dylan, whispered to him, hoping the other two couldn't hear me.

"I think I can help, but I have to go back in there. I can't go by myself, not after last time." I paused, tried to convince myself I could walk away. "I just want to go home, Dylan. Why'd you have to bring them today?" I was torn between wanting to help the victims of this murderous madman and wanting to take myself home to my bed where I could recuperate.

"If I go with you, stay right with you..." His concern came through even in his whisper. Dylan knew better than most what a *reading* took out of me.

I nodded, unable to speak.

Tension mounted. My mind shut out the world around me, funneled into the feelings alive in the house. I waited while he talked to the two detectives, didn't hear what he said. I heard a snort of disbelief and tried to ignore it.

"Let's go, Dylan, I need to get this over with."

The nightmare came alive in my head the moment I entered the house.

"Take me to the upstairs sitting room," I told him quietly. "That's where I started this morning, worked my way to the main floor. There was something..." I tried hard to remember but it wasn't coming. "Something to do with the big chair. It might be enough to help them get going. And it might explain the Preacher's need for that freezer."

"You're sure about this, Norrie? You've already done everything we asked." He stopped at the foot of the stairs and waited for me to find the front of the first step with my foot. One step up and the rest were simply a repeated pattern. We slowed a little and he told me, "Last one."

"If I can help put this killer behind bars, Dylan, I have to do it."

Dylan described the room as we stepped from the top step, through an archway, straight into an open area he told me had seen better days. The stench from the scattered refuse, moldering carpet and damp insulation was overpowering. Only God knew what lived in the walls, but the scrabbling, scratching noises told me mice, at least, maybe rats, had taken over.

Pain and sorrow once more assaulted me as I passed through the door. A whimper escaped, unconsciously, and I wished it back immediately.

"Norrie..."

"It's all right."

"If you want out, just say so. You don't have to do this."

"Yes, I do. I really do." I brushed his hand off my arm. "Let go of me. I'm all right."

The scent of death hung heavily in the air. It was quiet except for the ping of a hot water pipe, probably along the outer baseboard. I moved further into the room, heard the two detectives coming up the creaking stairs and waited. Once they joined us, Dylan used his quiet voice to guide me around the table and across to the big chair. The plastic covering left by the forensic team was still in place. My fingers felt dirty from a light trace of dust covering the top and I wiped my hand on my pant leg.

I touched the chair's high back, fingers tightening convulsively as the waves of anguish came unbidden to me. There was pain and incredible sadness, and somewhere in my head I heard a far-off voice, filled with sobs, pleading from deep within some tunnel.

"You shoulda known better, Etta Mae, you shoulda known. Oh, my Lord, why didn't I listen to my mama? Now, she'll never know what happened to me. Nobody will know where I've gone."

I didn't know I cried until I tasted the saltiness of tears on my lips, but I couldn't stop them. They weren't my tears. They belonged to Etta Mae. Or maybe they were *for* her.

If I got that much from the back of the chair just by touching it with my hands, how much could I see if I sat in it? I had to find out. My hands followed its contours as I circled to the other side.

"Norrie," Dylan whispered as soon as I moved, "are you sure?" He knew what I planned to do before I even made up my mind to try.

I nodded, afraid to utter a response. I didn't want to break the stream of horrific emotions and thoughts flowing from Etta Mae. I gingerly let my body slump and leaned against the high winged back. I couldn't see or feel the fabric through the protective layer, but I thought the chair might be covered in velvet or something similarly plushy. And because I could see nothing of its shape in the room, I deduced it was a dark color. I knew it really didn't matter.

As I lay my head against the back, a rush of agony made me cry out. I sensed Dylan edge closer, hoped he wouldn't stop me. If he did, someone's daughter would go anonymously into a common grave, paid for by the city.

Somewhere a mother would mourn.

Feelings poured through me, my heart pounded, reliving Etta Mae's suffering.

I screamed. It wasn't me. It was Etta Mae.

Footsteps moved toward me and I screamed again, cowering in the corner of the chair as if the physical assault was happening to me.

"No! No! Please don't—please..."

Other hands took mine. I cringed further into the corner.

"Norrie! Norrie, snap out of it!" I tried to stand, my knees weak, my mind in a daze and, feeling strong hands on my arms, recoiled violently. Fainting was too genteel a

word to describe what happened. One minute I was terrified, the next the fear grew too intense to withstand.

I escaped. I passed out.

Chapter Three

When I regained consciousness I heard low, distinct, unfamiliar voices.

Where was I? Who were they?

They whispered and I couldn't understand why. Through the haze of pain in my head I knew I lay on a wooden surface, likely a floor, yet couldn't recall how I got there. I recognized Dylan's voice and the pain and sorrow rushed back.

"Oh, God, Dylan, get me out of here," I begged. "Please, I can't stay." I tried to sit up but a hand on my shoulder restrained me. "I can't stay and try to identify their second body. They'll have to wait for another *reading* or figure it out for themselves."

Instant action was always Dylan's way and this time was no exception. He scooped me off the floor and carried me outside.

Others followed us and I remembered Hawke and Jamison.

My head was buried in Dylan's shoulder. I desperately held back tears. A door opened and he settled me into a car seat.

"Okay, Jones, so what was that all about?" The voice behind Dylan sounded annoyed.

Before he had time to answer I turned in the general direction of the disbelieving tone. "Is one of your torsos black and severely sexually mutilated?" I asked him.

For a moment no one spoke.

"Her name is Etta Mae," I continued. "I'm sorry I can't tell you her last name." I swallowed hard, the words difficult to utter. "He used a serrated knife to saw off both nipples." Should I tell them the worst of it? "Her injuries were not postmortem."

Again, complete silence. I wished someone would say something. I was finished.

Paper rustled, a pen slapped roughly against my palm. "Draw me the mutilation you're talking about, Ms. Benedict," Hawke demanded.

"No, Detective Hawke, I can't draw you anything." I wondered if he'd notice I said "can't" not "won't". I held out the paper he'd given me. Someone took it.

"I'm supposed to believe this isn't somebody you primed for us, Jones? I'd be more inclined to believe her if she drew me a diagram."

Before Dylan could respond, I played my trump card.

"Etta Mae's navel has a diamond stud."

Again, silence.

"All right, Ms. Benedict. If you can tell me all that, you should be able to help us put together a composite drawing of both the vic and the killer."

"No," I insisted, with an exasperated sigh, and looked away, hoping to look worn out. I didn't need to fake it, being at low ebb, wanting to go home. I craved a half dozen extra strength acetaminophen for the monster headache exploding behind my eyes and wanted nothing more than to go to bed. Instead, I eavesdropped on the conversation going on a few feet from the car.

"Sorry, Jones, but if Lady Psychic won't help us with the photo bit, what earthly use is she to us? She's being way too coy for my liking."

I was stunned by Detective Hawke's cold words, but faced him with icy defiance, imagining his mouth curled in a contemptible smile, probably a perma-scowl to go along with the grumpy old-cop attitude.

I disliked Detective Hawke more and more and started to turn when Dylan suddenly growled. I recognized the sound. He was about to lose his temper.

"You asswipe, she's given you more this morning than you've found out in a month. And you don't think she's been helpful? Now you want her to draw pictures." Dylan took a deep breath, phrased his words more concisely. "I'm sure Ms. Benedict would like to be able to help you, you bleeding bonehead, but she's blind."

There were a few seconds of strained silence. I didn't hear Hawke's reply, too low a mutter even for my highly attuned ears. There was a smack, then a thud, and a gasp. I assumed it was Detective Jamison. Hawke wouldn't react after the disbelief he'd shown. He couldn't. Not if he wanted to save face.

"I'm sorry, Detective Hawke just tripped," stammered Jamison. "At least I think that's what happened. I didn't see it. No matter, he had no right to carry on like that. You've been very helpful, didn't know you couldn't see. Thought the dark glasses were a fashion thing but it doesn't excuse Detective Hawke. As soon as he picks himself up off the lawn, I'm sure he'll apologize."

Detective Hawke was on the lawn? Interesting.

"It's all right, Norrie. Nothing's happening." Dylan's voice sounded a little strained. "Just a misstep from a clumsy detective, wouldn't you concur Jamison?"

"I really didn't see anything," he repeated.

I'm sure Dylan decked the man.

In my fantasy world the words "my hero" whispered themselves in his ear, my lips touched his perfectly formed earlobes and my tongue gently traced the edge.

I wanted to thank Dylan for his belief in me but knew better than to open my mouth.

"Ms. Benedict, could I ask you a couple of questions, please?" He spoke to me through the open car door. Martin Jamison smelled like summer sweat and coffee. Machine instant, powdered cream. "About what you told us."

I jumped, imagined I'd given away my sexual fantasy.

"Yes, certainly. I'll try to answer them as best I can, but I can only tell you what I felt in there. That's all I can ever do."

"Well, for starters, you were right about the body, cut up big-time. We have the torso and one arm, but no hands, of a black woman. The mutilation and the diamond stud are as you describe. Is there anything else you can tell me about her?"

There was the snap opening of a soda can. Root beer. Did he carry them in his pocket? Then the rasp of a match and an acrid, smoky vapor drifted by me. Jamison must have lit a cigarette. I'd become mortally afraid of handling fire, didn't have the courage to strike a match.

I drew a sighing breath. "Your victims were killed in this house, Detective. In the chair where I sat, in that room. That's why I felt it so strongly. I'm sorry I couldn't get you anything more, especially on your other victim, but I couldn't stay. When I got the sense of what happened it overwhelmed me. I feel things strongest if I touch something they've touched, sit in the same chair they used. Drink from the same glass. And from the strength of my perceptions in that house, I'd say Etta Mae spent a lot of time in the chair before she died. You might want to test it for bloodstains." The chair had been covered with a sheet of plastic when I'd sat in it. Obviously forensics wasn't finished with it.

"We have, Norrie." Dylan now stood beside Jamison. I had no idea where Hawke was and didn't much care.

"There is one more thing about Etta Mae. She has a mother somewhere. I could hear the victim talking to herself, admitting her 'mama' was right. About this situation, I guess. Maybe about meeting this man alone? I can't say. And she used the expression 'Oh, my Lord' almost as if she were praying. Might be a tie-in to the Preacher's church."

My comments got somebody's attention. I heard a cell phone beep, keys being punched and listened to find out which man spoke. From somewhere nearby a lawn mower fired and the fresh green scent of newly mown grass wafted our way. Detective Hawke's deep voice interrupted my musings. If he didn't let up on the volume, everybody for three houses in any direction would know why we were here.

"Hawke here, Captain. Get someone looking for a link between a woman named Etta Mae, last name unknown, and the charismatic preacher whose church was shut down last year. I think Jamison worked that case while I was away. I don't know who worked it with him, maybe someone from major case squad. Women laid assault charges against the pastor who disappeared. Was there a follow-up investigation, what happened to him. I seem to recall a name—maybe Peter? Let's hope it's Peter Thaddeus. And see if you can get the vic's last name from the membership rolls. If I'm right, we may have found our connection to Jones' cases." Silence for a moment, then Hawke disconnected.

"I'm so glad I could help you, Detective." I hoped he heard my sarcasm. "Next time, don't be so doubtful."

I reached out, prayed no one stood between me and the door handle, and pulled the car door shut. I'd had enough, and knew I edged nearer collapse, one of the adverse side effects of this work. The drain on my body would last for days. I'd gone into this

house twice today. There had been one or two occasions when I helped the local police department and ended up hospitalized.

I sat in silence and listened to three doors open then close. No one said anything. Dylan was behind the wheel, I could smell his soothing aftershave beside me, a hint of lime, I thought, although it also made me think of the sea. Hawke and Jamison were in the backseat, stale sweat and the quickened breathing of barely restrained hostility from the left side, a musky aftershave and an eerie emptiness from behind me where Jamison sat. I hoped they'd stay quiet until we got wherever they were going.

Dylan sensed how upset I was with Detective Hawke. He held my hand, his fingers laced tightly with mine, all the way to the precinct house, where we jettisoned the two shadows in the back. Neither said a word upon leaving. I didn't care if I saw either one of them again.

If I'd been able to see Dylan's face, I imagined his anger at these detectives might have scared me. Dylan in a rage used to be a volatile wonder to behold, but I refused to be frightened by something I couldn't see.

Ignorance, in this case, was definitely bliss.

Chapter Four

I understand my little house is some kind of joke, a mutation on various styles of architecture. According to the few people who visited or drove me, it was described as a little Victorian, a bit avant-garde and a whole lot indescribable. The previous owner must have been a mad painter who didn't believe in subtlety, preferring stark, garish colors. On days when I could tolerate them, my glasses allowed me to see large areas of bright light, in different hues. Maybe I'd been thankfully spared from fire engine red, sunburst orange, canary yellow and something described as not-so-hot pink.

"God, Norrie, when are you going to get this place painted? That color scheme is almost as hideous as the outfit you're wearing this morning."

I suddenly wanted to cry, to tell him if it bothered me, I'd have had it painted.

I'd made it through a morning of heart- and gut-wrenching emotions without shedding a tear of my own, but this man's insensitivity and insults would take me down. "Is there anything you *do* like about the color of my house, or my clothes? How about me? Too short? Too fat? Anything else you'd like to complain about and get off your chest?"

I turned to the side window, hurt and annoyed, not wanting him to see my face.

"Lord, I'm sorry, Norrie. I didn't mean it that way. You know that." I felt his hand searching for mine and I pulled away.

"No, Dylan, I don't know. You're hardly a morale booster, often downright mean, and lately that seems to be most of the time. I'm getting tired of being picked on. I won't be your verbal whipping post. In case you haven't noticed, I'm blind. I. Can't. See."

That did it. Tears flowed as the car drew to a stop at the curb. Assuming it safe to get out, without waiting for Dylan's help, I opened the door and clambered onto the sidewalk.

Right into the path of a passing cyclist.

The grandmother of all headaches pounded behind my eyes, pain radiated to my shoulder and numbed my fingers beneath a hard, still-wet cast. To say I felt rough would have been an understatement.

I blamed the headache on anesthetic and wondered how long I'd been unconscious. I listened but didn't hear anyone. For a little while there was nothing to define. No rubber-soled shoes shuffling on marble-tiled floor. No rustling of a starchy medical uniform. No soft breathing, nor did I detect deodorant, perfume or any kind of body odor. Only the smell of cheap disinfectant.

I was alone, amazed what my ears and nose told me. I waited impatiently, only able to comprehend the myriad sounds from outside my own space. I recognized beeping noises I associated with heart monitors. A distant alarm bell pealed incessantly, summoning help. The rattling of wheels on a gurney or food service cart.

In the ambulance I'd threatened to throw up before someone gave me a shot of some kind of joy juice, Graval, I think she said. Whatever'd been in the syringe had taken care of all my ills, my tears along with the pain.

Somewhere in the middle of all that muddle Dylan got in everyone's way, trying to look after me and see I was properly taken care of.

If there were anything else I needed to know about the situation, I'd have to wait until someone came and told me.

Giving up, deciding no one was ever coming to my rescue, I searched for what seemed to be a nonexistent call button. Then the soft hiss of the door sliding on a cushioned track told me someone had quietly entered my room. My eyes were closed, they wouldn't know I was awake. I wasn't even sure I wanted to open them because I'd have to be polite to someone I didn't know and couldn't see.

There was a hint of a man's familiar scent. "Dylan?" My voice was a squeaky whisper.

"Hello, *cariad*."

"What are you still doing here?" I giggled. "And why are we whispering?" I asked in my normal voice and regretted the action immediately. My head hurt and I made a face.

"That's why, *caru*. They told me you'd have a doozy of a headache and to try and keep the noise level down."

"How long have I been out?" I kept my head still and spoke quietly, not into masochism.

"About eight hours."

"That long? Why?" I wanted to sit up but when I tried, Dylan pushed my shoulder back against the pillow.

"They kept you sedated until your arm was set. And because I asked them to, they kept you under just long enough to help you get over the headache you were brewing before the accident. I told the doctor you needed some sleep, and he agreed the pain from your arm would keep you awake. At the request of a 'genuine cop' – that's what the nurse called me – the doctor gave you more sedative when you started to wake up."

"Thanks." I ran my good hand over my forehead. "How soon can I go home?"

"Tomorrow."

"But, Dylan!" My quiet words became a whispery wail, "I can't stay here. I don't know where anything is. I can't find the bathroom. I don't know which way to the door. I don't even know where the button is to call a nurse. I've looked, but..." I could hear my voice rising, knew I was rushing headlong into a little bout of hysteria and tried to

stop. It wasn't easy. I swallowed a few times. Took some deep breaths and bit my tongue until I tasted blood.

I made it. "Sorry. I didn't mean to lose it."

"It's okay, honey. You could lose it tonight and I'd just blame it on the drugs. Tomorrow, that's another matter."

I detected a smile in his voice, and experienced the silliest urge to reach out and touch his face. But he was on the left side of the bed, same side as the broken arm. What I wasn't prepared for was fingertips past my temple, down a cheek.

"Norrie, I am so sorry about what happened this afternoon. I didn't mean to put you down. I'd never do that. But sometimes, you know, you do have your days. Today, it just seemed there were more problems than usual."

"I know. I really shouldn't have snapped at you." As soon as the words left my mouth, I disagreed with myself. "I take that back. You deserved to be snapped at. You seem to forget I can't see and sometimes that causes problems for me. Instead of making fun of me, why not just help? Like my clothes. Instead of making a scene because nothing matched, why couldn't you have just told me, quietly, and suggested I get help? Oh, no! Dylan Jones take the easy route? It was more fun to rub it in when nothing matched, to imply my house was a painter's nightmare. I can't help it if I sometimes get rattled when I do a *reading* for you and button things the wrong way."

"Are you finished?" he asked smugly, the lilt more pronounced.

I didn't answer. Couldn't. If I tried to say anything more, I'd be in tears again and refused to do that.

"Forget it. It just wasn't your day."

My snort of derision was the only sound in the room. I didn't know he'd bent over me until his lips gently touched mine.

"Goodnight, honey, time for sleep. See you in the morning." Quiet footsteps receded, the door opened and he was gone.

I retraced his kiss with trembling fingertips. He'd twice called me honey. Often he referred to me as *cariad*, sweetheart in Welsh.

Why the kiss?

I was too tired to analyze it. For tonight I'd just bask in Dylan's sweet caress. I rolled over and pulled the sheet up around my neck, letting my mind float and with it my inhibitions. I imagined my studly superstar beneath the covers, our bodies entwined. We'd explore carnal creativity and discover pleasure places. His hot mouth on mine, my tongue searching for his, taking the kiss deeper. I needed new ways to enjoy this man, the taste of him, like some exotic nectar. While I passionately smothered him with another kiss, I'd slowly drag my fingernails down his back and massage his inner thighs, arousing a dormant volcano. I wanted to flaunt my high-octane eroticism and grab him like he is the last Gucci at an eighty-percent-off closing-out sale.

His large rough hands touched me gently, kneaded my breast, plucked my nipples, evoked shivers and shudders of the most pleasurable kind. With my caress his muscles hardened, the length of his body a revelation. His arousal, against my stomach, showed me a new erogenous zone.

Sighing, writhing, squeezing. From his chest to his waist. I lowered myself, stroked...

I slept.

Lucy

Lucy Stainton needed a man to make her feel like a woman. She needed a man to satisfy her mother. So she prayed. Her mother would have been angry with her for wasting prayer on something so vain. Lucy didn't care.

She didn't want to end up the spinster her mother kept telling her she'd be. She wanted to find someone to make her mother proud. To prove she could attract and keep a man.

The next day she met someone she thought just might be the answer to her prayer. Thaddeus James, the new preacher of the congregation she'd considered joining. A good-looking man, not overly tall, his reddish brown hair casually styled above friendly blue eyes.

It amused her when he told her his name. Imagine a minister named for two of the Apostles.

If anyone had told her this man would be responsible for her descent into hell she wouldn't have believed them. She was certain in her mind, absolutely certain, this man had been sent by God just for her. How else could anyone explain the feelings they felt for each other when he first shook her hand?

He invited her to supper. They spent the evening talking and discovered how much they had in common. They were both country folk, new to the big city. Both studied Comparative Literature at Oregon State University before deciding it wasn't really what they wanted. Lucy transferred to the Nursing Science program and would be graduating next spring.

As for Thaddeus, religion was his calling. But not just any religion. He chose one of the quasi-religions based on the teachings of the eastern scholars—a number of better-known religions all scrambled together. It produced a new religion no one had heard of before, but which must, because of its eastern influence, be worthy.

By the time their now daily phone call was nearly over, Lucy'd begun to worry. Thad hadn't mentioned going out that night. It would be the first evening in nearly two weeks they hadn't seen each other. She couldn't let him get away now. Not after everything she'd told her mother. She hated it when mother scolded her for not using more of her "womanly wiles" to make a man want her. She must convince him to come home with her. And satisfy her mother. Then maybe her mother would believe he was for real.

"Thad, honey, are we going out?" Lucy didn't dare push. Could she convince him to take her to the new place in town everyone raved about? While there, she'd broach the subject of him meeting her mother.

"Not tonight, Lucy. I have to work. How about coming to my place instead? You can read while I write my lesson for Sunday."

"I guess I could. I won't get in the way, will I?"

"Darling, you would never be in my way. I thought you knew that. You inspire me to greater things. That's the kind of relationship we have. The best kind."

Lucy blushed, thrilled at the words, and fell even further under his spell. She would cook, if he let her. Play house, if he wanted her. Even more, if he needed.

If. Seemed to her she said that a lot about this man. She wondered why.

But she trusted him.

After all, he was a man of the cloth.

Chapter Five

Awakening in a state of panic, I didn't know where I was or who was with me. I didn't remember what had happened. As it all rushed back, I moaned. I reached for Dylan and found I was alone in this sorry little hospital bed, my mind playing nasty tricks on me again. Why was it every time I thought of him I wandered into some sexual fantasy?

Desperation?

Yes. I could admit, at least to myself, it was. There'd been no one since the accident. No casual dates, no intense affair. Before, I'd been particular, giving myself only when I thought it was the right thing to do.

Now I wanted this man. As a lover. More, if he wanted it. I'd be anything for him. Friend. Lover. Wife.

As long as I could share his life, I'd be happy. At the same time I hated him. How could he be so cruel and thoughtless?

The sedative they'd given me had been effective but was obviously wearing off. I was no longer in needle-induced euphoria.

I still felt the effects of spending long hours in Emergency. I hadn't been tended to until after the victims of a house fire had been patched up. Their injuries weren't life-threatening, but their burns demanded more immediate care than my broken bones. By the time they finally got to me I was working on a headache that would knock a giant to his knees.

Too many *readings*, too close together. Most sensitives were smart enough to space their *readings* and avoid this painful reaction. But most empaths didn't have a serial sociopath methodically killing innocent, desperate women.

I suddenly realized someone else was in the room by the faint, cloying scent of cologne or aftershave mingled with the sharp tang of an unwashed body. It came from my right. It wasn't Dylan. Whoever it was didn't seem to know I was awake.

I coughed, a discreet throat clearing intended to tell whoever it was I knew they were there. Shoes squeaked on the floor as the man turned—no woman would wear shoes that heavy. As the scent wafted my way again, I recognized it.

"Can I help you, Detective Jamison?"

"I didn't think you were awake yet, Ms. Benedict," he admitted with a self-conscious little laugh. "Did I disturb you?"

I heard another question but I wasn't going to make it easy on him.

"You didn't. It's time I was up, anyway. I'm getting out of here this afternoon." I stretched, trying to untangle the kinks in my muscles from lying too still too long.

"I talked to Lieutenant Jones. He told me you wouldn't mind if I stopped by."

I wished I could see his face. I might have enjoyed his struggle and expression as he worked to get up the nerve. Why was he hesitating? Part of his job was interrogation, so it shouldn't have been hard.

"What do you want, Detective?" I said firmly.

There was shuffling toward the foot of the bed. My head followed. He said nothing while he fumbled and turned pages.

"Well, first you can tell me how you knew it was me." His tone was nearly belligerent, as though the answer really didn't matter, only idle curiosity made him ask.

"By your smell. I remember it from yesterday. I learned to recognize a lot of people by their fragrance, their body odor."

"Oh. I should have known. A heightened sensitivity in the other faculties." He flipped through his notebook and changed the subject abruptly. "I was just curious whether there was anything about our case you didn't mention yesterday, didn't think was important at the time, or you thought might not be connected to the case." He added, mockingly I thought, "You might be withholding information. Details only you and Jones are privy to, jeopardizing our investigation."

How dare he!

I silently counted to ten, then again.

"Detective Jamison, I'm going to ask you once, politely, to leave." I spoke to him through jaws clenched tight, wanting to yell at him for his insinuations. I calmed myself. "You obviously *haven't* done your investigative homework or you'd know after a *reading* I tell Dylan absolutely everything I feel. I do not, I repeat, do not *ever* keep anything back. It's all in my file, which you have ready access to," I continued. If Detective Jamison wanted to stick around and see the smoldering aftermath, he was welcome.

Struggling to sit up, I couldn't find the control to operate the raising of the head of the bed. My cast was in the way and it struck something. I fumbled for and found the call button, clamped to the sheet by my hand. I'd used it sparingly so their response would be swift. The sound of the nurse's shoes was all I needed and I turned my head to the door, demanding instant action. "Please remove this man. He's not welcome. He's not to be allowed in here again."

"Ms. Benedict, I—" Jamison tried to interrupt.

"Don't you Ms. Benedict me, you useless—"

"Norrie, that's enough." Dylan's thunderous voice was a cold steel shaft of authority. I didn't know where he'd come from. "I sent Jamison here. I thought you might have remembered something. Obviously you haven't. That's no excuse to treat one of my colleagues with disrespect."

Dylan was taking Jamison's side? That I *wouldn't* tolerate.

I didn't appreciate Jamison's accusing tone or insulting accusation and now Dylan thought maybe I was holding something back. My control really snapped.

"Get out of here. Both of you. I don't want visitors, including you." I heard Dylan's brief exchange with the others. I didn't hear him approach the bed. My anger at Jamison made me disturbingly careless. Normally, no one got close without my knowing it. Dylan's tone was sober.

"Jamison, would you wait for me in the hall, please? I'd like a word with Ms. Benedict. You, too, nurse." I sensed he was looking at me even as he spoke to the two behind him.

Footsteps hurried from the room and the door closed. What now? Probably give me a dressing-down for being rude. Today it wouldn't matter. I wasn't prepared to take anything from him.

I was caught unawares by the gentle hand on my face, the stroke of my cheek, a thumb caressing my bottom lip.

What was going on here? The tingle where his skin touched mine made me want to lean into his hand and take the thumb between my teeth. A spasmodic shiver coursed down my body, a movement lasting only a moment. I wondered what he'd do if I followed through, parted the covers and invited him in. It was the kind of bedside manner I needed right now.

"I'm sorry, honey." He'd leaned down until his mouth was near my ear. "I guess I shouldn't have turned him loose on you without warning."

"You got that right," I grudgingly admitted, turning away, laying back against the pillow. I wasn't going to give an inch. I tried to fold my arms in a manner that would show him I was annoyed, but the damn cast got in the way. I waited to hear him make excuses for the jerk he'd sent to the hall.

Again, he surprised me, giving my hand a quick squeeze.

"I said I was sorry, Norrie. I thought you might have remembered something, anything, that you didn't mention to them yesterday. You can be stubborn when you're angry, and you were furious with Detective Hawke. Did you hold anything back?"

Et tu, Dylan?

I was amazed and disappointed. How could he even *think* I'd do that? He was the only true friend I'd had since I lost my mom and dad.

The coroner said they died instantly. The police and doctors decided the only reason I survived was because I had been stretched out, asleep, in the back.

I was told the eighteen-wheeler crossed the centerline and hit us nearly head-on. When they extracted me from the wreckage with the Jaws of Life, my body was wedged between the seats.

Somehow, I knew my parents hadn't lived. I saw them suspended like marionettes, arms outstretched, tumbling further and further away. I reached out, tried to catch them. I remember screaming repeatedly, "I can't see you anymore. Please, come back."

Don't leave me alone." I thought it was a nightmare and wanted to wake up. A voice finally came to me, "We've got you, hang on." I was lifted by many arms and laid out. Terror gripped me, only hearing voices. Couldn't see light, faces or uniforms of my rescuers. I cried out, "Why can't I see you?"

For days I kept having flashes of Mom's and Dad's final seconds. Startled at the headlights looming ahead, over a hill, Dad tried to swerve. One hand on the wheel, he held hers with the other. There had been a smile on his face. She was laughing, probably at one of his terrible puns. It will always be a poignant reminder of the love they'd had for one another.

I longed for such love. The man I was supposed to marry had found a soul mate without a handicap. He obviously couldn't acknowledge the vows, "through sickness or hardship". He just stopped phoning or coming by. I got a short letter from him a few months after the accident. A friend read it to me.

He'd met "someone more compatible" was his lame excuse.

The P.S. on his letter wiped out any regret I might have felt.

"Keep the ring," it said.

I sent it back without a note. I didn't want a constant reminder of the loser I'd almost married.

My help with Dylan's cases had given me a reason to keep fighting. I discovered I was a very good psychic. Once I'd learned how to control my *emotions*, I'd become a regular resource to his department. It had taken a few wildly emotional trials to figure it all out.

"Dylan, you know me better than that. Go away." I turned my face away from him to emphasize my point. I was suddenly very tired, wanted to close my eyes and go to sleep. Between the ordeal of *reading* the Preacher's house and my broken arm, I wasn't recovering as fast as I wanted and hoped he'd take the hint and leave.

"*Cariad*, I asked the doctor to keep you here one more night and he's agreed. You need rest and you'll not be able to get it if you're at home. You'll be up trying to do things for yourself, reorganizing your closet. All sorts of silly, domestic things."

"You can't make them keep me here! I'm old enough to check myself out. I don't need your help." I protested, but I didn't care.

"Actually, you do," he said smugly, obviously quite pleased with himself. "You don't have any clothes here. They cut the purple top thing off you during admittance and I have the rest of your things at home with me. You can't leave without something to wear."

"Dylan!"

If I'd known the location of the bed in the layout of the room I'd have been on my bare feet, dressed in only my gown, and escaped this confinement. I wasn't going to lie here waiting for something to happen.

I swung my legs over the edge of the bed. There was a shuffle as Dylan stood in my way, both hands gripping my arms, holding me back.

"It's okay, Norrie. Stay there. I'm here to keep you company for the rest of the evening. There's a uniform outside, another near the nursing station."

He was staying? Something was surprisingly wrong with this picture. I was supposed to be going home, not having the company of three of Rocklynne's finest.

"Okay, Dylan, what's going—" I halted in mid-sentence. I'd just had one of those ugly moments—a flash of a knife, a muffled scream and blood splattered on a wall. My hand covered my mouth when I caught a brief glimpse of Dylan's inner thoughts.

I knew I was right.

My heart ached and I was overcome by a sensation of imminent disaster and horrible news. My voice was subdued. "There's been another murder."

Chapter Six

"Ah, hell, Norrie. I tried to keep you from finding out so soon." The bed moved as he sat beside me.

"Tell me," I commanded. When he spoke I heard a different Dylan. He was subdued, his words coming slowly and, for the first time, I heard defeat in his voice. I tightened my grip on his hand and felt him squeeze back.

"You're right. We have an unidentified body, and this time the only body parts missing are her hands. She was cut up and mutilated, same as all the others, although the mutilation is different this time. For some reason, he just dumped everything behind a building in the downtown core."

"What was the cause of death?"

"She was strangled, but not until after he stabbed her. Fourteen wounds at last count. Doctor Morris, the medical examiner, isn't finished with her yet. None would have been fatal, unless he finds one that caused her to bleed out. They were intended to cause extreme pain. We think he may have been interrupted by something or someone, because he went for a quick kill."

"Tell me about her." I closed my eyes, waited to hear details, things to help me stop this psychotic madman.

"Are you sure you want to hear this?" His hand tightened on mine, his fingers curled into my palm. His deep sigh told me he didn't want to do this. It was as painful for him as it would be for me.

"Yes. It's important. I don't know how I can help you unless you tell me what you've got." I heard his gusty sigh and waited impatiently.

"She's a white female, twenty-six to thirty years of age. Quite attractive, I suspect, before he started using her face for carving practice, and she had a nice figure. Her clothes were in a green plastic bag in a Dumpster half a block away from where he dumped her body."

"You're sure they're hers?"

"Forensics may prove me wrong, but I'm going to assume they are. At least three knife slits in the blouse match stab wounds on her chest and there's blood around two of those."

"Can you bring me a piece of her clothing?" I waited for his answer and prayed this victim hadn't made her purchases at a secondhand store. "I need her energy, Dylan, hers alone." If her clothes had ever been worn by anyone else, I'd pick up converging energy from too many sources.

He didn't answer immediately. What he was thinking? Doing? I could only hear his breathing. When he finally spoke he was very subdued.

"Are you sure, Norrie? This isn't going to be an easy one. She went through a long, slow torture period before he strangled her. If you take on all her pain, you'll be in pretty rough shape by the time you're finished."

"Look at me, Dylan. These readings are becoming scary consults. Each time, the aftermath lasts longer. I'm exhausted, unable to sleep. I'm desperately trying to resist drugs to help me. I'm all these women have, other than the department." I knew one day I'd have to stop. I'd put myself in physical danger if I carried on too long. "I've got to help her if I can. Can you arrange it?" I was beginning to believe I'd make myself ill before this ordeal was over, but I couldn't ignore another murdered victim.

The bed moved, shoes squeaked as he walked toward me followed by the rustling, crackling sound of a paper sack.

Damn him! He'd done it again.

I was annoyed. Hell, I was angry. He'd had every intention of me doing a *reading*.

"Why couldn't you just ask me, Dylan, instead of all the apologetic talk?" I snorted and lay back, disappointed he'd played games with me. "I'd have said yes. You needn't resort to reverse psychology."

I'd been thinking maybe there were signs of a relationship building between us. Last night I'd fantasized an even better night of hot loving.

Now he'd ruined it.

"It" being whatever feelings I was developing for him. My imagination had been working overtime and I'd filed memory pictures of how I saw things between us.

Now this.

How was I supposed to know what he felt if he never said anything? His actions certainly sent out mixed messages. One minute he was caring and affectionate, the next he was all business, dragging evidence into my hospital room so the department wouldn't have to wait for my release. Sometimes I wondered if he remembered I was a human being or if he saw me as his personal psychic machine.

Then I remembered. It was his job to investigate the murder of these women. He lived daily with what he'd seen. I could only imagine the scenes he saw. He told me no more than I needed to know, protecting me from the worst of his reality. I hadn't seen any of these women at the crime scenes. He had. I hadn't stood by at autopsy while the ME told of the horrors inflicted upon the victims.

What I saw in my readings was vicious and frightening, but in every case, the crimes were weaponless reenactments visited on me in my role as the victim.

I couldn't stay angry with him.

The sound of fabric as it slid across paper told me he was removing some article of the woman's clothing from the sack. Apprehension built in me at the thought of yet another young woman dead at the hands of this madman.

If I was the best the police department could do, well, I'd pray for all of them, any young woman foolish enough to let herself be taken in by this man.

"You're sure about this, Norrie? Really sure?" Dylan's quiet words again made me wonder. Didn't he believe me when I told him I was prepared for this?

"I'm ready. Let's get on with it." I held out my hand to take the fabric when there was a discreet knock on my door.

"For God's sake, now what?" I didn't need anything holding me up. I wanted to do this and get it over with.

Dylan stalked across the room. There was the hiss of the door's pneumatic hinge then soft voices. A man's voice I didn't recognize spoke. The door swung shut and four sets of footsteps came toward me.

Four?

"Norrie, Doctor Hayward is here. He's just going to make sure that you don't overdo anything. I explained to him about your reading yesterday and he doesn't think it will hurt you. I want him to stay. Just in case."

"Thank you, Doctor Hayward. Please, don't try to stop me unless I get into real trouble. Who else is here?"

"Miss Benedict." Detective Jamison's voice was subdued, "please. I want to apologize for what I said to you. I had no..."

"You're right, Detective, you had no right to say anything like that to me. But, I'm willing to forget it. I know this is so hard for all of you." I paused, drew a deep breath. "I didn't know there'd been another murder, Detective. So, if you need to ask me something, go ahead. Just know this. I tell Dylan everything. If I haven't answered your question it's because I don't have the information you want."

"Thank you." His hand touched my fingers, gently, apologetically I'd guess. "I'm sorry I made it sound as if I didn't believe you. If you were in our shoes, you'd know why I pushed."

"I do know, Detective, I do." I turned to where I knew Dylan had been standing. "Who else came in, Dylan?"

A deep voice chuckled. "Did your psychic powers tell you I was here, Ms. Benedict?"

"No, Detective Hawke. My ears did. I heard four people walk across the room." I turned to where I knew Dylan was standing. "Is he staying for this?"

"Yes, he is, Norrie. This murder is really his case and Jamison's."

Not only had he led me into all this in his mean, tricky way, he wasn't even doing it for himself. He knew how much I disliked Detective Hawke, yet there's Dylan, lending him the use of my gift. If it hadn't been for my desire to help these poor women, I would have refused to continue.

"If you're staying for this, Detective, I suggest you stand over there," I pointed toward the right side of the bed, hoping he'd be far away, "and don't say one word. Not

one, understand? When I'm finished, you can ask whatever you need to know, then you get out."

"That will be fine, Ms. Benedict."

"And for crying out loud, stop calling me that. It's Miss Benedict. Not Ms." My voice had risen with the level of my anger until I was practically yelling.

"Fine."

I'd done it. I'd shut him up effectively without having to argue about things. I felt slightly better, although I should have been ashamed of myself for losing my temper. Then Dylan had to go and spoil the superior feeling by holding out the fabric. He didn't shove the cloth into my hand, just touched my fingers with it so I'd know where it was.

It sent such a shock wave of emotion through me I cried out and my hand recoiled. I reached again for the fabric. Taking it in my hand, I immediately sensed the fear of the woman who'd worn this. I could smell it. My own body betrayed me, started shaking. I wasn't upset. I hadn't had time to feel any strong emotion from the woman except her first burst of terror.

There was no pain, but I knew it would come. There was no sense of impending death, but this could only end in hers.

The first wave of her feelings left me gasping. Her gasps. I felt a stinging, burning sensation in my side. The first of the victim's stab wounds. My hands clutched the fabric to where I imagined the searing pain of her wound. The next instant there was another hot, tearing sensation in my shoulder. I again grabbed the imaginary slash. My breathing was labored. Coming in short gasps.

I wasn't prepared for my most frightening moment.

I heard his voice, saw his face. Or at least some of his face. There was a strange lighting effect to my vision, enabling me to see his eyes and mouth, as if in a fog, and the hair near the top of his head. I wondered if there was any way I could describe him. There was a certain sibilance in his voice that made me think of a lisp. I cringed at the thought. Lisps were for innocent young children smelling sweetly of baby powder, not lunatic murderers who carried the stench of evil about them. The most shocking thing about the face was the lack of emotion. I saw total detachment there. This man didn't care, not bothered at all by the pain and dread he caused, eyes blank, corners of his mouth raised slightly in a hideous sneer.

He reveled in their torment. Liked the cries. Loved the screams. This was what he wanted.

I saw the drop of spittle form at the corner of his mouth and wondered if he'd drooled on this blouse. DNA could be had from something so simple as saliva.

The next wounds were mere seconds apart. All in the vicinity of my waist. Into that slim space below the band of a skirt or pair of pants, but above my navel, he shallowly thrust his knife three times in rapid succession. The pain was staggering. I might faint if it got any worse.

"And you thought this was going to be fun, didn't you, Lucy. So much fun. So what do you think about it now? Eh? Still love me, Lucy? Still want to take me to meet your mama?"

The words startled me. I bolted upright. Hands on my arms tried to restrain me. I fought to free myself. From someplace far away I heard a voice.

"Is she all right? Will this harm her?"

I didn't know who was talking but I hoped nobody stopped me. I couldn't, until I knew what happened to Lucy. At least now she had a name.

Dylan's quiet voice asked me if I was all right and I must have answered him because he stopped talking and let go of my arm. The hand on the other side was still gently holding my wrist, almost as though the person there was afraid to let go. I reluctantly pulled my hand free and brought the fabric up to my face. Breathed deeply. I could smell the victim's fear. Her sweat.

There was something else, elusive, an odor I hadn't smelled in a long time.

Horse? The faint aroma of horse sweat and manure?

Suddenly, I could see a lopsided, crumbling building—a run-down, unpainted barn, set amid trees next to a stream.

Before I had time to see anything more, there was another stab wound, then three or four more, coming in a hurry. No pattern, the knife thrust in wild parrying motions. He was being rushed.

Oh please, no, please no, Thad... It was Lucy's voice. This was the same man who'd killed the others.

The recall, a visual thing, like looking at a movie, was worse than I had foreseen and I felt hands around my neck, knowing this was what Lucy'd experienced. I couldn't breathe, knew if I didn't get oxygen in the next few seconds, I'd pass out. The hands holding my throat were stronger than my own. I was losing. I couldn't pull his hands from my neck.

Just before everything went black in my mind I heard a car. It stopped. Door opened, closed. A snick of noise I couldn't identify.

Lucy died.

Chapter Seven

"Miss Benedict. Norrie. Wake up. You're all right."

A hand stroked my cheek. A voice softly called. I still held tightly to someone's hand.

"Miss Benedict, come on," the voice urged. "It's over." I realized it wasn't a hand I knew. Too small for Dylan, and there was a ring with a rounded stone, one I knew, if I could just remember where I'd touched it before.

It reached me from the opposite side of the bed to where Dylan had been standing. I realized I'd latched on to Detective Hawke as though I needed him to keep me anchored to this bed, rooted to this planet.

"I'm sorry, Detective..." my voice was scratchy. Hot tears raced each other down my face, salty on my lips.

Back in the present, afraid of the past. My free hand found my neck only to have another hand take my left arm.

"It's Doctor Hayward, Norrie. Let go of your neck. I want to give you a shot to help you relax. This has been too much for you." He rubbed my arm with a cool alcohol swab. I tried to push him away.

"No!" I cried out and turned in the direction of Detective Hawke, clutched and begged. "Don't let him give me anything. Not until I'm finished telling you—"

Too late. The needle pricked and I tried again to pull away.

"What did you want to tell us, Norrie?" Detective Hawke persisted.

Where was Dylan?

"I saw him. His face." I shuddered. "It was horrible. I heard her. Just before she died. She called him Thad—"

"Thaddeus *James*?" There was surprise in Hawke's voice.

"What about him? What do you know about him?"

"Thaddeus *James* was the name that showed up in some of the reported assaults. It changed from Peter Thaddeus in earlier complaints. This guy's using many aliases to cover his tracks."

"Lucy called him Thad. I saw him. Vacant blue eyes. His hair is short. It looked dark, with a reddish tinge to it from the light. He has funny breath—offensively strong with mint or wintergreen. And there's a barn. I visualized it. In a field. Someplace close..." I was beginning to feel the effects of the shot. I lost all sense of urgency about telling what I knew. I paused to stifle a yawn and tried to cover my mouth as I'd been taught as a child but the effort was too great. I could hear my voice becoming gradually

more singsong as I spoke. The sedative or whatever Doctor Hayward had injected was taking effect.

"Do you think you'd know the barn if we could describe it to you, Norrie?" said Dylan, back from wherever he'd been. I hadn't heard him approach, reaching a twilight of sedative oblivion.

"I suppose. You find it. Tell me what you see. If you describe it right..." I yawned again, unable to help myself.

"You did good, *caru*. Real good. You've accounted for seventeen stab wounds and we know what order she sustained them. Anything else you remember?"

I shook my head, too relaxed to even try to speak. The hand I'd been holding pulled gently away and mine fell back to the bed.

I drifted, was gone.

"Does she always feel things this strongly, Jones?"

I realized Dylan and Detective Hawke must be seated in chairs on the other side of the room. In my still muzzy brain they were distant, at the end of a long, long hall.

"Not always. When she first started working with us, she didn't. She could tell us things, but she never seemed to live them. Not like she does now."

"Can she be hurt by this?" Hawke enquired.

Why was he asking these questions now, when it had been so obvious the day before he hadn't believed anything I'd said or done?

"Dylan, did I..." I interrupted. Chairs were pushed back, footsteps came toward me.

"You did well, *genethig*, filling in a lot of blanks, which may turn the investigation around. The only thing you didn't tell us was why he suddenly finished her off so fast before dumping her."

I dug through my memories to see if there was anything I'd missed to account for the killer's sudden haste.

"There was someone else there. I heard a car stop and a door opened. After that, he choked her." Without intending it, my hand found my neck and gently rubbed where the killer's fingers would have gripped the victim.

"Can you see the car, Norrie?" Dylan said sharply.

"No," I whispered, disappointed I couldn't recall the vision of the vehicle or driver. "No, but he had a gun." A hammer click from a distance, as if he was cocking his gun before he went to the door.

"Why did he pull a gun? Was he threatened?" Dylan asked.

I paused, shook my head when nothing more came to me. "Sorry, Dylan. That's everything."

"Excellent, Norrie. Go back to sleep. I've got to talk to Jamison and get him going on the location of this barn. Maybe we'll get lucky and get a break, catching this creep there."

I lay back against the raised head of the bed, let out another long sigh, feeling drained, desperate for sleep. My neck hurt and, in a few places, I could feel traces of pain lingering at the points where Lucy had been repeatedly stabbed.

The hospital room door opened, closed and I assumed I was alone. I was just moving into a bout of self-pity, tears forming to slide down my cheeks, when...

"Thank you, Miss Benedict. I appreciate your help on this." I jolted and swung my head to the right when Detective Hawke spoke.

The good detective didn't sound quite as disbelieving as he had the day before.

"You're welcome, Detective Hawke. I'm glad I could help." I closed my eyes, hoping he'd leave. I didn't hear him move. I waited a minute, maybe two. "You still here, Detective?" My voice sounded waspish even to my ears.

His chuckle from beside the bed made me realize his chair was closer. He had no intention of going anywhere.

"I'm still here, Miss Benedict. I'll be here a while longer. I've got first tour of duty keeping watch over you. You are now officially under police protection."

"I'm what?"

"Police protection. We've got your back now. Dylan thinks you gave us enough to put you in danger. And if you're right, and it is Thaddeus James, you're in terrible danger."

"That's not the name I remember from yesterday. It was Peter. Peter..." I searched my memories to get it right. "Peter Thaddeus."

"Whatever he uses. I've seen what he's done to the women he's killed." He paused. I had no trouble believing he was reliving those moments. "Believe me, you'll have round-the-clock protection from now until he's caught. If we have to we'll put you into protective custody. We're so short-handed we're all going to pull extra duty to make this happen. You'll have me for the first eight hours, then Dylan, then Martin. We're trying to free up a couple of uniforms to help, but until we do, you're our responsibility."

"Great. Now I'm in police custody." I was behaving like a spoiled brat but for the moment I didn't care. "Do I get to go home anytime soon?"

"I don't know." A smile crept into his voice. "And you're not in custody. Yet. That's up to Dylan. He's in charge now. We're running this investigation together and he outranks the rest of us."

I quietly gathered my scattered thoughts and realized this man would probably rather be out on the street trying to stop the murderer than baby-sitting me in my hospital bed.

"I'm sorry, Detective. I know you'd rather not be here."

The silence lasted for so long I decided he must be ignoring me. When he finally spoke, it surprised me—the fact he was talking to me and what he was talking about.

“Miss Benedict, can I ask you something? About the *reading*.” He waited until I nodded my head. “I watched you while you were holding the blouse and I could have sworn you were feeling the pain of the stab wounds. You’re hoarse from the choking.” He paused, I waited. “Since there is no weapon and nothing actually happens to you, what exactly are you feeling?”

Oh, my. How did I answer a question for him even I didn’t know the answer to? I could try and explain it, but I wasn’t sure I could give him what he needed.

“Well, Detective...” His hand on my arm stopped me.

“Look. Since we’re going to be together a lot for the next while, why don’t you call me Brand? That’s what everyone calls me. Detective is kind of formal. I’ll call you Norrie, okay?”

I stayed quiet. I wasn’t sure exactly what to say to this man. He’d doubted me yesterday, was trying to get answers today and was acting much more civilly toward me than previously. We could always go back to the formality of the day before if it didn’t work.

“All right. On one condition, Det...Brand. You can see me. You know what I look like. You can put a face to my name.” I stopped, afraid to say out loud what I was about to suggest, but it was the only way I could go along with his offer of the first name thing.

“Yeah. So what’s the matter?”

“Well, I can’t see you. You’re going to have to do two things. I want you to describe yourself to me. Tell me what you look like. Then I want to read your face.” His indrawn breath told me he’d never thought about this. The silence dragged on. I thought he might be changing his mind. When I heard the chair pulled closer, I knew he’d accepted my challenge.

“Okay. So, where do I start?”

“Just describe yourself. Tell me your height, your weight, the color of your hair, your eyes. All the things I could see if I were sighted.”

I sat forward, my legs covered by a warm blanket and my lower arms resting on my drawn-up knees. I felt his hand against my foot and knew he was leaning on the bed.

“Oh. Well, then.” He cleared his throat. He was obviously nervous yet there was really nothing to it. “I’m five eleven, about one hundred and eighty pounds. Hair is dark blond, or light brown, depending on who calls it. My eyes are brown. I’ve got my own teeth,” he paused when I chuckled, “and I have no scars or disfiguring marks. Like that?”

“Exactly. Not so hard, was it?” I smiled in his general direction and hoped he wouldn’t deny me when I touched his face. It’s the only way I had now to find out what people looked like and I was thorough.

After I read his face, I'd know him anywhere, if I ever got this personal again. Others found it too personal, unsettling, invading private space. I was about to find out how Detective Brandon Hawke felt about the whole thing.

"Come closer, beside me, if you can. It's hard if I have to reach too far. Are you wearing a tie?"

"Yeah."

"Remove it and unbutton the top shirt button." I waited, heard a chair scrape as he pushed it back to stand. The bed sagged a little when he sat. I lifted my hand toward him.

He took the initiative and wrapped his fingers gently around my wrist and directed me to his face. It would have been easier if I could use both hands, one was a slight handicap. I experienced a warm rush and something else I couldn't describe. In an instant it was gone.

I think he blocked me. His emotions evaded my mind.

Tracing over prominent cheekbones below equally prominent brows I noticed slight hollows in his cheeks above a strong jawline rough with the stubble of a long day. I put my palms flat against his cheeks and fondled earlobes with forefingers, finding nice small ears set flat to his head.

Locating the cleft in his chin, I slowly ran a thumb down the imaginary line from the tip of his chin along his Adam's apple to his collarbone.

"Wow," he said, sounding a little short of breath, "thinking of changing your line of work to sex therapy?"

"Stop it, I'm trying to concentrate."

As I touched him, his firm lips pulled back in a smile and I accidentally found the straight row of teeth.

"No dental blues for you." He uttered a soft laugh while I skimmed the curved lips. "Does the city provide its civil servants with good medical insurance?"

The dimple beside his mouth made me lean forward, just a little. I wanted to know if there was another one on the other side. There was. A matched set.

I drew a finger from his brows down the almost patrician nose, feeling the very slight upturning at the end.

"I'm guessing you have your hair brushed back, parted to the right, probably long enough to touch your collar. Right? I expected a brush cut. Don't know why."

"Not since my rookie days. Us detectives must look suave and debonair," he grandly pronounced it "swavey and debonner", "distinctly different from the unruly mobs and poorly dressed perps."

I giggled and held a finger to my lips in a hushing gesture.

"Quiet now, I'm getting to the good part." I had my hand on the side of his head and tried to hold him still. "Do you want me to stop?" I asked, because he was

fidgeting. I didn't know if he found the whole thing too personal or if he just couldn't sit still on the sagging mattress.

"Don't know. Might have to dismantle the smoke alarm, or take a cold shower."

I snickered and ignored him, pretended I was shampooing and glided my fingertips through the hair along the scalp and ever so lightly down the nape of neck, then back up. It was difficult with only one hand but I didn't want to bash his skull with the hard plaster cast.

I would have traded my short, straight, wispy mess for his hair—soft, silky and wasted on a man.

"You pass inspection, Brand. I'd say you are a rather handsome guy. I'll have to get someone else to tell me if I'm right or not."

"Listen, I'm not sure if you intended that exploration to be an erotic turn-on, but you sure know how to cover the upper part of a man's terrain. If you ever open a massage parlor, let me know. I'll switch to vice, so I can come and receive a bribe."

I laughed for the first time in a long while. Surprisingly, I enjoyed getting to know Brandon Hawke and I hadn't once thought of Dylan.

"Norrie, I think now it should be my turn. I'd like to read your face. With my eyes closed. See if I can feel what you look like."

"Oh." He'd caught me off guard. "Well, if you want to. But you already know what I look like."

"I know. Let me try?"

"Okay. But let's make it more realistic."

"How?"

"Turn out the lights. Do this in total darkness."

I didn't know if he was going to agree or not. It was an awful disadvantage to put oneself under. If one were sighted and unused to the dark, it would be more realistic if one wanted to know how the unsighted coped.

"Okay. Let me get the lights." He leaned over me and hit some switch on the wall above my head. The faint images of gray I'd been able to see disappeared.

"Ready?" he asked.

I hesitated for a moment, edged forward a little and let myself smile, despite being consumed with nervousness. I hadn't been this close to a man in years, except during my risqué fantasies over that other cop. I couldn't suppress a shiver of pleasure at the touch nor did I want to object when his hands touched me. Brand retraced, with tenderness, my movements around his head. I was suddenly conscious of every part of my body. I think I moaned. He didn't take it as much of a protest for he continued.

He dabbed his finger over several points of my head.

"What's that for?" I asked.

"Early eighteenth century means of identification—separates the good guys from the bad guys."

"What am I?"

"Borderline. You'll bear watching. You have very prominent bumps, making you a very suspicious woman."

"So what's the verdict? Tell me honestly."

"Actually, you're more lovely than you look."

"You're nuts!" I sat back and grinned. "I'm not. I have a plain face, with short, probably shapeless hair and nothing special in the way of features except for those awful bumps, which hopefully are well hidden."

"No, Norrie, you're wrong. Sure, your hair is short and straight but I suspect that's so you don't have to worry about it. But if you could see yourself in a mirror you'd know I was right. Maybe it has something to do with maturing."

"Thank you, kind sir, for the compliment. You sure know how to cheer up a girl. I think you're wrong, but I can't prove it, so I guess we'll just call it a draw for now." I flopped back against the pillow while he again leaned over me and my shades of gray returned with the light.

"Okay. Now that you've found out what I look like, how about you answer my question. What exactly do you feel when you read an object like that woman's blouse?"

Damn. He'd remembered his original question. I took a moment to consider my answer.

"The terror I can definitely put a name to. There's the energy from the person who possesses the object and the power the object itself has stored. In this case, Lucy's energy, whomever she was, when she was in fear for her life. As for the pain from the wounds, I don't honestly know. I guess it has to do with the same forces. But why I feel them the same way the victim did, I can't tell you. I'm still just getting a handle on some of these things."

I took his silence to be skepticism. Had I disappointed him? Disbelief would make it hard for us to work together. I decided it was time to try and lighten the mood.

"Okay, Brand, now I want you to do something for me. Describe Martin Jamison. I've talked to him a couple of times, but I don't have any idea what your partner looks like."

The mattress moved again when he stood up. Our moment of touching and sharing was over. I was now just part of his job. At least he honored my request.

"He's a bit shorter than I am, probably five nine, and the same weight. He has blue eyes, reddish brown hair starting to go gray at the temples, not cut in your typical short cop cut but just a little longer. His nose is slightly crooked from an elbow during a street fight when he was in uniform. And his ears stick out. Reminds me a little of the guy on the cover of *Mad* magazine."

It surprised me he would say that, knowing I'm blind, then I recalled Dylan telling him how I lost my sight.

"Thanks. Maybe I should read him the way I read you. Throw all those details in. Have some fun with him."

"I wouldn't. Martin can't take a joke. You might not like his response."

"Oh. Well, thanks for the warning."

"Why don't you try to sleep? In fact, that's an order. I'll be here in case you want anything." I heard him slide down in the chair he occupied. He was obviously getting comfortable, reclining for a long shift. Maybe he'd snore. I wouldn't mind.

I thought I'd been dismissed until his hesitant voice interrupted my musing.

"Norrie, can I ask you another question?"

"Depends. What about?"

"Your gift."

He paused. I wasn't sure if I wanted to answer his questions. I didn't often talk about it and when I did, it was usually with people who knew me better than he. People from the university who could relate.

"I...I guess so. If I don't want to answer you, though, you'll accept that?"

"I don't have much choice, do I?"

"Not really."

There was a long silence and I could feel the tension rising in him. He was afraid to ask. Afraid he'd say the wrong thing.

"How do you live with your powers, your gift, from day to day? Don't you feel things no matter where you are? No matter who's around? How do you shut it off?"

Ah. The crux of the matter.

"How? I don't know. It's just there, all the time. If I forget and allow it to surface, it can take over at any time. For the first six months after my abilities began surfacing, I had a few embarrassing moments. Times when I should have kept my mouth shut but had instead blurted things out loud, leaving everyone around me uncomfortable. Dylan and my professor, Ken Newman, had taken me in hand and taught me how to control my thoughts and, most of the time, I managed to keep myself from opening my mouth out of turn and planting one or more feet inside."

After the accident, my gift seemed to strengthen and now showed signs of branching out into specialties I'd never realized I could handle. I was not only reading crime scenes and the detritus left behind at murders, I was occasionally hearing other peoples' thoughts. A couple of times I'd known what Dylan wanted to ask before he opened his mouth and was able to answer him without opening mine. It shocked me the first few times it happened, but Ken tried to explain to me that when one gift works well, it occasionally left the empath open to other gifts. I didn't mind, I just had to be careful I didn't let other people's thoughts drown out my own. If I didn't shut them out,

I could be swallowed by others' thoughts and lose my sense of self. It was frightening when it happened, but again, I was learning control.

"It took me a while to realize I didn't have to tell everyone everything I saw or heard," I continued. "Sometimes I feel only a slight apprehension, other times I'm overwhelmed by a feeling of sadness and pain. I usually end up in a mental and physical funk, sort of my litmus test for death. I gauge the situation by how much it affects me. Ken once told me that being a psychic means your life is never your own. The dead can reach you anytime, anywhere."

He was quiet for a moment and I wondered if I'd scared him a little. But apparently he was only considering my words because he suddenly asked, "What happens when you're out on a date?"

"Um..."

"You don't have to answer that. I'm sorry. I guess it's really none of my business."

"It isn't that. It's just...well, let's just say I lost my sight at the same time my gift began increasing in power and there haven't been any dates since then. So the subject hasn't come up." I felt the heat in my face and knew my cheeks would be a healthy shade of pink. I still blushed like a teenager when I was self-conscious or embarrassed.

"Are you serious?" His voice held total disbelief. "You haven't had a date in more than three years?"

"No. Look, if you don't mind —"

"I'm sorry, Norrie. I guess it's really none of my business, but that seems like such a waste. You're a lovely, educated woman. I'd think there'd be a lineup of guys waiting to go out with you."

"Now I know you're nuts!" I lay back on the pillow, pulled the blankets around my neck and tried to shut him out. "I think I'd like to sleep now, if you don't mind. The sedative..."

His hand gently stroked my leg and I realized, for the first time in three years, I'd forgotten I was blind and alone.

Carol

Carol Knightly looked at the man she'd been dating for three weeks and wondered when he would invite her home to his house. She'd never dated a man before who hadn't wanted to get her into bed by the third date. She knew her looks attracted attention wherever she went but she'd been surprised when the preacher at the new church had asked her out to lunch one Sunday after the service.

His name was James Simon, which struck her as funny. How many ministers were named for two of the Apostles?

Now, after three straight weeks of dating, she didn't know when she would get to see his house. He told her he lived in the country, in an old run-down farmhouse he was trying to fix up.

He was an interesting man. Tall, but not too tall. Dark hair, but not black. Compelling blue eyes. But it was his facial expressions that intrigued her. His face never looked the same two days in a row. It was as if he was in a play and the makeup he wore was never quite the same. But she knew this was just her imagination. His face was a plain, ordinary face, nothing special. If anyone had asked her to describe him, she doubted she could have done it well enough for anyone to recognize him.

"When are you going to invite me to this farmhouse of yours, James? I'd really like to see it."

"How about tomorrow, darling? I'll make us a real old-fashioned farm supper. Roast beef, potatoes, vegetables, fresh bread."

"Ooh. Sounds wonderful. Can I bring anything?" She was holding his hand as they walked and felt him shudder. She wondered why but didn't ask.

"No. Just bring yourself. Better yet, I'll pick you up. About five."

"All right. And maybe you can show me around your farm. Show me the barn. Show me your animals."

"You'll love it. I have babies in the barn I'll show you."

She didn't ask what kind of babies. She didn't ask about the barn. She didn't ask anything. She was afraid if she did he'd leave her. Dump her before she got to see his farm. Dump her before she had a chance to convince him he wanted her. She was afraid she could lose him.

She liked James Simon. She wanted to be able to tell her mother she'd finally found a man. Someone to prove she could have a normal relationship with a normal man. And who better to call normal than a minister? He was a man she could trust.

After all, he was a religious man.

He was a man of the cloth.

Chapter Eight

Noise. Heat. Confusion.

I was dizzy, nauseated.

There was an assault of offensive odors. Bad cologne and cheap perfume mingled with human sweat and the stale beer smell of marijuana.

I repressed a strong urge to walk out of the waiting hall at the precinct house. Tried to appear calm but I wasn't succeeding. My driver had tucked me safely in the furthest corner of the waiting room where he thought I'd be safe. I'd spent several days recuperating but I'd gladly take more. Dylan had honored my request to hide out at home. I'd slept a lot, gone on a shopping spree, then headed back to the seclusion of my home.

Now, frantic feet and muttered curses passed by me. Occasionally a conversation stopped before me. A reduced sentence would be suggested and a "No friggin' way, get me a better deal" would be the refusal.

Sometimes there were strange and baffling silences. I started to tremble, felt drops of perspiration on my forehead, shifted uneasily and uncomfortably on the hard bench seat. Someone sat beside me. Smelly clothes and repulsive breath made me inch a little further away. I didn't answer "Whatcha here for? You'll never turn tricks looking like that."

A depression settled over me. I sensed something more profound. The room had a profusion of despair and indifference, shame and anger. Sadly, there seemed to be no joy and so little hope. I was startled by a siren's wail, a squad car pulling away from the curb outside.

I wiped my brow and circled my neck to relieve the prickly sensation beneath my damp collar. I was sticky under my bra. I discreetly tried to pull the fabric away from my wet skin. I hesitated. Beyond the blur was somebody watching? Waiting to nudge, nudge, point, point, snicker, snicker, pass it on?

There was a shuffling of feet up to the counter and the rustle of paper. The repulsive person beside me got up, shouting obscenities. Close by, someone demanded she "Cool it". They argued, loudly, then her stiletto heels clattered away on the linoleum.

I was sure everybody would be watching her, so I took the moment. Yank, stretch, both sides, oooh, that felt better. I reached for a dry tissue, dabbed my cheeks, under my chin, breastbone.

I felt the fine chain and the charm my mother had given me the last time we celebrated together before her death. We had lunch, topped off with a decadent, too-

many-calories-but-who-cares much-layered parfait. We shared, we laughed, “What the hell?” and ordered another.

We went to an art gallery where I marveled at a collection she described as a “chaos of color, streaks and blotches”. She didn’t understand it but she knew it brought me joy.

I missed color.

I missed her.

Later the same night we’d gone to a symphony concert. I’d been brought up around classical music and had an appreciation for the moods and sensations it could evoke. Right now I thought the “Overture” to Tchaikovsky’s *War of 1812* appropriate.

Across the room, a shouted, “What happened to the air-conditioning our taxes are paying for?” A gruff voice of authority answered, “Quiet. Your attorney is waiting down the hall in 1-C.”

There were more complaints of the stifling hot waiting hall. Those ceiling fans that worked just circulated the heat over and around most of us, here unwillingly, and others who had little choice. It was their job. They were here to uphold law and order.

Maybe someday a developer would come along to convince city council that the old precinct house should be deemed an historical site, worthy of restoration. I imagine the lofts, galleries and boutiques would be a wonderful addition to urban revitalization and bring the public back to the city center, away from the big box malls.

I wiped my face again. I normally liked the heat. But in this building, during an unseasonably hot spell in Rocklynne, so close to the ocean and with this humidity, even I was ready to stir my cauldron. After sprinkling some potion around or filling a magical chalice, I’d hold it up in a plea to the weather gods. I could do it, so I’d been told or as it was mostly whispered, because I was that “psychic broad”, conjurer of “hocus pocus”.

I giggled.

Suddenly I remembered Fred Swetzler—thirty-year veteran, four citations, once wounded in the line of duty, uniform cop and all-around nice guy. He’d failed the sergeant’s exam twice but really didn’t care. He’d brought me here, left me.

I felt even more alone. I heard myself saying out loud, “Where are you, Fred?” He’d been my hazy blue shadow person, standing guard and, for brief periods, sprawled on my living room couch. He was too tall for it, so his beefy calves and size thirteens hung over by quite a bit and his service revolver lay across his chest while he napped. That’s what his wife told me, anyway. Soon, retirement would give him time to dig clams and watch the Portland Trail Blazers play basketball.

I was walking normally now, only sometimes slightly weak in the knees. Other empaths recommended I practice some weight training to give me strength and stamina to endure these periods of total exhaustion. Yet others suggested yoga and meditation.

I was interested in food again. Cupboards were bare, the fridge empty, so Fred and I sent for takeout. Pizza or Chinese, as the mood took us, delivered to the door by one of a team assigned to round-the-clock stakeout surveillance.

Fred endeared himself to me after the second night when he brought his wife, Rhoda, to sit with me. She was someone who knew how I was feeling and how to cope.

I decided I knew too much about a murdering madman and too little about a persnickety Welsh policeman, whom I thought I was falling hopelessly in love with. Occasionally he acted as if I meant something to him. Most of the time it seemed I was nothing more than a mere colleague or available consultant. Maybe this special attention I was getting was the usual treatment afforded any informer or someone crucial to the case. My contribution could aid in the apprehension of a high-profile felon, terrorist or killer. After, there would be the handshake, arm-around-the-shoulder photo op, big smiles all around and "Thank you for your assistance, really appreciate this, see ya."

When I complained to Rhoda that I thought Dylan was taking advantage of my powers on this case and forgetting I was a human being, her reply surprised me.

She laughed.

"Doll, you don't have troubles any worse than the rest of us. You've known this cop for a few years. I've been laying beside one for over three decades. Sometimes it's hard for them to separate the job and the rest of life. Detectives, I think, have it the most difficult. You have an advantage right now. You can't *see* the ugliness. When you do a *reading* for him, he takes what you give him and believes you without question. Don't ever shortchange him. He needs what you can give him. You can imagine sunshine, rainbows, blue skies and smiles all the time. He can't. He only sees the evil he's dealing with. Think good things about your cop, Norrie. It might only be until tomorrow. If he's lucky, there's a next day, then another. You, you've got your whole life in front of you."

I'd had an interesting few days with Rhoda. When she wasn't browbeating me into telling her my inner secrets, she was fretting over how little I ate.

"Gotta put some meat on those bones, child." She'd prepare some unsavory-sounding dish, which turned out to be quite delicious.

She was helping me in the mismatched mess that had been my clothes closet. She'd thought of a system, she informed me one morning, that would be implemented as soon as we got back from the shopping spree she had planned for that afternoon. I nearly maxed out one of my credit cards as I acquired an assortment of seasonally stylish outfits in coordinated colors. According to Rhoda, it was the "new you" and "you now wear the clothes, the clothes don't wear you". There were now tiny buttons, in groups of one to four on an inside seam telling me this blouse works with that skirt and this one doesn't.

Before this scheduled meeting at the police station she'd had one more surprise. She'd escorted me, with Fred along as my guard and chauffeur, for the "final touch". A new haircut with highlights by Leonard, her stylist. It was such fun to have Rhoda

standing on the sidewalk and Fred standing by the squad car clapping as I was presented with a “ta-da”. We celebrated with ice cream at a Yummy Scoops, “more flavors than stars in the sky”.

Here I sat, concentrating on something pleasant, thinking about things I missed so much, when a calm voice nearby asked, “Can I help you? Is there anything I can get you?”

I’d heard no one, felt no one. This man crept into my space without a hint. The emptiness I encountered felt familiar yet I didn’t know the voice.

“I...I was hoping that Officer Swetzler would come back and take me to an important meeting,” I said with some exasperation.

He didn’t answer for a few seconds then, with a slight accent, Hispanic maybe, said, “Fred was asked to meet with his sergeant and asked me to assure you that he would be back shortly.”

“Are you a policeman?”

“I’m sorry, I should have introduced myself. So busy trying to save souls, bring comfort to the men and women of our police force.” He shook my hand rather limply. His hand was clammy. In this heat, I wasn’t surprised.

“I am Jésus Barthol—dy,” he declared, his hesitation at his own name going over my head, “police chaplain.”

There was movement, people walking by. A bump on the knee and my purse, which I’d been carelessly holding quite loosely, spilled to the floor.

I leaned over, ready to scramble after the contents, when a hand on my shoulder restrained me.

Sitting back, I was assured by the chaplain, “Please, don’t apologize, it was those other people not watching where they were walking” and he’d find everything for me. He got up, handed the purse back to me and, still standing, took my hand. He placed a card in my palm, folded my fingers around it.

“There. I give these out to everyone, sort of a good luck charm. I know I have the teachings of the good book, but we can always leave something to chance.”

“What is it?” Holding it close to my face, I tried, rather pathetically, to make out what he’d given me, but all I could see was a fuzzy outline of light on darker gray.

“It’s a symbol. I think the Greeks adapted it from some pagan beliefs. Even the Druids had something similar. It’s a cross, inside a circle, inside a square.”

“What’s it mean?”

“It says ‘It serveth to protect against all earthly dangers’. For protection against those dangers beyond us, you’ll have to wait.”

I was telling him how enlightening this was and how much I appreciated his help when a familiar voice broke in.

"Norrie, who are you talking to? What are you doing out here by yourself?" Detective Hawke sounded surprised, somewhat annoyed, and his voice held an uncertainty, a hesitation I didn't understand.

"I was talking to the chaplain, Jésus Bartholdy. This is where my driver left me. Fred said he'd be right back but I think he's been detained."

Should I have told Brand that I'd been sitting here for at least half an hour? No. I didn't want to get Fred into trouble.

Just then I heard Fred's voice. "Sorry, Miss Benedict, that was some wild goose chase. The sergeant I was supposed to see isn't even on duty right now. Never did find who I was supposed to be talking to."

"Who told you to talk to your sergeant, Swetzler?" Brand sounded a little disturbed and that raised the first warning in me.

"Some new chaplain. Jésus Bartholdy. Left me a note with the desk sergeant." Fred sounded a tad defensive.

"Who's he?" Brand asked, and I could picture the uncertainty on his face. "The chaplain here is Lieutenant Ray Seymour."

Chapter Nine

"Come on, the meeting is about to start," said Brand. "Fred, we'll have the desk sergeant find you when we're finished." There was a snide veneer to the words and I wondered why. I didn't think it was aimed at Fred, but —

"The commissioner is chairing the meeting. Wants to make sure the task force knows what it's doing. As if we didn't already know. The man's a friggin' ass and that's not only my opinion," Brand's voice held disgust and derision.

He took my arm, guided me down a hall and we ascended stairs to a second floor that was even warmer, if that was possible, than the waiting hall.

"Some in the department are already joking that those on the task force are Randall's newest 'comic ass-kissers'. I suspect it doesn't matter. He's a political animal, well connected, with keen instincts and media savvy. Current public opinion is dissatisfied by the lack of action to apprehend the Preacher." We made a turn at the top, slowed approaching a room where the babble and prattle of voices rose and fell.

"How do I look?" I asked.

"Just fine, don't worry," Brand assured me, his voice not far from my ear and his breath warm on my cheek.

For a moment I stopped breathing. My arm tingled where his fingers touched me. What was I responding to — the uncertainty of the situation or Brand himself? I shut my mind to what I was feeling and readied myself mentally for the meeting.

There was a hush when we entered.

"I found her," he announced. "We need better protection though. She was a sitting duck down there."

I frowned at his description. I hadn't been alone, at least not all the time. If I hadn't known the seriousness of the situation, I might have found his reference to "sitting duck" funny. As it was, there were one or two chuckles.

"Well, Norrie, at least you're safe now," Dylan's familiar voice said laughingly. "Half a dozen valiant men, guns at their sides, ready to defend you."

I spoke hoarsely, cleared my throat. I felt awkward, a bit apprehensive, wanted to tender my regrets over some womanly thing and leave.

"Thank you. I can always hit my attacker over the head with my cast if someone comes after me." I received some applause and more laughter but thought better of going on with *thank you, you've been a great audience* or *gee, guys, just think, the psychic broad, the hocus-pocus bitch has a sense of humor*. The people who didn't know me could call me what they liked. I was ready to fend off distrustful looks, preconceived notions and negative stereotypes about psychics. I was proud of what I did, only there to help.

Deciding to keep my imaginary stand-up finale to myself, I was surprised to smell the choking stench of a cigar. This was supposed to be a non-smoking building, unless I'd misunderstood. Whoever this was must have some clout to be able to flaunt the rule so blatantly.

"Miss Benedict. I see you made it." Dylan had once described the commissioner as an effeminate fat man with a phony accent. I didn't know if he looked effeminate but his voice sounded normal and I couldn't tell how much floor space he occupied so I had no way of knowing if Dylan was right. I'd have to ask someone else, maybe Detective Hawke. As long as he stayed out of my space, I really didn't care. "I'm Rawleigh Randall, Miss Benedict." I didn't extend my hand. He took it anyway, pumped it several times. It was an affront, somewhat unsettling, but I attempted not to show my discomfort. I quashed the urgent desire to wipe my hand on my skirt when he finally released it. Then, he rudely leaned forward and blew the awful cigar smoke in my face. "Personally, I didn't think a civilian should be here, this is a professional investigation," Randall gloated. "The mayor insisted, over my objections. My good friend, the governor, thought the psychic angle had some interesting PR value. Might deflect the ineptitude of those investigating." Heavy sarcasm underlined the last few sentences.

Some close by obviously overheard the comments. Aversion and lack of respect for Randall from the others assaulted me from every side. My own resentment rose in a hot wave.

I would have to speak to Dylan and have him convince the others to curb some of their exuberance of feeling while I was with them. The air in this room, right now, was absorbing the energy of those in attendance. I was confused by the many different, unkind thoughts people were presenting, all of them aimed at Commissioner Randall.

It wouldn't do to miss an important fact from some piece of evidence because someone in the room was angry and unintentionally sharing their ire with me.

I stood in what was fast becoming a sweat box and listened to voices discussing evidence, lack of same and even one voice lamenting, "Too many bodies, not enough suspects." Another remarked, "Why can't we just find the bastard and string him up?"

A little vigilante justice from a cop?

It would save the public expense, I thought, for all the pre-trial nonsense, psychiatric examinations, the courtroom circus and the years of appeals. The murderer could get rich selling rights to an autobiography and a movie of the week. Some sicko cable TV producer might come up with a pilot for a reality how-to series.

I guess cops could become as frustrated as anyone else over their apparent inability to stop the Preacher.

"Norrie, guys, please be seated." Dylan's voice demanded attention. "Sorry about the heat, Public Works promised ASAP on repairs to the air-conditioning."

Feet shuffled and chairs banged. I fidgeted, not knowing where to sit. A hand on my arm startled me. I was relieved when Brand said, "Come sit with me." He took my

elbow, guided me to a chair and added, "I've just made you my personal assignment for today."

"Commissioner, you have the floor," said Dylan. His abrupt words brought me back to reality with a snap. A chair at the far end of the table scraped and Randall cleared his throat. There was a shift in the atmosphere, a hardening of the attitudes and a collective mental shrug from the group.

"Thank you, Lieutenant Jones," the commissioner began. He introduced a female political science student who'd be taking notes. She was interning with his office from a state university. "A transcript will be made available. I just want to make sure everyone here understands the severity of these crimes."

Randall rambled on for a few minutes, with some quotes from Quincy Adams, Benjamin Franklin and a quip from Mark Twain. Nobody laughed. Someone coughed. A cell phone went off and the officer excused himself and left the room. Undeterred, Randall continued making his comments, his speech sounding more like a battle cry of a fund-raiser than a crime briefing or a pep talk to the troops.

My mind strayed because something more important was trying to get into my head. My presence was being questioned. I wasn't wanted here. I tried to rebuff the thought and couldn't. It was too strong and I struggled to make sense of it.

I clamped my hand around the chair's seat to stop from grabbing Brand's arm, suspecting that someone's gaze was piercingly directed at me. I nudged his arm, leaned toward him and said, "Is someone staring at me?"

He whispered, "No."

"...and I'm giving you five days to get results or under the authority of the governor, state agencies will be brought in. I will not take kindly to that development." Rawleigh Randall gave a contemptuous laugh and concluded with, "Don't let me down."

My mind snapped back to the commissioner's words. What had I missed? Almost immediately, footsteps went swiftly from the room and a door closed. There were a few low exchanges and some wisecracks.

"*Cuall*," muttered Dylan.

The accusation that the assembled officers for Rocklynne and surrounding county were incompetent brought angry comments from most in the room.

Across the table someone said angrily, "Sure likes to throw his weight around."

To my left, another said, "Typical politician. No substance, lots of bullshit."

Brand inhaled, straining to calm himself. I offered comfort and laid my hand on his arm. He tensed, reacted sharply.

"Sorry, Norrie. I forget you *say* you can feel our energy." He leaned over and I shivered, his breath warm on my neck. For a moment my mind wandered and when his words finally registered, I was more than a little surprised.

I noticed the slight emphasis on the word “say”. I withdrew my hand and said, “It’s all right. I didn’t hear half of what he was saying, so he surprised me, too.”

Dylan’s voice abruptly cut into our hushed exchange.

“When you’re finished, Hawke, maybe you could help me here,” he said flatly. The waspishness told me he was annoyed and I sensed something was troubling him.

Were we holding up his meeting? Did he want to make sure everyone knew he was in command?

Jealous?

I smiled.

“Now that the commissioner and friend are gone, let’s get real,” Dylan continued. “If we catch this guy in the next day or two it will only be by divine intervention, and I don’t think that’s on the agenda.”

A few laughs helped lessen the tension, chairs were rearranged, and those who remained became more comfortable.

“Before we go too far, I want to introduce the only civilian who will be working on this task force. She’s been involved in some of the cases already, but she’s going to be totally involved from now on. She will attend all the meetings. She’s privy to all the information we have. And if she asks you something, you *will* help her. She may be a civilian, but right now she’s our best source of information.”

I listened as Dylan introduced me and related my involvement to date and felt embarrassed. I sounded like the best thing to come along to help the lowly, disadvantaged police force since they’d perfected fingerprinting, identikits, databases and DNA analysis.

Sliced bread couldn’t hold a candle to me.

“Norrie Benedict, people, is currently under police protection. She knows too much about the murderer and his victims. She is not to be left, like she was this morning, sitting anywhere in this building on her own. If she’s here, there should be someone from this task force with her at all times. Do I make myself clear?”

I didn’t hear any voices in the room. I was too shocked by what was happening in my head. The threat hit me like a bolt out of the blue—a lightning strike of malevolent thought—a death threat.

The death of someone here?

Someone I knew?

Me?

Chapter Ten

Just as quickly as the thought appeared, it was gone. Whoever it was blocked me. I must tell Dylan about the incident.

The sound of my name brought me back to the matter at hand. "Can you please tell these people what you've told us so far?" said Dylan. "Try and describe the barn. Maybe someone here will recognize it."

"Before I start, Dylan, can you introduce me to the people I'm working with?" I said, pushing optimism into my voice. "Then, if they can remember and sit where they are today each time I'm here, I'll know who's talking." There were muffled sounds as people turned in their seats, obviously intently watching me.

Dylan chuckled, "Sorry, honey, never even thought about it."

I wondered if he realized what he'd said.

He continued as though he hadn't. "I'm so used to you helping us, I guess I just figured you knew everyone." He hurriedly rattled off names and ranks. I'd need him to repeat them later. "Okay, now tell them what you saw."

I described the decrepit barn and its setting, which brought mutterings around the table. Suddenly, another blinding flash.

He, whoever he was, knew the rural building and its location.

What's going on here, I wondered? Someone must be putting up an incredible block for me to be unable to push back and read more. I hadn't been clairvoyant with many people in the past, other than Dylan. Now, I seemed to be overwhelmed by too much energy and in its midst, I was reading the mind of a killer.

"Before any of you start talking, could you please give me your name and rank again?" I tried to maintain a reasonable tone. "That way I'll have a mental picture of the layout around this table. And tell me what your connection is to the case. First, I should tell you I get no feeling for the kinds of trees. There's a shallow creek or stream because I could hear the water gently cascading over rocks and stones."

"Roy Ferran, Miss Benedict..."

"No, please, all of you, call me Norrie. No point in being too formal."

"All right, Norrie. I'm Roy Ferran, detective, Pilot Point. I was the lead investigator on the first two murders we now attribute to this slimeball. Can you tell if this barn is anywhere near the ocean or maybe the mountains? That would tell us which side of town to be looking at."

"I'm sorry. I haven't seen any indication of either."

"Well, there's a stream about ten miles out I'm thinking of. I've fished there. Wonderful brook trout." He hesitated, realizing fishing wasn't really important to this case.

"Where is this creek, Roy?" Brand's shoulder brushed past mine as he leaned forward.

"About ten miles east, sort of tumbling down out of the mountains. It's on the anglers' map as Hunter Creek."

"Any roads, easy access?" Brand asked.

"Just a one-lane dirt strip that would shake most of our cars to pieces. It's someplace you only want to be driving in a four-by-four."

"Okay," Dylan interrupted the discussion, probably in an effort to push it along. "Any other creeks anywhere close to town? How far do you think we should draw the circle? If we're going to look at all of them, we need to have some idea of how far out we go. Norrie, any ideas?"

"It's close and I have no doubt about it. Unfortunately, that's all I feel. As for a road, I didn't see the car, but the one I heard was, I think, a four-cylinder and I don't think there's too many of those with four-wheel drive. It was a small car, needed a tune-up and a new muffler."

"Brian Doppin, Detective Sergeant, Norrie. I'm from Detective Hawke's precinct, Stanley Park. I've been involved in all our cases. I've photographed all the evidence. How do you know it's a four-cylinder motor? That would restrict the car to something relatively small and lightweight and it would eliminate a lot of the roads around here."

"It goes with the loss of my sight. I can tell the difference between a four and the rest, but not between a six and eight. My hearing is much more acute than it was before."

"Okay, so we've got a small car and rough roads, narrowing it down some. Contact State Fish and Game, Forestry and BLM. Geological aerial surveys may even show private roads, abandoned farms and lumber mills. Anything else, Norrie?" Dylan must have been in a hurry.

"Not really. It's dark when I see it. I'd need to see the setting in more light to tell you anything else." I hesitated, unsure of what to do, but I knew I needed to say something. Let whoever was thinking about the barn know they had the right place.

"There is one more thing, Dylan. Twice this morning, I've received some kind of thought transference involving death and the barn. Someone in this room has recently been there."

There was dead silence. I waited, hoping whoever it was would step forward and say something. There were only two people in the room I could eliminate—Dylan and Brandon Hawke. I knew Dylan would tell me. Brand might have tried to block me, but at this close proximity, I doubt he could.

"All right, get to work," commanded Dylan. "See if we can pinpoint this creek and find the barn. The rest of us will be working at getting everything into the computers."

There was a general shuffling of chairs and feet as everyone reacted to Dylan's dismissal. I stayed seated until everyone had left except Dylan and Brand.

"Lieutenant, I don't know about this. Do we have time to waste looking for a creek? Just because she says it's there? We could be chasing our tails here." Brand had hurriedly moved away from beside me to the other end of the room, keeping his conversation with Dylan subdued.

I was quite rightly shaken and disappointed. Not only was he trying to undermine me, he did it while I was still within earshot. I thought we had a better understanding going for us.

"I take it you still don't believe my gifts work, Detective," I said coldly, my voice rising to make sure he heard me.

"No, Miss Benedict, I think you might be guessing most of the time." His voice indicated he'd turned toward me. "I've been reading up on your kind of psychic claims and still think it's a crock. You could have told us a body is along the banks of the Columbia and we'd have men dragging the bottom. How about...the victims are in a basement of the abandoned tenement. Maybe in a vacant field across from the rail yards. If we didn't find anything, you'd say the vibrations were incomplete and the deck of tarot cards got the wrong shuffle. Oops, sorry folks, but I'm sure you guys don't mind all the overtime."

"So how, Detective, did I know what you were thinking this afternoon?"

"That wouldn't have been too hard. Practically everyone in this room had time to come to the same conclusion," Brand replied. "Anyone listening to the idiot Randall could have daydreamed your startling revelation. You're a carnival act, Norrie. Get yourself a booth. Come one, come all. For a buck I'll tell you which closet has the skeleton. For another two bits, you can tell me."

I shook my head in frustration, my stomach clenching in something like pain. I'd trusted this man to the point of telling him things about myself no one else had learned. We seemed to have built a rapport. Now this. I turned away and lowered my face, hoping no one could see my despair. I thought I'd convinced Brandon Hawke of my abilities and here he was infuriated and treating me as a sideshow freak.

"Miss Benedict," Martin Jamison was still there, a surprise because he hadn't bothered to say anything until now.

I wondered why.

"Yes, Detective?" He was another one on my list of people who would get the formal treatment. I'd forgiven him his slip at the hospital but I couldn't seem to get a reading on him. To me, he was an unknown. "Did you find Detective Hawke funny?"

"Not in the least. Really, I find all this quite interesting. If you could hear the motor that well, could you hear anything like the sound of rocks under the wheels, anything to indicate whether this was a gravel or a dirt road? Maybe even a paved road?"

"Very good, Detective. Move to the top of the class," said Dylan. Sarcasm was getting to be Dylan's strong point at this meeting.

"He's got a good question, Dylan." I had to interrupt. For the moment, at least, Detective Jamison was treating me seriously. If he were willing to talk about my *readings*, I'd reserve judgment on him. "From what I remember, I'd have to say the road might be paved. I don't recall hearing the crunch of gravel or the sound of gravel bouncing off the car's underbody."

"Good job then, Martin." Dylan at least gave praise to the men under him when it was deserved. "Considering how often Norrie is right, I should have listened and not reacted as I did. Questions like that will help us, if we can eliminate some of the creeks and roads. Now get out there and start looking."

I heard a snort from the general direction of Detective Hawke, or at least from where he'd been standing. Dylan told me, earlier in the week, that no one had indicated any reluctance to work with me. I wondered what had happened to cause Brand to do an about-face. Now I had to worry about him trying to discredit me with the rest of the task force.

"Dylan, am I finished? I'd like to head home now."

"Sure thing. Hang on, I'll find your driver and make arrangements for your surveillance."

"Thanks." I retreated into the darkness of my mind, tuned out the others and wondered what it would take to convince Detective Brandon Hawke I was not a fake or a charlatan.

I smiled at the realization.

I'd have to catch the killer.

Chapter Eleven

I was in a drowsy jumble of numbness and fantasy. I jumped when a hand touched my shoulder.

The heat made me drowsy.

The fantasy was Dylan.

"Sorry, honey, didn't mean to scare you. You were miles away." My fantasy was bending over me, breath warm on my cheek. "Something on your mind?"

"Are we alone?" I whispered, hoping the others had left.

"Yes. Why?" I thought I'd like to kiss him, but this was neither the time nor the place.

"Dylan, you've got to find out who in this room this afternoon knew about the barn."

"You're sure? When you spoke, they were all still here. I was watching them. Nobody looked like they were covering up. Nobody's expression changed. Of course, these guys have played 'good cop bad cop' so many times, they're trained not to give anything away. This bunch has perfected the poker face." His voice sounded skeptical, which didn't please me.

First Brand, now Dylan? Were they sorry they'd asked for my help?

"Yes, I'm sure. I sensed it twice."

"All right. I'll see if there's a way to check it out. Anything else?"

I hesitated, wondering if I should say anything about the death threat. It came from someone in the room and I wondered if it was the same person who knew the whereabouts of the barn. If I told Dylan, he'd inform the rest of the task force and they'd all think I was nuts for sure. They'd start wondering why they were working with me.

I could wait.

"No, that's it for now. Just need a ride home and I'm set."

"All right, you wait here, I'll see if I can locate Swetzler or I'll find you someone else." He walked away, stopped, came back.

"You're looking really nice today, Norrie. Things working better? Find yourself a new aide?"

I was thunderstruck.

The only time Dylan ever remarked on my clothes was when there was something wrong. Today he was complimenting me!

"Th...thank you, Dylan. I had some help."

"Well, whatever it is, you're looking much better. And you've done something with your hair."

My, my, my! The man was a wonder.

"I got it cut."

He stepped closer. "Norrie, what are you doing tonight?" he murmured in a low, gentle voice.

"Nothing." Please, not another damn meeting. "Why?"

"Have you got time to take a drive with me while I pick up an evidence bag in Stanley Park?" He hesitated. Cleared his throat.

I stiffened. My hands became fists.

"Then I'd like to take you out to dinner. Maybe a river cruise, drinks later at my place."

Oh, my. How did he look when he said that? A scoundrelly smile, a mocking brow, a sardonic twist of the underlip, drooping of an eyelid? Perhaps a boyish, aw shucks, tight smile, now we'd gone kinda steady for a day or so, can I take you for a soda later, huh?

Who cared? Thank you Rhoda and Leonard!

"That would be lovely, Dylan." I had to work at controlling my breathlessness. "What's the evidence? This case?"

I tried to keep my mind on business, but I had butterflies making me nervous and a little bit scared of being alone with this man.

I'd wanted this to happen since I'd come to know and like him. When he started calling me sweetheart and honey, I'd been on tenterhooks.

Did I look good enough to go out with him? Was I dressed well enough to go wherever he wanted to go? Could I eat out in public without embarrassing both of us?

"No, it's the last piece from a case we closed yesterday," he answered. "Just need to get it back here before the case gets to court."

"Where do you want to go for dinner?" I asked.

"How about that seafood place down on Garden? The Briny Deep has a relaxed atmosphere. I'm not dressed for anything fancy. You're fine. You'll have all the guys in the place eyeing you with lecherous looks, drooling in their soup and salad from their salacious thoughts and envying me."

I tingled deep inside. If he kept this up, I'd be incoherent.

I smiled in his general direction and was surprised, when I felt his sleeve brush my arm, to find he'd moved to stand even closer. "Dylan, don't tease."

"I'm not teasing, Norrie. You look radiant today. I don't think I've ever seen you look this good."

Dylan's lips caressed my forehead, his fingers stroked my cheek. Trembling, I lifted my face, gave him the chance, if he cared to take it. I began to sizzle, I was thinking such scorching thoughts. Dylan and me, an evening of pleasure, a romp in a king-size bed.

His mouth moved slowly down my cheek and I parted my lips, ready for his. Whispered words took me slightly aback, but not enough to cool my ardor.

"It's about time, *anwylyd*. You're finally getting it all together. For a while there, I worried about you. You seemed to lose all desire to be a woman."

"Oh, I haven't lost it, Dylan. It just took me a little time to recover. I think the old me is finally back," I replied softly and seductively.

Where had those words come from?

New clothes? New hair?

I absorbed his hot breath, his mouth found mine, hearts beating as one. I asked for and got what he was giving. Sensual, loving, caressing of tongue to tongue, along my teeth, my lips and as he deepened the kiss I felt the rest of the way.

I was in love with this man.

I didn't think he was ready to return my love. I wasn't sure he even knew what love was. But lust was as good a place as any to begin. And there was certainly something between us.

I almost laughed out loud with the thought.

There *was* something between us and the hardening ridge of his arousal was telling me I had him right where I wanted him. My hand slid from his arm to his back, pulling him closer, coaxing him.

I felt a muscle twitch.

There was a knock.

"Hey, Lieutenant, you're wanted on the phone," came the shout from behind the door.

"Ah, shit," was Dylan's exasperated sigh. He backed away from me as soon as he heard the desk sergeant's call.

"Are you all right?" He rearranged my blouse, gently touched my face.

"I'm just fine. You'd better take the call. It might be important."

My heart and my hormones would slow down in their own sweet time.

Dylan's kiss set me free. Whatever I'd been afraid of was gone. No man could ever hurt me again the way my fiancé'd hurt me after the accident.

Dylan steered me toward the door and down the hall to an office, directed me to a chair, picked up the phone.

"Jones here." I listened, hoping this wasn't something that would cancel our dinner date. I wanted to continue what we'd started. I thought we both wanted it.

I was still involved in my fantasy thoughts when his voice registered with me.

"Okay, Darlucci, tell them to keep looking. Sooner or later he's gonna set up shop again."

Darlucci. Was he on the task force? Was this to do with our case?

"Good. Call me when you find out." He hung up, heaving a small sigh of relief.

Dinner was still on.

"Sorry, Norrie. Antonio was checking out the paper trail at City Hall, trying to find out if Thaddeus James had set up any new congregations anywhere."

"And has he?" I didn't want to talk about a serial killer. I wanted to talk about Dylan. About us. Find out if there *was* an us.

"Not so far." He shuffled papers, pushed his chair back, came around the desk to me. When his hand slid beneath my arm I stood, leaning into him.

"Come on, *cariad*, let's get out of here before someone else decides to phone. If I stay the damn thing will just keep on ringing. Tonight it's no phone, no pager. I'll leave word at the front desk where we are in case they need to reach me. At the moment we have something more urgent to take care of."

"You're just too popular for your own good, Mr. Jones. How many of those calls are ladies fighting over you?"

My God, I was flirting with the man and I loved it.

"None, Miss Benedict. Don't have time. But tonight I'm making time for you. We both need a break and I could use your company." He slid his arm around my waist, drew me close and steered me down the hall.

I don't think my feet touched the floor all the way to the car. I couldn't remember walking down the stairs or hearing anyone in the waiting room. Once we hit the door to the underground parking garage, I could smell the stale exhaust fumes that cling to such places and thought it was wonderful. I was going out to dinner with Dylan Jones because he wanted my company.

He'd kissed me.

I'd kissed him back and he'd taken it further.

Did he love me? I'd settle for whatever this was for now, but I hoped so. I guessed I'd lied to Detective Hawke. I had a date!

The car he bundled me into was not the same long dark shadow I usually saw him in. This was low-slung, with soft, supple leather seats and the new car smell that turned me on.

"What is this, Dylan?" He used his hand to protect my head, a policemanly thing that was obviously a habit, tucked my skirt in, closed my door, and a moment later let himself in the driver's side.

"It's my pride and joy. I'm sure some shrink someplace would call it a status symbol or something like that. But I always promised myself when I could afford it, I'd have an S-type Jaguar. I inherited some money from my grandmother's estate last month and picked this up last week." His hand was on my knee, squeezing. "You're her

first passenger. Norrie, meet Nellie Belle.” I heard the laughter bubbling below the surface of his words and decided to play along.

“Charmed, Nellie Belle.” Giggling, I reached out to pat the dash, rubbing my fingers over real wood. “Where’d you get the name?”

“If I tell you, promise me you won’t laugh.”

“Promise.”

“I used to watch The Roy Rogers Show on the BBC. The white hats against the black hats, the good guys always winning...”

“I remember seeing a few episodes on the Western Channel.”

“Well, Roy Rogers’ sidekick was Pat Brady, and Pat drove a jeep called Nellie Belle. Every one of my cars since then has been a Nellie Belle.”

“Dylan, that’s sweet! But his jeep didn’t have that leaping cat on the hood. Does this one?” I was trying not to laugh but I wasn’t doing very well. I heard Dylan’s chuckle and knew I hadn’t succeeded at all.

“Go ahead, laugh. But let me tell you, this will be the last Nellie Belle. I’m going to keep this car as long as I live. There won’t be another.”

A violent shiver rocked my body as he said those words. I felt fear and pain but I didn’t know whose. I didn’t realize I’d made a noise but something alerted Dylan to my problem.

“What’s the matter, love? You all right?”

It was a moment before I could speak.

“Yes. I am now. But I just had the most frightening thought from someplace. I don’t know who it was, but they had a moment of pure terror and a flash of incredible pain. Then it just stopped.”

“Do you want me to take you home?”

“No! Definitely not home. I want to be with you.” I felt his warm hand as he wrapped his strong fingers around mine and turned my hand over so I could grasp his. I clutched him as tightly as I could, although my cast was getting in the way. I needed to ground myself and rid my brain of the thoughts I’d conjured from some deep recess of ugliness. I didn’t want anything ruining what looked to be the beginning of a wonderful evening.

“Okay, then, we’ll go get that dinner. If you get any more thoughts like that, you tell me. All right?”

I nodded.

“Good. Let’s get out of here.” He gave my hand a squeeze. A key hit the metal on the ignition and the car beneath us purred to life. I heard the gearshift click and the rich, low rumble from the tailpipe and we moved so smoothly as to be almost unnoticeable.

I took deep breaths in an effort to relax and drain the tension from my body. I had no idea where the ominous thoughts were coming from and no idea who they were

about. Until I knew more, I could do nothing. I focused on ridding my head of all unpleasant thought.

I felt the car slow and in the silence could hear a siren as it picked up speed and volume and disappeared into the night. We were at the Stanley Park precinct house.

"Just sit tight. I'll only be a minute. You're in front of the police station and I'm going to have one of the uniforms come out and stay by the car until I get back."

I'd forgotten I was still getting police protection. I was so caught up in the fantasy of a date with Dylan Jones, I'd lost track of the reality.

"I'm not going anywhere."

I heard his door open, close and suddenly felt very vulnerable.

Dylan was gone only a few minutes when I heard the trunk open and I assumed he was stowing the evidence. He spoke to someone close by.

"Thanks, Rezlawky. You're done."

Rezlawky must have been the uniform standing guard over Nellie Belle and me. I wondered which of us was more important to Dylan Jones and decided I really didn't want to know.

The car began to roll and I relaxed back into my seat. The low sound of someone singing on the radio surrounded us, soothed me. I hadn't noticed it before. Dylan must have turned it on just as we started to move.

"Now for dinner. What do you like, Norrie? Shrimp, lobster? What?"

"I love it all. But we'll have to figure out what I can handle with this cast. Maybe some popcorn shrimp?"

"What would you *really* like? What would you have if you didn't have the cast?"

"Rare steak and crabs' legs. But I'm afraid that's out. I can't cut the steak or crack the crab. I'll make out all right, Dylan, don't worry about me."

We rode in silence for a few minutes more.

"We're here. I'm going to find a parking spot then walk you in. I'd drop you at the door normally, but there's no one around to watch out for you."

The edge was beginning to tarnish on this dream I was having. Dylan was thinking too much about keeping me safe and not enough just about me.

Dinner began as a wonderful affair. Dylan cancelled my order, insisting I have the rare steak and crab. We were sitting in a horseshoe-shaped booth and he moved to the back, closer to me. We talked about the case, rehashing what we knew until our food arrived. He cut up my steak, cracked the crab. I'd had three years of getting into the bad habit of eating with my fingers. I sat, wondering how I'd find the pieces with my fork, when I felt a flake of the crab touch my lips.

A laughingly seductive, low voice spoke. "Open for me, Norrie."

Surprised, I did as I was told. He forked the tasty morsel into my mouth and I sat back and inhaled the flavor. I was caught off guard by Dylan's thumb on my lip, wiping up the clarified butter that dribbled on my chin.

Without thinking, when his thumb hit my lips I opened my mouth, took it between my teeth, licked the flavorful juice from his skin. He inhaled sharply. His hot breath on my cheek warned me he had closed the distance between us.

"You minx!" His whispered words gave me only a second's warning. His lips covered mine and his hand moved to my back as he drew my body closer to his. The kiss was tentative, but grew quickly. As he deepened the kiss there was urgency between us. And if we hadn't been in a public place I'm not sure we could have stopped the fire that sprang into full blazing glory.

His hand on my back moved higher, his other hand turned me to him. Fingers traced the edge of my blouse where it veed between my breasts. Every nerve in my body came to attention. His finger moved deeper inside my blouse. He undid the top button. His finger on the swell of my breast was the most excruciatingly painful pleasure I'd known in a long time. I was slowly moving my hand down his shirtfront, heading for his belt.

The waiter's discreet cough broke us apart. My good hand was closest to Dylan and as he pulled back he laced his fingers through mine and held my hand against his thigh, rubbing it gently up and down, sideways. There was heat and dampness between my legs.

I venomously wished the waiter a quick trip to hell.

Dylan finally spoke in a hoarse voice.

"Yes?"

"Are you Lieutenant Dylan Jones?"

My stomach sank. If he was asking for Dylan by rank, this was business.

"Yes. What's the matter?"

The waiter put something on the table and reached behind me.

"Call for you, sir."

A cord touched my arm.

"Thanks," he said, reluctance in his voice. Dylan's body moved as he reached for the phone, turning and giving me a quick hard kiss before he answered. He still held my hand and wasn't giving any sign of letting go.

"Jones, here. Who's this?"

"Rolf, sir."

Dylan leaned so the receiver was closer to my ear and I could hear the voice that ruined my evening.

"What's up, Rolf?"

"Boss, we've got another one."

Chapter Twelve

"Another what?" asked Dylan.

"Another dead woman," Rolf replied. "Same M.O. as the others."

Hell! Number ten.

"Where? Which precinct?" Dylan asked, assuming the authority of his rank. The man who'd been my passionate date at a romantic dinner disappeared, replaced by Rocklynne police Lieutenant Dylan Jones.

"Just down the street from the last one," Rolf continued. "The body's in a vacant lot, wrapped in some kind of sheet. Roy Ferran has secured the scene and first report says the body is mutilated. Pieces are missing and I'm assuming it's the hands."

Damn! Why couldn't this monster stop?

"Thanks, Rolf. We'll be there in about fifteen minutes." Dylan called the waiter to retrieve the phone, then added, "Could you please box this to go? We'll take it with us." My plate, still full of good food, disappeared with only a passing hint of the aromas of what we were missing.

Leaning toward me, Dylan's finger traced my jawline, and he placed another not-so-gentle kiss on my willing lips.

"I'm sorry. This isn't what I'd planned." His tongue, tracing my lips, told me what I would be missing. I parted my lips to his questing tongue but he withdrew. "I'd take you back to the station, but I'd rather you come with me. Are you up to it?"

"I think so. I want to stop this bastard as badly as the rest of you." If the truth were known, I'd like to part this monster from his balls and shove 'em where the sun don't shine. I forgot for that one moment to be the lady I was brought up to be. My mother would have a fit if she knew I thought such nasty thoughts.

"Maybe you'll get a chance to pick up something at the site." Dylan's voice was all Lieutenant mode.

He slid out of the booth, came around and held my arm as I stood. He dropped his hand, moved away without me, remembered and returned to my side. His arm around my waist drew me tightly to him. He stopped long enough to pay the bill, led me out and into the car. He reached behind my seat, his arm brushing my shoulder, and pulled back. I heard the thunk of magnet to metal on the coupe's roof and realized he'd pulled out a flashing dome light. His S-type Jag had just been turned into the sportiest unmarked police car in the Northwest. I could hear the light's motor as it revolved.

"God, Norrie, I'm sorry. This isn't what I wanted for us tonight. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes. I was getting a pretty good idea. You can't know how sorry I am this had to stop. I think I finally broke free tonight, Dylan, thanks to you."

"I *know* you did, *anwylyd*. I felt your body responding. If that call hadn't come, I think I'd have been dragging you out of there before we even finished eating. You'd have become my main course."

"And you would have been dessert."

Grabbing me around my waist, he hauled me unceremoniously across the gearshift and the handbrake, into his lap. We were pinned by the steering wheel. My cast hit the rearview mirror with a bang. We couldn't be any closer. At least out here in his car we wouldn't be disturbed.

His mouth on mine was hot. Hotter than it had been inside the restaurant. His tongue once more demanded entry. I opened to him and felt his urgency. Sitting in his lap, I also felt the arousal I wouldn't enjoy this night. We couldn't make out in the front seat of this car—or could we?

For a moment I thought he meant to go on, but his hand, inside my blouse, cupping my breast, feathering my nipple, hesitated.

"Oh, please, don't stop." I was desperate! I wanted this man so much I'd have welcomed him spread-eagle on the hood of this car, much less in the front seat in the parking lot of a public place, red light revolving above us.

Thank God, Dylan still had his wits about him. "We can't, Norrie. Not here. I want it to be nice for you, in my arms, in my bed, not in the car like a couple of groping teenagers with the hots for each other."

His hands put me back together, rearranged buttons I didn't realize he'd undone, smoothed out fabric and stroked my face.

"Later, love, later." He lifted me back across the gearshift and secured my seat belt.

I couldn't talk. I could only sit there, fantasizing about what I was missing. All because of some sociopathic psycho killer.

"Go, Dylan, they'll be waiting for us." Those were the hardest words I'd had to say in a long time.

It didn't take us many minutes to get to the scene. We parked and Dylan came to my door, helped me out. There was a rustle nearby and footsteps approached.

"What have you got?"

"White woman. Late twenties. Body's mutilated." I heard his voice grow faint and worried about what he'd say next. I was a member of this task force and decided the time had come to act like one of the team.

"What kind of mutilation, Roy?" I inquired. "Describe it for me, please."

"Sorry, Norrie, I was thinking about what this bastard did to her," said Roy. "She had to have suffered, something awful."

I reached out my hand, found his shoulder and gave it a sympathetic squeeze. "Please, tell me."

"He did the same thing to her as he did to that black woman, cut off her nipples. But he didn't stop there, he stabbed her countless times, just like the last vic." Bile rose in the back of my throat.

"What else?" Dylan's voice was now slightly more supportive of the man. Whatever had happened to the victim was definitely affecting Roy Ferran.

"The killer gutted her," the Pilot Point detective continued. "Sliced her open from breastbone to pubis then pulled everything out." He gagged and I knew if I weren't careful I'd be doing the same. I swallowed fast, several times, trying to keep myself from throwing up.

I squeezed the man's shoulder still harder, giving him what little I could in the way of comfort.

"And she's one of the Preacher's victims, almost certainly," he went on. "Her hands are missing. It's like he did everything to her he's done to all the others, then added this final new touch." He swallowed hard, clearing his throat in what had to be an absolute emotional response to what he'd seen. "Sorry. I don't think I've ever seen anything quite this bad before."

"That's okay, man," assured Dylan. "These cases just get harder with every new victim."

I pulled away from Dylan, hoping he'd take my hint. I wanted to see the victim, to be near her and see if there was anything left for her to tell me.

As he led me closer, I smelled the coppery scent of blood, telling me there was plenty of it around. What interested *me* was that from someplace close I was getting energy from the murderer. I didn't want to spook him. I turned back toward Dylan, crowding him, so I could speak softly.

"Dylan, he's here. Are there people standing around, watching? A man with auburn hair?"

"No, there's only a couple of women over on the sidewalk."

"There's got to be someone else. I can feel him."

Another thought came crashing through.

"Dylan, he's laughing at us."

"Norrie, I can't see anyone who doesn't belong. There's just the task force and the two ladies on the sidewalk, likely hookers." Roy Ferran moved to stand at my other side as he spoke.

"I'm telling you, he's among us. Very, very close."

The sound of maniacal laughter floated around me and I spun, trembling, trying to pinpoint its direction, just as two pairs of hands grabbed me. "Careful. You're going to fall." Dylan's hand steadied me and stayed on my arm this time.

"He's with us in this field."

"There's no one else, Norrie." His voice was tinged with impatience, as though he wanted to move on with the immediate investigation and I was stopping him. "He

might have been here when we arrived, but now there's only you and me, Ferran, Hawke and Jamison. The forensics team hasn't even arrived yet."

I stood, trying to feel anything more that might help us, continuing to hear the killer's voice.

Who's going to be next, Miss Benedict?

He paused and laughed the sickening sound once more.

You?

Chapter Thirteen

"No!" I gasped, tense and shaking. "Please, go and leave us alone."

"What?" Dylan snapped, sounding genuinely surprised.

"Dylan, he's talking to me." I about-faced, then swung around twice more, searching frantically for the source of the terrible message.

"Norrie, there's no one —"

"I don't care." My voice cracked and I clutched his arm tightly. "Why should I make it up? He's reaching out, taunting us, threatening me. He *has* to be nearby." I stopped speaking, listened intently for more from the mysterious and deadly entity. Nothing. I pressed on. "His thoughts are too strong, too clear. He just has to be here and you can't see him."

"Norrie..." Condescension crept into his voice. He fussed, lifted my hand off his arm, drifted away from my side, retreating to his crime scene. I sensed I was becoming a nuisance, a distraction. His impatience with my presence suddenly disturbed me. I didn't deserve to be ignored or ridiculed. I was part of this task force because he wanted the benefit of my gift. Now, just because I was telling him something he didn't want to hear, he decided to ignore me. I couldn't let him get away with this or our murderer would have a chance to strike again.

I called after him, "Don't, Dylan. I know what I heard and felt. You recruited me for this damn task force to use my gifts. So use them, let me do my job."

He didn't answer. I stared in the direction I thought he'd gone, hoping he'd been too far away to hear me and wasn't really shutting me out. These awful weeks pursuing a serial killer were taking their toll on everyone's emotional strength and strained those most concerned. Dylan's mettle would be the last to crumble. Mine was eroding quickly.

I swallowed hard and my heart beat in my throat. I suddenly realized I might have been left standing alone.

"Can I help?" came a whisper from beyond my perennial darkness and occasional ghost-like shadows.

"Roy?" I reached for him. I sighed as he took my hand. "Thank you for sticking with me. Will you watch for me so I don't trip or get too close to the body, contaminating the scene?"

"I'm with you," he assured me, squeezing my fingers, giving me comfort. "You're starting to think like a cop."

I managed a slight smile and relaxed. "Where's Dylan?" I asked, certain it was a moot question, for the detective had obviously been watching his commanding officer's reaction to my frightening experience.

"Taking charge. He's over by one of the squad cars, talking with Jamison and Hawke."

"Why are they here?"

"Hawke was at the station and rode with me, Jamison heard the call when only a few blocks away. Anybody on a task force who's available is expected at the scene. Uniforms have surrounded the area, forensics is on its way. Takes them a few minutes to collect any extra equipment they might need. I understand there was another homicide, a knifing at a bar." He let out a long sigh. "I'll be glad when vacation time is over, then the flu season passes, so we're back to departmental strength."

Dylan barked orders, now some distance behind me. He was either ignoring me, leaving me to my thoughts, or content to have Roy Ferran baby-sit the resident psychic. I suppressed frustration and turned to Roy, composed now.

"Can you take me as close to the victim as you can?" I asked, sensing a quick, low-level energy disturbance, not sure from what direction. As we walked arm in arm, my feet sank in the damp soil, wetness seeped through the soles of my shoes and tall grass brushed against my bare legs.

"Sorry, about that," came Roy's apology. "I should have warned you about the conditions."

"Hazards of being a rookie, a psychic investigator," I shrugged, took a few more steps and stopped. We'd moved further away, distancing us from the evil source, which puzzled me.

"Wait. I need to turn around slowly." Roy walked me in a circle. "I'm feeling something. I thought as we neared the victim it would become stronger. What's directly in front of me?" I asked and pointed.

"The sidewalk makes a curve," came his response. "A few bushes about twenty feet to the right. Before those, a bus bench and a newspaper box."

"A bench? Take me to it, please." He led me toward it, redirecting me around immovable obstacles, then stopped and placed my hand gently on the back of the bench. A jolt of negative energy slammed through me at the touch, whether left by the Preacher or the victim, I wasn't sure. I suspected the victim would have left fear and terror, not the hate that rolled through me in waves.

"I think he sat here, Roy, waiting for her." I instantly removed my hand and my mouth dried briefly. "Maybe she got off a bus?"

"Let me check," said the detective. Beeping noises as he punched the keys on a cell phone. I waited expectantly, feeling tension in my shoulders.

"This is Detective Roy Ferran, Rocklynne PD, badge number seven eight four three, I need to speak to your supervisor."

I tuned out during his inquiry, unable to shrug off the lingering thoughts from a malevolent source. My heart started to pound, memories of other horrible events flashing before my mind's eye.

A hand touched my arm and I jumped.

"Sorry, Norrie, didn't mean to startle you. Transit dispatch says four buses passed here in the last three hours. After five p.m. the schedule cuts back sharply because this is designated industrial area."

"What about those two women who were on the sidewalk? Why were they here?"

"Working girls in the sex trade," replied Roy. "This has become an unofficial red-light district. There's a coffee shop down the street where some of them hang out between tricks, and like them, the dive is always open for business." He chuckled and added, "Do you need to be there?"

I considered not answering, finally murmured grudgingly, "Yes, I should cover all possibilities and be thorough, for the sake of the victims."

The detective guided me across the street and into the eatery. The air hung heavy with rancid odors and choking cigarette smoke, many lost dreams and little hope.

I smiled to myself when there was a hush of conversation and routine insults among the customers. Only the raucous, unmelodic sounds of a jukebox played on.

"I take it no one here has come forward to greet us?" I said.

"Nope, not exactly a house of hospitality," laughed Roy. "Usually when the law shows up, it's a narc or vice conducting a brief shakedown. Wait 'til they find a division of homicide dicks in here, the block cordoned off with squad cars and streamers of yellow crime-scene tape and the coroner's meat wagon parked out front. Then you've got a bunch of unfriendly, pissed-off locals." The detective laughed again and squeezed my arm. "You picking up anything or would you prefer some fresh air?"

I'd expected to stumble into sensitive quicksand and be overwhelmed by the now familiar tug of impending horror. Relieved I hadn't found it, I shook my head. "Let's go back, Roy, there's nothing here."

We returned to the opposite side of the street. I was about to step into the vacant lot where the victim lay when I was rocked by fear and incredible pain, triggered by another spasm of the killer's rage and hate. The image of her last moment before death claimed her—the fatal wound, vicious stab that spilled her body and blood onto her final resting place.

"Aahh..." I doubled over, absorbing the imaginary thrust, covering my belly with splayed fingers, preventing my own body from being split asunder. Consumed by physical anguish so violently intense I wanted to scream, I fought against the surge of unconsciousness threatening to seize me. My first impulse was to faint and fall. Instead, I cried, "God, no...stop!"

"Norrie? Norrie, what's wrong?" It wasn't Roy Ferran's voice. Brandon Hawke spoke softly at my ear while his arms surrounded me as I slumped forward. Only his quickness saved me from falling to the ground.

"Stand up. Take a deep breath, you're safe. You're with us."

I tried to stand, the pain receded. I gasped like a fish out of water.

"My God, she was...she was still alive when he...when...when he did...that." The horror was making it hard for me to talk.

"Come on, Norrie." Total disbelief. "Those injuries *had* to be postmortem."

"Detective, I'm telling you, she was alive." I shook my head, trying to clear the fog from my brain and denying my words by my actions. "She was alive."

"Okay, we'll accept that for now. The ME's report will either confirm or refute. Dylan wants you."

"Roy?" I didn't know what had happened to Detective Ferran, but I had to thank him.

"I'm here, Norrie."

"Thank you. For helping me. Can you find out from the bus dispatcher where those buses came from? It might help track down the victim's path here. Maybe help us identify her."

"Sure thing. Tell Dylan I'm going back to the precinct house. I can use the computers and I'll start the files in the operations room."

Muffled footsteps were swallowed by the night as he walked away from us across the grass and dirt. I was alone again with Detective Hawke.

"Let's go. Dylan's waiting." His short, gruff sentences annoyed me. He was still operating in a state of disbelief.

His arm touched mine and I put my hand on him so he could lead me. I didn't say anything, not in a mood to argue with this arrogant man about what I'd felt. Having him throw it back in my face was not an option tonight.

We stopped walking after only a few short steps. I assumed we'd reached Dylan and I was surprised when Brand spoke.

"What in God's name happened back there?" he asked, obviously confused. I knew he didn't want to believe, but he'd seen everything, heard everything.

"I don't know, Detective. I felt what the victim felt. I wasn't touching anything of hers so it only lasted a moment. I can't tell you anything more until I get something of hers to *read*."

"Norrie, is it safe?" I heard his concern and wondered why he was worrying. He didn't believe, so he shouldn't be worried it would hurt me. Or...

"Detective, why..."

"Norrie, come on." I heard his exasperation. "You were calling me Brand at the hospital. Have I angered you so much because I can't understand what's happening?"

Because I don't know if I can suspend my disbelief long enough to consider what you say?"

"No, detective. I'm not angry because you don't believe. I'm angry because you don't have an open mind that can consider something other than what you believe. You're a narrow-minded..." Words failed me. He let go of me and I realized he'd turned to face me.

"Then teach me, Norrie. Show me. Make me a believer." He sounded as though this meant a great deal to him.

"I, uh, Brand, you make this very difficult." My fingers were tapping my cast, something I'd caught myself doing this past week whenever my frustrations threatened to overcome me. "I can't make you a believer. That's up to you. All I can do is show you what happens. What you saw at the hospital, back there. You're the one who has to accept I do that. I really do feel or hear or taste or smell something you can't feel, can't hear, can't taste or smell. It's called a gift, Brand, by people who don't have it." I drew a deep breath and lowered my voice, as if unwilling to admit what I was about to say. "To me it's something I wish I'd never known."

We stood, neither of us able to speak. I didn't know what he was thinking but I knew what I wanted.

"Brand, please, take me back to Dylan. He's waiting for me."

"Sure, come on." He was subdued, so quiet I wondered again what he was thinking, but I couldn't ask.

We reached Dylan in time to hear him give orders to the forensics team, who had apparently just arrived.

A hand on my free arm startled me, then Brand's partner, Martin Jamison, spoke.

"Are you all right, Miss Benedict? Can I get you anything?"

"No, Detective, I'll be fine. This is what I meant about reacting to what I feel. It'll get worse before I'm done," I warned him.

The sound of the forensics team moving around the site intruded and I realized I had to stop them now.

"Dylan?" I interrupted. I wanted something before things got too involved. "Dylan? Stop. Please. Don't let them move anything yet." I heard the sounds of movement halting, people waiting to see what I was going to do.

"Why, Norrie? They need to get the scene catalogued and move the body."

"No. I want to get as close to her as I can and do a reading. Right here. This is where I think she was killed. Where he made the final wounds. It's all you're going to get for a crime scene, unless I find he brought her here from someplace else. She's talking to me. I know at least one important fact."

"But, Norrie..."

"No, Dylan. No buts. I'm part of this task force and I'm asking for help here."

"All right, *cariad*, calm down. We'll get you what you want."

As Dylan spoke, Brandon Hawke pulled away. I called to stop him.

"Stay, Brand. I need you for this, too." How was I going to explain to them what I wanted? They'd think I was certifiable.

"Dylan, please ask the forensics people to go back and wait in their vehicles. I don't need an audience. Their energy is interfering." I waited while he did what I asked, directed him where I needed him. "Stand next to where the victim is lying," I instructed him.

"Brand, is there a screen around the victim, something to protect her from prying eyes?"

"Yeah, they hung a rope framework around the area and covered it in tarps." His arm was against mine so I'd know where he was.

"Good. I want you to take me over to the bus bench on the sidewalk over there." I pointed in the general direction of the street noise. It wasn't a busy street, only an occasional car passed, none stopped.

We silently made our way back across the vacant lot to the sidewalk.

"Now what?" he asked.

"Now, I sit. You can either sit beside me or stand and wait. Don't stop me unless I'm in danger of hurting myself." I turned to put my hand out and find the bench but he stopped me.

"Wait." He took my hand in his. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to try and get inside the murderer's head."

"How?"

"I'm going to sit where he sat and hope it's his energy I find."

"You're sure about this? Absolutely sure?"

I nodded, unable to speak, anxious to begin.

"Then turn around and back up two steps. You'll feel the bench behind your knees." He held my hand until I got there and sat. I withdrew my hand from his and leaned back.

Energy from at least six different people invaded my mind and I couldn't tell if any of it emanated from the Preacher.

"Damn." I started to stand and Brand had my arm immediately.

"What's the matter?"

"Too many people have been here. I can't even tell if the murderer sat on this bench or not. Yet before..."

"Before, what?"

"Before, when I walked over here with Roy Ferran, I felt his presence. I told Dylan he was here, in the field or very close. Now there's nothing." I turned as I spoke, trying to feel anything of the man. Absolutely nothing. Either he was gone and had never been near the bench or I was being blocked again.

"All right. Let's leave this for now. Take me to the victim. And Brand, again, don't let anyone stop me unless I'm going to get hurt."

Each step toward the victim increased my apprehension, each step took me closer to her pain. Her fear. Her death. I was beginning to sweat even though the evening air was cool. I could hear myself panting and knew it was her breath coming in little bursts of terror. Her emotions were swamping me, threatening to engulf me, take over my mind.

When we stopped, I smelled death. It was everywhere. All around me. Reaching out to me from every side.

I shuddered. This time a reaction of my own.

"Is there any of her clothing, jewelry, anything I could touch, please?"

I caught a whiff of new leather, a faint hint of a familiar aftershave. Dylan stood beside me.

"Here." He took my hand in his and turned it palm up. "It was around her neck. It's an antique locket of some kind."

"That won't do." I pulled my hand back hurriedly. "If it's an antique, it belonged to someone else before she wore it and I won't know whose energy I'm receiving. It has to be hers."

"How about a shoe?"

"That would do."

Moments later I held a strappy little shoe, not leather, with a high heel not meant for walking. I was beginning to think this girl had been a prostitute, like the rest of our victims. Found in a field near a known hangout wearing screw-me shoes in cheap vinyl. One of the Preacher's women, a repeat of his pattern so far.

I clasped the shoe to my chest and her energy poured into me. I swallowed, hard.

Scared. Terrified. Fear of death coming strong and clear. Fear hadn't saved her. She'd died. At *his* hands.

"Hey, Carol, what do you think? My sermon hot enough for you? Are you learning the evil of your ways? Or do I have to deliver you to Satan himself?"

I heard a voice say "No, no," and realized it was mine. I'd become Carol. I wasn't sure if it was her thoughts or mine that formed the words.

"No, James, no. Please. Don't hurt me. I'll do whatever you say."

"You will? So if I tell you to kneel in front of me and do whatever it is those disgusting men pay you to do, you'd do it? You'd do that to me, a man of God?"

"If it's what you want, James, I'll do it for you. But I thought you were above all that. You preach purity and love. Yet you'd make me sink that low?"

"You slut. You whoring slut. Keep your filthy hands off me. You don't have the right to touch me. To defile me. To do that to a man of God? Woman, you are beyond redemption. You must make the ultimate sacrifice. You will give yourself to Satan."

I screamed and couldn't stop. Arms encircled me, holding me, trying to keep me from following the victim. Still I screamed, the sound muffled now by someone's chest, my head held there by a strong hand.

As the scream became less a scream and more a cry for help, I encountered the first burning pain. It was the last victim all over again.

Stabbing for the sake of stabbing. For the sake of causing pain. My body bucked each time the knife blade entered me, yet I was kept from falling.

Terror rose as he hacked at my breasts. Terror I couldn't escape. I was held tight in someone's arms.

Pain filled me. I wanted to escape the torment but I couldn't. Not as long as I held the shoe.

The knife blade entered my chest at the base of my breastbone. My eyes opened wider on my darkness, my body bucked up and away from the arms that tried to hold me safe. I was falling and couldn't stop. On the ground, I heard him laugh again. It was a laugh of triumph, a shout of bravado.

"You are mine."

He'd won. He knew it.

Carol lost.

The ripping sensation of a knife cutting me from breastbone down, down, down. Pain washed over me in waves until I could feel it no more. From a distance I watched as he cupped his hands above me. His hands were inside me, bringing me closer, closer to that final moment when he would tear me apart and spread me around this wasted field.

"No..."

As his hands rose, dripping, I escaped.

Chapter Fourteen

"My God, Jones, it's been fourteen hours. How long does this last?"

I heard the voice somewhere inside my head and wondered who was talking. In my bedroom. The blanket covering me had fancy edging, tatting my mother had done a year or so before she'd died, so I knew I was home.

How'd I get here?

"Dylan? Dylan, where are you?" I cried frantically, my heart pounding. The bed sagged as someone large sat beside me. I was pleased to hear his calming voice, feel his warm breath on my cheek when he leaned forward to speak.

"We're here, honey. Hawke and I are both here. Are you all right?" Footsteps sounded muffled on the tight pile carpet as someone else circled to the other side of my bed. Brand's scent wafted over me. My two protectors flanked me. It felt good.

"I...I think so. What happened?" My fingers picked fretfully at the blanket until Brand gently clasped my hand. He soothingly stroked the length of my fingers over and over again.

"I don't know. One minute Brand was holding you and the next you were on the ground. What were you feeling when that happened?"

Pushing back fatigue, I looked inward for the memories.

"I...I think that's...when he cut her open. Can I get...a drink, please?" My throat was so dry I could barely speak.

"Of course. Would you like tea and some breakfast?"

I should have known a Welshman would be a tea drinker. "No, I'd really like some coffee. And there's some melba toast in the cupboard by the fridge." I'd grabbed the blanket, pushed it back and swung my legs over the edge when Brand's arm crossed my body, pinning me to the bed. He'd sat on the other side of me.

"No you don't. You stay right where you are. Let Dylan get it for you." Dylan agreed and stood. As he left the room, Brand told me, "You are not getting out of that bed until a doctor says you can."

"Oh, for the love of... Why do I have to see a doctor? There's nothing wrong with me that about three days of sleep won't cure." I decided to be totally honest with him. "I have to go to the bathroom."

He choked back a laugh and I knew I'd said the one thing to get me out of bed. I felt bone weary and my head was muzzy amid the painful drumming. I would go back to bed for more sleep without being told. That's what recuperation periods were all about. Dylan understood. He'd just have to make sure the rest of them got the point.

The blanket was pulled back, a hand on mine began to pull me into a sitting position. "Come on, Sleeping Beauty, let's get you up and back here before he gets the coffee made. Then we'll leave you to it. You can sleep the clock around if you want."

I let him help me to my feet, thinking I'd be able to at least stand on my own, but as I tried to move my knees buckled.

"Oopsy daisy!" Strong arms caught me on my way to the floor.

"Damn! Look, Brand, just go out to the other room and leave me be. I'll get this fixed. When I do so many *readings*, too close together, it sometimes takes me a day or two before I can walk properly. Before I can do a lot of things. Please. Just go out there and wait until I call you."

"I don't think so." His arm moved from behind my back to around my shoulders. "Come on, if it's the bathroom you want, it's the bathroom you'll get." His other arm swung my legs off the floor as though I weighed no more than a sack of feathers, and he proceeded to carry me down the narrow hall to the bathroom. Made me glad I wasn't a heavyweight.

"Watch my arm," I warned as my feet banged the wall a few times and my head brushed the bathroom doorframe. I wiggled. "You can't come in here, you idiot," I giggled, trying to get him to let me stand. "Put me down."

He sat me on the edge of the bathtub.

"Okay, can you handle this if I wait out in the hall, or do you need help?" The air around me was warm where he stood, where his arm touched my back, and there was a prickling I couldn't explain, as though my nerve ends were raw.

"Get out!" He laughed as he left and I heaved a sigh when the door closed. Brand had got me this far, now all I had to do was move to the toilet and get my clothes...

That's when I realized someone had already undressed me. I was wearing one of my cotton sleep shirts. Last night I'd been wearing a dress. I hadn't noticed the difference, hadn't realized my bra was missing. I'd obviously been unconscious when someone – Dylan or Brand – removed my clothes.

Edging along the rim of the tub, I leaned perilously and flipped the lock on the door. There. Now I'd just stay here. My body slumped sideways into the wall dividing the tub from the rest of the room and I wondered how long they'd leave me be.

Holding the counter for support, I pulled myself upright and moved across to the sink. I ran water in one hand, holding on for dear life with the other. In the back of my mind a voice reminded me not to get my cast wet and I splashed the few cool drops that hadn't trickled between my fingers across my face. Reaching for the towel, I nearly toppled over. With both hands on the counter, I dragged my spent body to the other end of the room and did all the necessary things one did after fourteen hours of sleep. Then I sat again on the side of the tub to wait.

For what? I couldn't go back out there.

One, or maybe both, of these men undressed me last night and tucked me into bed. I couldn't look them in the...well, that really wasn't a problem. But I couldn't face them. It was too embarrassing.

A gentle knock on the door reminded me Brand was standing in the hall, waiting for me. Hmmphh! He could just keep on waiting.

"Norrie, are you all right in there?"

I didn't answer. What was I supposed to say?

"Norrie? Answer me."

Maybe if I said nothing they'd decide to leave.

He knocked again, louder this time. I wanted to tell him he didn't have to make so much noise, that it made my head ache, but I was afraid to open my mouth.

"Norrie?" His voice was raised, sounded annoyed. "Open the damn door."

Ouch! What did I do now?

The hinge squeaked and the air moved on my face at the same time. I was no longer alone. I'd forgotten bathroom locks were so easily pickable.

"What was all that about? Are you okay?"

There was concern in his voice and I regretted, for an instant, making him worry. Then I remembered the sleep shirt.

"Get out of here. Take Dylan and leave. Both of you, go!"

My self-control was fast disappearing, my voice rising. They had to leave.

"What are you talking about? We're not going anywhere. Right now, *you* are going back to bed."

"No! Get out of here." Maybe if I begged? "Please!"

"Dylan!" Brand's roar nearly made me fall off the edge of the tub. I heard footsteps running in the hall, the door hit the wall.

"What? What's wrong?" He sounded even more concerned than Brand.

"Norrie refuses to leave the bathroom. She wants both of us to leave. She's your psychic, you look after her." Brand spoke in a voice both quiet and tightly controlled, then he walked out.

What had I done?

"Is that right, Norrie? You want us to leave? Both of us?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because."

"Ah."

I waited. He said nothing.

"Dylan..." His steps left the room.

"Hawke?" Dylan's voice moved down the hall and I knew I was in big trouble. They were leaving. And they were going to just leave me sitting in the bathroom.

"Yeah?" Brand must have been standing by the front door.

"Let's go."

"Dylan?" My voice sounded frantic, even to me. He couldn't just leave me here. Could he? I'd be stuck in this little room until someone came. Or I'd have to crawl back to my bed. With no food, no drink.

Footsteps receded further down the hall. I was alone. After my woeful little conversation, I didn't have a clue what was happening. I heard the front door open, close.

Silence.

Had they gone? Was I on my own? I decided to sit absolutely still and listen. My hearing *was* supposed to be my most acute sense.

An eerie quiet filled the house.

I leaned against the wall and relaxed. All I had to do was get myself back to bed.

A voice in my ear set me screeching and I finally realized I'd relaxed myself right into sleep.

"Norrie, stop." Gentle hands held my arm. "It's me, Rhoda." Her hand was the only thing that kept me from falling onto the floor or into the tub.

Asleep. How long had I been here?

"Dylan tells me you're being obstinate. He and Brandon Hawke are waiting outside on your front step and want to know if they can come back in. What do I tell them?"

"No. They can't."

"Why?"

"Because." Belligerence moved to the fore. I was acting like a child and couldn't help myself. "One of them undressed me last night. I can't let him back in. That's too..."

"Doll, if one of those two wanted to undress me, I'd be standing there with a smile on my face. And if they wanted to stick around while I flaunted what's not sagging, they'd be welcome. Fred hasn't done that since six hours after our wedding ceremony, thirty-one achingly long years ago. You're being silly, is what this is. And wrong. It was me undressed you, doll." Rhoda seemed to be moving around while she spoke and I wondered what she was doing. "Besides, they're both big boys. I'm sure they've seen a woman naked. Be happy these two were *good* boys."

"What?" I asked, confused.

"It was me undressed you, Norrie. Fred was at the scene and saw what happened to you. When he saw Hawke get into Dylan's car and Dylan put you onto Hawke's lap, he knew you were going to need help so he called me."

The water ran, then the comfort of a cool cloth soothed my face. Rhoda mothered me and I reveled in it.

"I was here when they brought you home, Brand holding you like a baby on his lap in the car. Dylan carried you in and laid you on the bed. They weren't back in your room until you were under the sheets." The cool cloth soothed my frazzled nerves. "They only stayed long enough to know you were okay then went back to the scene. I stayed with you until around six this morning."

"Oh, Rhoda, thank you." Now I'd have to apologize for being a fool. "Will you please help me back to the bedroom? Then," I admitted, reluctantly, "I guess, I'll have to talk to them."

"No, doll. I can't. I couldn't help you if you started to fall. My back would just give out. Hey guys," her shout and piercing whistle hurt my ears and set my head thumping again. Where had she learned to do that?

"Teach me to whistle, Rhoda? But not now," I hurried to make my wishes known, not wanting any more noise for the time being. "When my head isn't hurting."

"My father taught me so I could whistle up my brothers. They never came when called."

I laughed quietly, heard heavy footsteps in the hall.

"She ready now?" Dylan's gentle voice came from just outside the open bathroom door.

"Yes. Take it easy with her. She was asleep against the wall when I got in here. I don't think her legs will hold her."

"Move, Rhoda, I'll carry her." Dylan effortlessly scooped me off the side of the tub, held me tight against his chest. He navigated the narrow door without hitting it with any part of me and swung into the bedroom as though he'd done it before.

He laid me gently on the bed and my head sank into the pillow. The back of his hand caressed my cheek.

"Are you all right now, honey? Norrie?" he whispered, his face close enough to mine that I felt his warm breath on my forehead.

"Yes. I'm sorry. I was just being silly." I'd admit my mistakes then get on with recuperating. "I thought you and Brand undressed me last night. I couldn't make myself come out of the bathroom when I realized I wasn't wearing my dress."

Dylan's laugh was some of the best medicine I'd have today. More movement in the doorway told me Brand had joined us.

"So, Norrie. You feel better now? What was —"

"Never mind, I'll explain it later."

Thank you, Dylan.

"If I reheat your coffee, you ready for some breakfast?"

"Please. Where's Rhoda?"

"Right here, doll. What do you need?" Rhoda laid her hand on my shoulder, patting me as if I was a small child.

"Nothing. Thank you. Go on home now. I'll be fine. Thank Fred for me, too."

"I will. Remember, doll, it's five for Rhoda. You call me if you need help, you hear?"

"I will. But I'll be fine." I reached up and touched her hand, listened to her leave. She talked to Dylan in the hall, Brand stayed with me.

"What'd she mean by 'five for Rhoda'?" he asked.

"She's number five on my speed dial."

I was a little surprised neither man had asked me anything about my *reading* last night. Dylan had learned patience, finally, and I assumed he'd asked Brand to go easy on me.

The gentle clatter of china and cutlery heralded the arrival of my breakfast. The coffee smelled heavenly and Dylan had exchanged the cold melba for hot buttered toast. I might even be able to eat it.

"Here you go, *caru*. Service with a smile." He placed the tray on my lap. "Cup's on the right, toast is on your left. It's buttered and cut. Anything else?"

"No, thank you." I reached with both hands, knowing the tray was balanced on my legs. I used my fingers to trace the edge of the tray, walked fingertips toward the middle until I found the cup. My other hand made the same foray and I found the toast. The first bite was worth the wait. I swallowed before answering. "Sit down. You, too, Brand. You must be eager for a few answers."

"We can wait until you're finished eating, Norrie."

"No, I need to do it now. Then I need sleep." I enjoyed another bite of toast and a swallow of hot coffee. I'd tell Dylan the highlights now and fill in the blanks later.

"Dylan, I don't know what happened, but there's something strange going on here. I'm absolutely sure that this victim, he called her Carol by the way, was killed by the same guy. Everything about him is getting more intense. His anger is building, he's talking to them like he's some high-moraled religious judge and they've committed some terrible sin." I paused for another bite of breakfast. "She called him James."

"She what?" Dylan replied and I heard the sharply indrawn breath Brand took.

"She called him James. Not Thad or Thaddeus. James."

"You know..." Brand began, quit. Dylan and I waited.

"I thought maybe..." Again he quit. "Look, Dylan, I've got to go back to the station. There's something about this..." His pause didn't tell us anything but it might be helping him get something straight in his own mind. "I need to check on a detail. I'll phone you as soon as I know anything."

He was gone before either of us could say a word. Whatever the bone was he'd found, he'd worry it until he knew if there was any meat on it or if it was an old cast-off with no value left.

"Norrie, is there anything else that we need to know? That can't wait until you've had some sleep?"

"No. Just his name. Everything else went about as you saw with me. But he's taunting them more. Being crude. Nasty." Considering what he did to his victims, my words seemed mild, inadequate. Now I had to tell him the part he wouldn't like. The part that might cost me my place on the task force if he got stubborn about it. I'd told him once and he hadn't believed me. This time he'd have to accept what I said.

"Dylan...he threatened me."

"Threatened? How? How can he threaten you when he isn't there?"

"That's just it. He was there. Someplace close. He threatened me before I started *reading* the scene or the victim."

"My God, Norrie...why didn't you say something."

"I did. I told you, Dylan. I told you he was someplace close, but you..."

"Dylan, come out here." Brand's yell from the front of the house made me slop coffee all over my sleep shirt, burning myself. "Now!" Dylan pounded down the hall but I couldn't hear what they were saying.

I waited impatiently for someone to come and tell me what was happening, but the voice, when I heard it, was a stranger's.

"Miss Benedict, can you tell me what you were doing in the field last night with the police?"

"What? Who are you?" I grabbed the blankets and pulled them up under my chin, sending the tray crashing to the floor. China crashed and tinkled, drops of coffee splashed back against my face.

The clicking sound of a camera as it whirled through a series of shots told me who this was. Some damn reporter had snuck into my house.

"Get out of here! Get out of my house!" I screamed at him.

I didn't know where he was, couldn't tell if he'd left. It got very quiet. I heard him breathing. Soft, stealthy footsteps walked slowly down the hall. Brand or Dylan walking into a trap? I couldn't take a chance.

"Look out, he's in here. With a cam..." A crash vibrated my bed as bodies hit the floor. Brand fell on top of me, his voice hoarse and intense when he spoke.

"Stay down, Norrie. Let Dylan finish him." He rolled across me, stood on the other side. One hand still touched me when I heard the snap on his holster and the sound of his gun being drawn against the leather.

"Brand! He doesn't have a gun, he has a camera." I yelled to get his attention and hoped he heard.

"A camera?"

"Yes. He was taking pictures."

"Damn it all anyway," he muttered. "Dylan, he's a photographer." His voice was loud enough they'd be able to hear it next door.

"Umpphhh!" I knew that wasn't Dylan so I had to assume he'd caught the guy.

"For Christ's sake, Jones, go easy. Take the damned blanket off my head. I'll have to sue the department for harassment, assault, malfeasance – whatever I can think of."

"Carter Grimes, is that you?" Brand was laughing. I personally didn't think there was anything funny about this situation, but obviously he did. When Dylan laughed too, I saw red.

"Look, you two, this guy broke into my house. Are you just going to sit there and laugh at him?"

"Calm down, Norrie. This guy's mostly harmless. When he isn't being a dirty old man and breaking into women's bedrooms, he's after a story. So which is it, Carter? You breaking in here for a story or do I charge you with trespassing, maybe a little B & E? How about voyeurism?"

"Come on, Jones, you know I don't do things like that. Jamison told me I should talk to her."

Jamison told him that? Martin Jamison? What right did he have to be telling anyone about me? Just because I'd accepted his apology didn't give him the right.

"Said you guys couldn't find your way out of a sleeping bag," the voice continued. "Told me this little woman had to show you where your zipper was. All I'm after is a story," he whined.

"Well, I'm not it." I tried to get myself up and off the bed, but Brand kept getting in my way. "And I want to press charges. He's in my bedroom." I pushed myself up again, tried not to hurt my broken arm and tried even harder not to fall over the edge.

"You going to let her do that, Jones?" He sounded a little uncertain.

"No, you old reprobate. But I should. What *are* you doing here? I have to assume the little diversion out front with my Jaguar was so you could get in here." There was laughter beneath Dylan's words.

"Yeah, yeah. I didn't think you'd be too long coming to check up on your fancy piece of British automotive trash."

"So what do you want to know, Carter?"

"Just a minute here," I interrupted. "If you aren't going to charge this guy, how about telling me who he is?"

"Oh, sorry. Norrie, meet Carter Grimes, full-time pain in the ass, part-time public nuisance, occasional crime reporter for the *Rocklynnne Examiner*."

Chapter Fifteen

"I make Woodward and Bernstein look like softies," Grimes protested.

"Just take your fancy camera and your notebook and get out!" I'd progressed to the side of the bed, still held down by Brand's hand on my shoulder. I wouldn't have tried standing, but he didn't know that. I needed sleep, lots of it, before I'd try again by myself.

"Look, sweetface —"

"Are you talking to me? Calling me..."

"Yeah, sugar, I am. And ain't nobody goin' to stop me. I've been around so long I'm an institution."

"You should be *in* an institution. Dylan, get him out of here, please."

"Hang on. Let's find out what was so important he had to wrap my car in toilet paper then sneak in here."

Dylan's new car? Mr. Grimes had messed with the wrong thing there.

"I'd like to hear that one myself," Brand butted in. The sound of his gun sliding back into its holster made me marvel at my progress in this business. I found it comforting to know he was ready to defend me.

"Let's hear it, *then* get him out of here. I want to go to bed. To sleep." I swung my legs back under the blanket and waited.

"Well, since you asked so nicely." Grimes set something on the foot of my bed then sat beside it, narrowly missing my legs.

"Last night I took pictures of you, milady, acting very much like you were being attacked or having some kind of erotic fling in a vacant lot. I figure you and this boyo here — Hawke, is it? — I figure you and he weren't showing off for all to see, so I'm going to go out on a very thin limb here and guess that you're hired by the department to read their crime scenes. I think you're a psychic. I think they're stuck and you're their last hope." He paused as though waiting for me to reply. Before I could open my mouth and say anything, Brand's fingers tightened on my shoulder, a sign, I decided, that I should keep my mouth shut.

"Do you expect us to answer that, Carter?" Dylan's voice still held a note of amusement, but Brand's fingers told me this was no joke.

Quietly waiting for someone to say something, I fervently hoped Grimes wouldn't push me for an answer. Even if I'd been able, I'd never consider giving away police information to a member of the press. And certainly not to one who'd break into my house to get it.

"All right. Now that we know what you think, get out of my bedroom." Brand's fingers dug into my shoulder so hard it was painful, ready to stop me if I went too far. "You are still in my house without my permission and I want you gone."

"Now, now, Miss Benedict. Is that any way to treat a hardworking..."

"Get him out of here, Dylan. Now. Otherwise, I hit the panic button." My arm swung up to indicate the button on my bedside table. I could still reach it. I idly wondered how Dylan and Brand would react when the security guards showed up—ready to protect me from the police. Giggles escaped at the thought and broke the mood, spoiling everything.

"See, Jones, she's not really upset by me being here. It's you who needs to..."

"I wasn't laughing about that, you...you...you housebreaker." Without thinking, I reached again for the button. Brand grabbed my hand, stopped me.

"Norrie, wait. We might just be able to use Grimes for something good in this case. Dylan?"

"We just might. And, he'll do it our way."

Brand was asking for help with that question and Dylan gave it.

"Oh, I would, I would." Carter Grimes didn't hesitate to agree to their terms, without even knowing what they'd suggest.

"Well, then, take yourself out of here and when I phone you, you get into my office as fast as you can. I'll lay it out to you then. But if you release anything before I tell you to, I'll slap you in jail for obstruction, not to mention trespassing, breaking and entering, mischief and anything else I can think of. You'll spend a lot of time in jail and lose that fancy press pass you flash everywhere. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yeah, Jones. Perfectly. Don't forget to call." He scrambled quickly off my bed—his tone told me he was taking this seriously. Maybe there was hope for him after all.

"I guess he knows where the door is." My sarcastic remark made me feel slightly better but I knew lack of sleep was catching up too fast and would take me out of the picture fairly soon.

"You'll get used to Carter, Norrie. He can be rather pleasant when he wants to be. Particularly when he thinks he might get a story out of it. But under no circumstances are you to talk to him by yourself. You won't tell him anything about this case that I haven't already approved." The pensive tone of his next words told me he was thinking out loud. "We're going to try something, I think. See if we can make the Preacher upset with us. Make him come to us."

"Maybe we can make him come to us *and* warn the women around here at the same time." Brand's interruption was brusque. He must have been kneeling beside my bed. I could hear the chink of broken glass as he picked up the mess I'd created when the tray fell off the bed.

"Just leave it for now, Brand. It's not going to hurt anything."

"No problem, I've got it." The food had been nearly gone when I sent the tray flying. Only the broken cup and a spoon, maybe a drop or two of coffee, would have made it to the floor.

"Well, you two look after him at the station. I want sleep. My head is pounding again and I've had all the excitement I can take for one day. Go. Please." I lay back on my pillows, pulled my blanket around my neck and closed my eyes. I hoped they'd take the hint and leave.

"Do you need anything else before we leave?" asked Brand, more quietly than he'd spoken before.

I pushed up on one elbow and asked for oblivion. "A glass of water and some painkillers. They should be on the bedside table somewhere."

Brand played nursemaid, supporting my shoulders while I flipped pills into my mouth then taking the glass when I was finished with it.

"Sorry, *cariad*. We'll go." Dylan kissed my forehead. "I'll check in with you later. I still have the key from last time."

"Fine. Go. I'll phone you when I'm awake."

"Get some sleep, Norrie." Brand's voice was still gruff, his words clipped. Something was bothering him. I just didn't know what.

I was asleep before they got out of the house.

Lydia

She felt his hands on her neck and knew she was doomed. These hands were not cradling her in love. They were tightening, choking her, cutting off the air she needed to survive.

He'd promised her an evening of loving, tender moments but this wasn't what he'd talked about. He'd started by telling her how much he wanted to help her, yet his help would only put her in an early grave.

Lydia Yiu knew then she'd made one very big miscalculation. She'd believed that a man of the cloth could be trusted. Too late, she knew better.

When she'd first met Simon Andrew it had amused her to find she'd been attracted to a preacher. She'd been even more amused to find out that his name was Simon Andrew. Two of the Apostles. Two of the chosen.

She'd believed every word he said. Now...

This man was the disciple of Satan. He was going to kill her. He wouldn't let her die easily, either. She'd read the small story in the paper a few weeks ago. A woman murdered. Mutilated. Dishonored. Tonight, with the clarity that comes of fear, she knew the woman she'd read about had been killed by this man.

How could she help stop him? She would die this night, of that she was certain, but there had to be something she could...

Pain replaced fear, so intense it made her cry out. She no longer had time to be afraid. She could only try to stay alive as long as he'd let her. She didn't want to die, didn't want to leave the world without her family knowing what had become of her.

Her mother had been so happy to hear that she'd finally found a good man. One who didn't put her down or make her feel used. She'd tried so hard to pull herself out of the gutter of porn she'd fallen to, away from the movies she'd allowed to be made of men doing unspeakable things to her body. It was the only way she'd known to make enough money to keep herself fed, to keep a roof over her head. She wasn't proud of the life she'd led but she didn't want it to end, not if it meant dying, alone, with this perverted preacher in this tumbledown old barn on the outskirts of town.

His anger built, his hands tightened. Lydia knew she wasn't going to get a second chance.

This was the end of the line for her but if she could save other women from this madman, she had to take the chance.

Simon Andrew held her fine-boned wrists in one hand, his other hand clamped around her neck. His long fingers found the soft hollow, the place where he knew he'd do the most damage, and pressed. She fought for one last breath. She freed one hand. Raked her long, painted fingernails across his face. His roar of pain told her she'd succeeded. She'd leave something for the police to find.

Simon released her neck and used his hand to hit her, his anger so vicious and his backhand so hard her head snapped back and hit the wall behind her.

Jésus

Damn. He'd knocked her out. Father would not be pleased with him tonight.

This whoring slut was not helping him, either. She should be letting him rid the world of her presence.

She knew she was evil.

She knew she was corrupt in spirit.

She knew she deserved to die.

While she was unconscious, he reached for the knife, the serrated blade gleaming in the light from the eleven candles he had placed around the room. He would do to her what he'd done to the others then he'd wait for her to regain some semblance of thought before he finished her off. She would die the same way the last wanton bitch died. Screaming His name. Crying out for help to the one person they thought would give it to them.

This was what he wanted.

Screaming for Him to have mercy on their blackened souls.

Crying to God to be saved.

Chapter Sixteen

Stinging shafts of burning, piercing pain scorched my chest, moved to my stomach, traveled lower. As numbing blows assaulted tender skin I conceded to myself that I might never make it back to normal.

Not at this speed.

If I didn't have more time to recuperate before this maddened killer struck again, I might never get over these killings.

Now it was Dylan and some hare-brained scheme he had to use the photographer who'd broken into my house to help them flush the Preacher.

I hoped he knew what he was doing.

I let the water run hotter, trying to stimulate my poor, tired muscles. As I stood there, unseeing in my darkened bathroom, I let my mind float.

Big mistake.

It floated straight to Dylan and stopped there.

The stinging drops of water from the massaging showerhead became the sensations of nerve endings aflame under his exquisite strokes. The soap that slicked over my moistened skin was the friction of his skin on mine. I stood with my head thrown back, let my skin burn, felt the spark of his fingertips as he caressed me. I tasted him on my wet lips, smelled him in the steam of the shower stall. My knees were weak, threatening to collapse under me from the liquid fire racing through my veins.

"Hey, doll, ready for supper?"

Soap flew straight up then smacked me on the way to the floor, elbow and plastic-covered cast hit the wall and the shampoo bottle crashed off the corner shelf.

"Hell, Rhoda, couldn't you have knocked?" I nearly shouted at the poor woman I was in such a state of...state of...

Lust.

Plain, honest, straightforward, old-fashioned, blood-boiling, x-rated lust.

"Norrie, you all right in there?" I heard a hint of fear in Rhoda's voice.

"Sorry, Rhoda." My voice was going to betray me if I wasn't careful. I cleared my throat, tried again.

"Sorry. I was a million miles away, lost in thought." Lost in Dylan Jones was closer to the truth. If that man didn't decide soon what he felt for me and let me know, I'd be a wreck. When a cake of soap and sluicing hot water could do things to me, I knew I needed help.

"Rhoda, can you grab my robe out of the bedroom, please? I want to eat in the kitchen tonight. It's time I got out of bed and stayed up for a while."

"Sure thing, doll. You wait right there." She bustled out of the bathroom. Five deep breaths settled my raging hormones to a level that would allow me walk and be seen in public without telling the entire world where my mind was.

I opened the shower door and reached for the towels hanging there. Dressing myself—a large bath sheet engulfed my body, a smaller towel wrapped turban-style around my head—I went back to daydreaming. My mind wandered again, this time to thoughts of my mother. I didn't hear Rhoda return and jumped when her hand touched my arm.

"Sorry, doll, I thought you heard me." She spoke softly, reminding me suddenly of the many times my mother shared the bathroom with me.

We'd talk about this and that, life in general and men in particular. I missed those heart-to-hearts. Hell, I missed her. I'd have liked to ask her opinion of Dylan Jones. I would have liked to be able to tell her how I felt about him and ask her what to do to make things easier for myself.

Couldn't. Not anymore. Death was pretty final when it came to ending conversations.

"Is something bothering you, Norrie?" Rhoda's hand lightly touched my arm.

"No, Rhoda. I was just remembering."

"Mind my asking what?" her voice questioned.

"My mother."

The towel I'd been using to dry my hair fell around my shoulders. I hung on to both ends and pulled it up around my neck. Protection of sorts. But it couldn't protect me from my memories. I leaned against the counter.

"She used to sit in the bathroom with me while I bathed or did my hair. Just talking. We had some of our best mother-daughter chats while one of us soaked in the tub." My voice broke. Rhoda wrapped her arms about me in a friendly hug.

"Any time you want to talk, sweetie, you just let me know. I'd be happy to have a nice little chat with you. I won't ever replace your mother. I don't have any daughters to talk to, Fred and me, we couldn't have kids," she spoke matter-of-factly, not asking for sympathy. "So maybe I could try with you. You know. Surrogate mother. Stand-in. Whatever you want to call it. If you want to talk, I'd be pleased to listen." The smooth cotton of her blouse was against my cheek and I thought, irrelevantly, that I was going to make it wet.

"Oh, Rhoda," I sobbed.

My tears were for things that could never be, things gone and things I couldn't change. It seemed as if all the emotions I'd held in for the last three years were silently emptying themselves in tears on Rhoda's shoulder.

"There, there, sweetie, you'll be fine. You just need a good hot meal and another good night's sleep."

Typical motherly woman, Rhoda considered food and sleep the fix for just about anything.

I hiccupped, drew back and dashed tears from my face with a corner of the towel. I turned my back on Rhoda, dropped the towel and felt my way into the robe she held. I belted it as tight as I could and straightened up.

Rhoda led me out of the bathroom to the little kitchen someone had once assured me was sunflower yellow with white cupboards and trim, white floor and black appliances. It sounded bright and cheerful.

"Sit yourself down and we'll have an old-fashioned gossip session about all that's happening." As she spoke she lifted a heavy lid from a pot on the stove. The clang preceded the most amazing aroma rushing out to greet us. "How many of these beef ribs would you like to start with?" The scents wafting around my kitchen were a little bit spicy—garlic I think—a little bit teriyaki and a little bit sweet. Probably honey. I loved beef ribs and done this way it was enough to make me drool.

"Rhoda, that smells incredible!"

"It's my old family recipe—changed a bit over the years, but it still reminds me of when my grandmum made them."

"Well, I think you could probably start me with just one, then I'll see. I don't want to be a pig, but those do smell heavenly." Clinging to the top of the small ladder-back chair beside the little square table, I smelled flowers—something else that made me think of my mother. Something she'd grown.

Sweet peas. Rhoda must have found them someplace and brought them with her. Nothing blooms in the yard out behind my little house. All I had were trees. I'd sat in their shade more times than I cared to count. But there was nothing that needed tending other than the small patch of grass that the neighbor's kid kept cut.

"Rhoda, where'd you get the sweet peas?"

"How'd you know about them?"

"I can smell them. My mother used to grow them the length of our yard. Every color under the sun. The smell was earthy, not too sweet. You could have them all through the house and it just made it smell like a garden."

"I've got them planted down the length of the fence in my backyard. Every spring Fred says I'm crazy to plant them but he admires them from the day they first bloom. It was his idea to bring you some."

"Well, you thank him for me. Where is he? He should have come for dinner."

"He's working tonight. He's got the duty watch here until midnight."

The clanging of pot lids and the rich aroma of food being transferred to plates made my mouth water. It seemed a shame not to share it. "Can't he come in and eat with us?"

"No. I promised him I'd take some home, so don't you be worrying about him. He's well looked after. Sit yourself down."

I complied with her pleasant request, anxious to taste her homemade ribs, and I was soon chomping my messy way down the length of the first bone. Rhoda put a finger bowl in the middle of the table and after I found it, my hands went back and forth from my mouth to the hot, lemony water.

Finishing one rib, I discovered there were at least two more on my plate. I threw back my head and laughed.

"Rhoda, that's exactly what my mother used to do. If I said one, she'd give me three. She knew me so well. I guess that's what mothers are about, isn't it?"

"How old were you when she died, Norrie?"

"Twenty-eight. I still lived at home. I couldn't be bothered wasting money on an apartment when I was happy living with my parents. I'd have moved out if they'd asked, but we shared. When my friends visited, they'd disappear into the bedroom suite they used. I guess I was lucky about that," I said, reflecting on how we'd managed. "I've met lots of people over the years who couldn't get along with their families, but, you know, I don't think we ever fought. We had some good arguments, but they were always settled peacefully. Nobody ever stayed mad."

"You were very lucky, doll. There's lots that can't abide each other. Take my Fred. His brother can't get along with anyone. He's always in trouble. And even though the rest of the brothers would like to help him, he won't let them near. You cherish what you had."

"I do, Rhoda. I really do. I know I was lucky."

"What about your father? What was he like?"

"Daddy was a big teddy bear. All noise and bombast to the outside world but a softy whenever you had a problem. He was a teacher. He retired, then went back to teach kids with special needs. He was always giving, always helping." A sudden thought sobered me. "You know, we wouldn't have been on the highway when we were if it hadn't been for a little kid my dad had befriended. A little boy. He didn't have a father and I think my dad was the first male to pay attention to him. He came to talk to my father just before we left for home, delaying our start. He worshipped my father. I guess I did, too. I didn't think he could do anything wrong."

Tears were close but I blinked them away. I wouldn't cry over happy memories.

The phone rang as I was reaching for the last rib on my plate. Rhoda bounced up and answered.

"Yes, she's up. Hang on. Oh, Dylan? Don't you be hard on her."

Smiling, I pictured Dylan at the other end of that line, saying "yes ma'am", and nodding. She placed the phone next to my hand and I picked it up.

"Hi. What's up?"

"There's a meeting in the morning. We got everything entered into the computer finally and the display boards are all in order. Can you come?"

"I won't be back to normal, but I'll be fine for a meeting. I'll be there. What time, where?"

I memorized the details he gave me then he hung up. No "how are you", "how're you feeling" or "goodbye". A typical Dylan business call.

"Hell!" I put enough feeling in that one word I heard Rhoda lay down her fork.

"What?"

"There's a meeting tomorrow. Be there at ten. Not even a goodbye."

"That's all he said? No 'How are you?', 'What's up?'"

"Nothing."

"Men!" She began to speak, her disgust clear, changing to a thoughtful tone, slowly, as if from deep thought.

"You know, I don't really think it's because he doesn't care. I think it's because he has so much on his mind that the niceties get pushed aside." She rested her hand on my arm. "You should have seen him that first night, Norrie. He was worried sick about you. In fact, they both were. I saw him take you from Brand out there in the driveway, and I could see his face. He was plenty worried."

"Well, he sure has a peculiar way of showing it. He hasn't once asked how I am, how's my arm, how's my headache. It's like he's forgotten what happens to me when I read for him."

"Maybe he doesn't say much, but his expressions and actions spoke louder than any words that night. He was scared for you."

"Hmmm," I snorted. "Just wish he'd occasionally say so. Brand's pretty good about being polite. Always asks me how I am. If I need anything. He takes pretty good care of me."

"You'd better be watching yourself, young lady, or you'll have those two men fighting over you."

"No way, Rhoda. Not those two. Brand doesn't have much use for me. He doesn't believe in what I do. And if he's serious about what he said at the last meeting, he'd just as soon I wasn't on the case. He doesn't think I can do anything for them—I'm nothing more than a lot of 'hocus-pocus mumbo-jumbo' which I resent. That's not a man who's going to fight over me. Besides, there's no one to fight with."

"I know what I saw, doll. He was just as scared and concerned as Dylan."

"Strange. Neither of them acts like it." I suddenly wondered if I should ask Rhoda for her opinion. She'd offered to be my mother figure.

"Rhoda, tell me. When you look at me, what do you see?"

"Oh, Norrie. Hasn't anyone told you, love? You're a beautiful young woman."

"That's what Brand said, but I know what I used to look like. I wasn't beautiful. I was plain as day. My eyes were too far apart, my nose was too small and it turned up at the very end."

"Sweetie, you're not plain. You've got gorgeous eyes a deep shade of blue. And since Leonard streaked your hair, you've got the latest shade of blonde. Your nose is perfectly balanced to the rest of your face, which is something most people wish they had."

This detailed inventory of my personal attributes made me think that Rhoda and Brand had been sniffing the same bottle of glue.

"Rhoda, I don't believe you. I can't have changed that much in three years. I was never pretty. Very plain, very nothing."

"Norrie, what started you on this? Did someone say something? Tell you you weren't pretty?" She must have leaned closer, her hand settled on mine.

"No. Brand told me I was beautiful when I was in the hospital. I told him he was crazy and he said he wasn't, it was me who was nuts."

"Well, believe him. He was telling you the truth."

"Do I look blind to you?" I heard her small gasp.

"Not unless I watch what you're doing. Your actions give you away. But when you're talking to me you appear to look me in the eye."

"Thank you. I've always wondered but didn't want to ask." I played with the last rib bone on my plate and decided I was full.

"Rhoda, thank you for this supper. It was wonderful. It was even better having someone to share it with."

"Anytime, doll. I enjoyed fixing it for you. And before I leave, I'll clean up out here. You can't see the mess I made but I am *not* a tidy person when I cook." Plates clattered, cutlery rattled and I heard the grating sound of a chair being moved.

"Well, let me tell you I don't mind if you destroyed the kitchen. Those ribs more than make up for it. But let me help. I can wash if you'll put everything beside the sink."

"You're on."

We chatted away like old friends, my hands in the soapy water making fast work of the chore. The hot water helped relax me so when the phone rang, I found it an intrusion. I didn't want to talk to anyone. It would keep me from enjoying the rest of the evening. I ignored it, but Rhoda, obviously, was more curious than me.

"Hello? Hello? Who's there?" Rhoda's voice became first annoyed, then quickly advanced to frightened.

"Who is it, Rhoda?" Fear made me ask. The dishrag I grasped was soggy, cold, but I hung onto it as if I could wipe away the terror clawing at me.

"I don't know. There doesn't appear to be anyone there, yet the line sounds open. Listen."

She handed me the receiver and all I heard was breathing. I called out a soft hello.

"*God will punish you,*" came the hoarse, familiar voice. I nearly dropped the phone at the harsh utterance. I shivered, trying to speak, but nothing came. He was still talking when the phone slid through my fingers and hit the counter.

Rhoda grabbed it, shouted, "Who are you? I'll report you to the pol... Damn. He hung up." The phone thumped gently onto the counter this time.

"Rhoda, did he say anything to you?"

"No, all I heard was heavy breathing."

Should I report this to Dylan? Or was it a crank? Was I imagining the Preacher's voice? Had I been threatened again? It couldn't be ignored, but I didn't want half the department, or the task force, camping out in my living room.

Rhoda dialed the phone and I waited to hear whom she'd called, reasonably sure the problem had been taken out of my hands.

"Dylan, it's Rhoda Swetzler." The pause worried me. "She's fine. But we just had a little incident here..." Dylan's spluttering carried halfway across the kitchen.

"No, really, she's okay." Rhoda moved closer beside me and gave me a quick hug.

"See, doll, I told you he was worried." Her whispered comment made me smile.

"Look, we just had a phone call here. Guy wouldn't talk to me, but from the look on Norrie's face, he gave her an earful. What do you want me to do?"

There was silence for a few seconds then I heard Dylan's squawks and knew he'd taken time to think through what he told us, followed by Rhoda's hmmm's of approval.

"Right. Fred can help then he'll follow us. I've got my own van here. Shouldn't take us more than half an hour, tops. Fred will radio you when we leave."

More squawking, Dylan in lieutenant mode. He'd give directions to Rhoda, a civilian, knowing she'd jump to it and obey his every word. That was Rhoda's way, and right now I was glad of it.

"Okay. Thanks, Dylan." She set the phone down.

"He's moving me, isn't he." It wasn't a question.

"You bet. Can you blame him? What did that punk say to you, Norrie? Come on, we've got to know. Dylan needs to be able to protect you."

"Oh, Rhoda..." Waves of fear flowed through me. "It wasn't a punk. It was the Preacher." Her hands grasped mine tighter. "He said God will punish me. For what? I've not done anything. To him, or anyone else." I stopped, unable to tell her the rest, although I knew I had to.

"Rhoda?" I swallowed, tasting my fear. "He called me *Miss Benedict*."

Chapter Seventeen

Rhoda's utter silence drove home how scared I should be.

She dialed again. The information would be passed to Dylan.

Rhoda talked to him while I moved down the hall to my bedroom, wondering what I could pack for the next few days. I'd need relaxing clothes for sitting around and clothes for meetings. If things were escalating, there'd be more than just one meeting, there'd be one a day.

I dropped to the side of the bed and waited, not knowing where to start.

Rhoda came down the hall and, just like my mother, was talking before she even got to the doorway.

"Dylan is sending someone to stay with you right now, doll, and we're moving. To our house. Dylan wanted to put you in a hotel, but I told him no. You can stay with Fred and me, and whoever is assigned to look after you can have the spare room next to the one I'm giving you."

"How long will I be gone, Rhoda?" Bouncing up, I headed for my closet. "I don't have a clue what to take. I'll have to pack enough for meetings, and I'll..."

"Calm down, doll. Relax. We'll pack up enough for a week. We can always stop back here for more if you need it. We'll just take the hangers right out of your closet and straight to mine. My van has one of those bar thingies, you know what I mean." I guessed she meant her van had a clothes bar. She was sliding hangers along the rail in my closet and her last words seemed to be coming from deep within its padded depths.

"Okay, Norrie. I've picked out enough good things for the meetings that they could hold seven of 'em and you won't be wearing the same thing twice. What about relaxing at our house? Sweats? Jeans?"

We put my wardrobe together, moved to the bathroom for a few cosmetic things. Cream, body lotion, scented soap and my special treat, French vanilla candles that made me feel warm and fuzzy any time I lit one. They matched the scented soap and the body lotion so all in all I probably smelled more like a bakery than a woman.

While we were in the bathroom, the doorbell sounded. Rhoda went to answer it and came back with someone in tow. From the footsteps, I guessed someone smaller than me. The creaking sound of leather said a uniformed policewoman had been sent to keep me company.

Now I had to be nice to someone else and answer to her and, oh, *hell!* What choice did I have?

"Norrie, this is Francie Vine. She's from the Point. Dylan sent her to help us move and then she'll be staying with us. Francie, meet Norrie Benedict."

My hand was out, and I hoped I was facing the right direction. A small, hard hand grasped mine.

"Hi, Norrie. Thanks for being a good sport about this. Dylan told me you'd probably throw a small tantrum when I showed up. I'm glad you proved him wrong. Take him down a peg or two."

Dylan told her a thing like that? About me? Now I *was* ready to throw that tantrum, but neither Miss Francie Vine nor her venerable boss would know about it.

Rhoda squeezed my arm, none too gently. She knew. She'd read the situation and correctly guessed I was seething. I nodded once, hoped she was looking my way. My nod would tell her I'd got her message and would save my snit for later. Seemed to me I spent a lot of time lately being annoyed with Dylan. Why was I doing this to myself?

"Let's just get on with it. I want to go to bed and get a good night's sleep so I can go to that meeting in the morning in a fit state to think. Let's move."

Francie Vine was just doing her job and I knew I really shouldn't be taking out my mad on this poor woman. The person I needed to yell at knew better than to put his Welsh hulk where it would fill my doorway.

While I sat and waited impatiently, Rhoda and the lady cop took my clothes and my suitcase out to Rhoda's van then came back for me.

"Come on, doll. Fred's going to follow us over. Make sure we aren't tailed."

At Rhoda's van, Francie moved to put me into the back. I balked. I couldn't. I hadn't ridden in the backseat of any car since my accident and I wasn't about to start tonight.

"Rhoda..." That's all I said. She hurried around to my side of the van, opened the front door for me and deftly relegated Francie to the back. She muttered something to the policewoman that I didn't hear. I decided I didn't care what she told Francie Vine as long as it got me into the van and on my way. The chill of the evening air had seeped through me while we stood by the van and now I only wanted to get warm.

Rhoda roared away from the curb and we were snapped back in our seats. Rhoda seemed to think fast was the only way to get anywhere. Who was I to argue? She must have felt my tension because her words were intended to calm.

"Norrie, relax. Fred is right behind us, and there's only one other set of headlights I can see back there." A tiny click from below heralded the noise of a police radio. "Do you want to listen to the scanner? See if he's telling Dylan anything?"

"Sure, why not?" She turned it up and a thought struck. "Rhoda, is that thing really legal?"

"I don't know. Fred put it in here for when he's off duty. You know men. They have to be in the middle of anything they think is important. To him, that's the job."

We drove fast through the city streets, with very few stops and only the low murmur of voices from the radio for company. When I suddenly realized it was Brand's

voice speaking, I began to listen more closely. Rhoda must have sensed the change in me because the radio volume rose.

"Hey, Fred, you've got to teach her how to drive. That wife of yours has broken every speed limit we've seen since we left Norrie's house."

"I keep telling her, but you know women."

"Not really, and I'm not planning to remedy that any time soon. Okay, you're clear. No tails back here. I'm going to leave you now and go back to the station. We've got a few more hours of work before the meeting tomorrow. Tell Norrie goodnight for me."

Goodnight, Brand.

"Thanks, Brand. I'll tell her."

Rhoda turned off the scanner and I relaxed in my seat. Francie Vine hadn't said a thing since we left the house.

"That accounts for the other set of headlights. Fred is now the only one back there. Brand just turned off." Rhoda's hand stroked my arm. "Didn't I tell you, doll? He's worried about you, too."

The car slowed and the wheels bounced, hard, up the curb.

"We're home. Let's park this thing right in the garage and unload straight into the house." The overhead door grumbled protestingly upward. When the little van finally stopped moving, I thought about getting out but remembered what happened the last time I tried that. Patting the cast as a reminder, I stayed put. Fred's voice at my window told me it was safe to open the door and let myself out.

"Thanks, Fred."

"You're welcome. Just wait here for Rhoda."

Waiting for Rhoda to give me a steer in the right direction, I desperately craved a bed. Again, as if she could read my mind, Rhoda was beside me, leading me through the door and down a long hall. There was soft carpet under my feet as she turned me into a room on the left. I could smell furniture polish and something floral. A plant maybe?

"This is where you'll sleep, Norrie. I'll put Francie in the room beside you. The bathroom is right across the hall. I'll show you and then I want to see you into that bed and getting some sleep. You look exhausted."

I *was* exhausted, but I wouldn't admit it to anyone. I always thought an admission would make me look weak.

"Thanks, Rhoda."

"Your case is on the bed, nightshirt on top. You get ready and I'll be back in a moment."

I was quick. I'd finished in the little adjoining bathroom and changed into my nightshirt by the time she came back with a steaming cup of hot chocolate. The aroma of cocoa and marshmallows tripped me right back to evenings with my mother,

relaxing in front of the fireplace. Today, it seemed, I'd had too many reminders of days with my mother.

My brain wasn't totally recovered from the last *reading* so at least I wasn't getting other people's feelings along with my own. Too many mixed emotions would have been too hard to handle.

An intense shaft of pain suddenly doubled me over, making me clutch my stomach. It wasn't the pain I felt at the crime scenes. It was more intense, so much so I feared it might make me sick. Then, as suddenly as it came, it disappeared.

"You all right, doll?" Rhoda's worried voice was just inches from my ear.

"I am now," I panted the words. "I don't know what that was but somebody, someplace is going to have one hell of a stomachache if that's any indication." I rubbed my hands over my face in frustration and sat up. "I just don't know who or when or how." I reached to pull back the blankets and felt an unwanted surge of aggravation. "Damn it, Rhoda, this isn't fair! If I'm supposed to help people I have to know what's happening and to whom. I'm only getting part of what I need to help anyone."

"Take it easy, doll. Maybe there's a reason you're only getting part of it. Maybe you don't know the person it will happen to. Maybe you have to meet them yet. Is that possible?"

"Anything's possible. I just wish I knew." Pounding on the pillow took a little off the edge of my frayed temper.

"Here, drink this. Then get some sleep. You'll feel better in the morning."

I drank most of the hot chocolate in two or three swallows and handed back the empty mug, suddenly so tired I couldn't seem to stop yawning. I usually feared when I put my head down I'd be wide awake, reliving the last murder.

Tonight I thought it might be different. This time, I would make it to sleep. As my eyes closed and my brain shut down for the night I realized they'd tricked me.

Somebody put something in my drink to make me sleep.

Chapter Eighteen

The noise level coming from the task force office was low when I arrived. Fred delivered me upstairs, so when I heard the sudden outburst through the open door I was a little surprised.

Brand's epithets turned the air blue all the way out to the hall and bordered on being a plea. I wondered what caused him to be so profane. Profanity wasn't something I'd heard much from this man. Maybe he'd been careful in my presence to keep his act clean and this was the real Brandon Hawke showing himself when I wasn't in his presence.

I didn't know what he was doing in the office, but decided to remain in the hall and give him time to settle down. He was muttering to himself, banging his hand on something that sounded flat, wooden. A desk maybe.

Then I realized he wasn't alone. Someone else was talking, too quietly to identify. Without my over-acute ears I probably wouldn't have even heard the other voice.

"I still find it hard to believe that Norrie can feel what she says she feels, hear the voices she says she hears or see the visions she claims to see. It isn't normal. And it sure as hell doesn't make sense to me." Pages were turning on the big easel pad. "But here's the proof. How the hell can she know this?" There were more pounding sounds. "Damn! I don't understand."

The voice answering him remained low, but now I recognized it as being Martin. "Accept that she has a gift, Brand. Let her help with the case." I could barely make out the words but it appeared he was on my side.

"I can't. I just don't believe it. If I ever let myself believe any of the things she's done... Let's just forget it. I have my beliefs and I'll stick by them."

He walked toward the door, stopped, angrily punched somebody's number on a phone.

"Hey, Lester." Ah. The computer operator assigned to the task force. "Need a favor."

I stood in the hall, incredulous, while he explained what he wanted.

"Yeah, that's it. Just run those names in that order. I don't expect you'll find anything. I think this is all a crock, but I have to check. The boss wouldn't like it if I left any stone unturned."

He listened a moment longer, laughed and hung up.

Well! They say eavesdroppers never hear well of themselves and I guess I'd just proved the homily.

Brandon Hawke didn't believe me—unwilling to try—going through the motions only to keep Dylan happy. I could only hope the search brought back the results as I knew them to be.

Knocking gently on the door, I was surprised to realize it had a glass window. I'd pictured the room with a solid wooden door to keep out all prying eyes. There were footsteps behind me just before a voice spoke.

"Glad to see you looking so much better, Norrie," a deep, warm bass spoke, inches from my ear.

"Me too, Roy." The aroma of smoked bacon and cigarettes, coming from his jacket, invaded my space. "That was a hard one."

"I don't know how you do it. Doesn't your body take longer to recover each time? Seems to me I read that someplace."

"You're right. It does. But if I can get undisturbed sleep...I'm usually back to normal in five or six days."

"Well, you're looking good, and I'm glad. You had a lot of us pretty worried the other night."

"Thanks." Now was the time to find myself a guide I could trust, someone who believed in what I did. I'd rather have Roy than Brand beside me today, I thought. Then a little sliver of doubt invaded my mind. Did I want anyone beside me? Knowing I didn't was no help at all. Someone had to get me in and out of this room and help me find a chair. "I was just getting ready to go in. Could I get you to help me find a seat and could you describe the room for me so I know where things are?"

He did such a good job I could probably walk around without danger of bumping into anything. He described the old oak table so perfectly I could practically see the initials carved there.

"Here you go, one decent armchair without the usual splinters to grab your clothes." He pulled the chair back and led me to the side to sit down.

"You've been taking lessons," I accused him with a thankful smile.

"Naw. I just watched Dylan and Hawke that night in the field. I saw what they did for you. How it helped you. I can do this without being shown how." His breath smelled of a recent cigarette and his clothes reeked of smoke. He must have enjoyed a last cigarette in his car on the way here.

I reached and patted the arm closest to me and felt a smooth shirtsleeve over an extremely muscular arm. I'd have to get Fred or Rhoda to describe these people for me so I would know in my mind what they looked like.

Martin Jamison's voice came from the corner. "Hey, Brand, do you think there's anything to those names? Maybe she really did hear them. Peter-whatever. Thaddeus James. James-who-knows. Simon Andrew. Want to bet that Peter told his victim that his name was Peter Thaddeus? And James would likely be James Simon. That seems to be

the pattern here.” He quit speaking and I heard footsteps heading toward the door. “Hey man, I’m going to get a coffee. Want one?”

“Care to share your thoughts, Brand?” I interrupted, ignoring Martin. “Are you finding something in the names?” Martin could leave for coffee if he wanted to. It was Brand I needed to talk to.

“No coffee, thanks, Martin. And no on the names, Norrie.” The door closed behind Martin and I once more waded into the fray.

“Haven’t you found a match on any of them?”

“I can’t say.”

“Why not?” The silence told me I’d probably screwed up.

“Actually, I want to wait until Lester sends the data to confirm what we’ve learned.” The ice in his voice might have hurt worse if I hadn’t known he was mad at me already.

Back to square one with Brandon Hawke. Would he ever believe me?

Probably not and that was a sad situation. I could help this case, but with the second in command not believing anything I said or did, how would it work?

It wouldn’t. Couldn’t.

He had to believe before anything could happen.

Pushing myself off the chair, with my hand on the edge of the table to keep my perspective on the room, I faced the direction of his voice.

“Detective, I’m sorry about all this.” Sliding sideways, I followed the edge of the table to the corner Roy Ferran had shown me. “I’m sure Dylan will understand if you tell him I can no longer be one of the task force. I can’t work on these cases.” My fingers kept slight contact with the end of the table as I turned to head for the door. “If we aren’t all on the same page, so to speak, I’ll be more a hindrance than a help.” Having memorized the trail to the table from the hall door, I slowly reversed my way, reaching the door just as Brand’s voice bellowed.

“Sit down. Now.” He calmed down some and his voice softened. “You’re not going anywhere and you know it. Dylan won’t let you.”

My hand on the doorknob, I turned my head in his direction. “Dylan can’t stop me.” Turn the doorknob. “I’m sorry, Detective, but this just isn’t going to work.” Pull it open.

I was in the hall, feeling my way along the wall. I knew where I was even if I couldn’t see where I was going.

A clammy hand touched my arm and a voice beside me made me jump. “Can I help you, miss?”

“Thank you, yes. Could you lead me to the front desk? My ride is waiting for me there, Chaplain.” I recognized his voice, glad it was someone I could count on.

“Certainly. It’s Miss Benedict, isn’t it?”

Nodding, I prayed he'd shut his mouth and leave me in peace, get me to Fred and let me out of here.

I'd had enough.

"Are you all right, Miss Benedict? You seem somewhat upset."

"No, really, I'm fine." My teeth grated they were clenched so tight. "I had an argument with someone. Lost my temper."

"Ah, yes. Temper. A sad thing we have to lose it to make others see our way, isn't it?" His hand on my arm fell away.

I heard running footsteps behind me and flattened myself to the wall. I'd been run over more than once because I hadn't moved out of the way fast enough. This time the steps stopped beside me.

"Wait up. We've got to talk. Right now."

"No, Detective Hawke, there's nothing more to say. I'm going home. You can explain to Dylan why I'm not here and —"

"Will you please *shut up*?" His hoarse voice grated close to my ear, his hot breath caressed my cheek and his hand shot miniature electrical currents running through the skin on my arm. I yanked my arm away, tried to turn and follow the wall.

"Chaplain, where are you? I could use your help here."

"Who are you talking to, Norrie? There's nobody else here. Just you and me."

"Nobody? But..." Brand's words suddenly made me recall the day a chaplain other than Lieutenant Ray Seymour introduced himself. I could hear his lightly accented voice when he told me his name. Later, Dylan and Brand said there was only one chaplain. So, whoever acted the part had convinced me once, then again, that he existed.

How did he introduce himself? Jésus Barthol — dy. Big pause between the first part and the "dy" of his name.

Disbelief was now *my* problem. "No. He wouldn't...he couldn't—"

"Who wouldn't? Couldn't what?" asked an obviously irritated Brand. "What are you talking about?"

"He was here! The murdering bastard was here, in the station." Holding tight to Brand's arm, I dragged him along.

"Now I know you're crazy. That madman isn't going to show his face around here. We'd —"

"We'd what? Arrest him? Nobody here has seen him. They don't know what he looks like." I moved quickly down the hall, headed for more information. "He could even be a cop."

"Slow down, Norrie. Where the hell are you heading?"

"The front desk to talk to Sergeant Rolf." His arm moved under mine, leading me there.

The noise and smell told me we'd made it to the waiting hall.

"Rolf is with a lawyer. I'll get him over here. Grab this chair and don't move."

Yes, sir! Detective, sir.

In mere seconds I heard his steps coming back. A second set of footsteps heralded Sergeant Rolf.

"Morning, Miss Benedict, you wanted to talk to me?"

"Sergeant, I need to ask you questions about this morning and about the last time I was here, the day of the last murder."

"Ask away, I'll try and answer."

"Last time I had a long wait until Detective Hawke came to get me. Did you see the police chaplain who sat with me, picked up my stuff when my purse spilled?"

"No, ma'am. I didn't. There was no chaplain on duty. I know 'cause Ray Seymour's wife was having her baby that day. This is his first day back since then."

"Is there a chaplain named Jésus Bartholdy in any other precinct?" I nearly choked saying his name.

"No, ma'am, nowhere in Rocklynne. None of the precincts. Ray Seymour sort of travels around to wherever he's needed. He's the only chaplain we got."

Brand sent Rolf on his way then sat beside me, his hand on my arm so I'd know where he was. He stayed silent while I thought about what I'd heard.

"He was here, Brand. In this building. And I don't know what he looks like." I leaned forward and dropped my head into my hands, frustrated at being duped. "I didn't get any of the usual vibes from him. He must have been blocking me."

This wouldn't have happened if I'd had my sight. The harsh reality of my thought was like a kick in the stomach until I remembered that even with sight I couldn't have recognized someone I hadn't seen. I'd only ever had telepathic communication with the Preacher.

Right. And if I'd had my sight, I wouldn't have been a police department psychic. My parents would still be alive and—

"Stop. Don't cry, for God's sake. I can't stand seeing you in tears." His thumb gently wiped my cheek, his arm circled my shoulders.

"Sorry. It's just...I realized I have twice talked to this scum in this building and I don't know what he looks like. Nobody else has seen him. I'm even beginning to wonder if he isn't a figment of my imagination."

Another set of steps hurried our way.

"What the hell is going on here?" Dylan demanded. "I was told you quit, Norrie. Is that true?" I couldn't answer him. I didn't know if I was going back to the office or not. Brand finally answered for me.

"Norrie and I had a misunderstanding, Dylan. She walked out, but it's settled now." He sucked in a deep breath. "We've got a bigger problem, sir."

Sir?

“What bigger problem?”

“The Preacher. He was in this building. Talking to Norrie.”

Chapter Nineteen

"Shit!"

"My sentiments exactly." Brand's voice was hard, rough.

"Yeah, well, I'm not too pleased about it, either." I didn't know whether to be angry or sulk. Neither was going to solve my problem.

"How do you know it was him?" Dylan demanded. "You couldn't see him."

"His name. He's borrowing again. This time he was Jésus," I pronounced it the Hispanic way, "Bartholdy. The first time he introduced himself to me, he hesitated after Barthol, then he quickly added the 'dy'. I think now he was going to say Bartholomew and realized it might give him away."

"Makes sense. Fits the pattern of the other names. Has anyone run a check on those names?" Brand stiffened beside me when Dylan asked the question that caused the hard feelings between Brand and the know-it-all psychic. When would I get a handle on my ego? Whenever it reared its ugly head, I usually screwed up and antagonized someone important to me. Usually it was Dylan, but with this case it was increasingly becoming Brand with whom I argued.

"I'm checking now." Brand's hand was on mine, squeezing it, then he leaned against me and kissed my cheek. In front of Dylan, yet.

"Sorry, sweetheart. I owe you a big apology. You have to be right about those names."

It was a hollow victory and I wasn't enjoying it at all.

"I tried to tell you." It came out a whisper.

"What's the matter, Hawke, your sense of the credible giving you trouble?" Dylan's verbal poke was tempered by an understanding chuckle.

"Yeah. I just couldn't suddenly believe something I'd never considered possible before. But this is beginning to make me have doubts about those values. Let's go back upstairs and see if there's anything from Lester yet."

Dylan walked on one side of me, Brand on the other. When we reached the door to the operations room and walked in, those present sent up a little cheer.

"Glad you're back, Norrie. We need you on this."

"Thanks, Ray."

"That should help clear the air, anyway."

"I'm glad *you* think so, Detective." Martin's subdued laugh told me he, too, was trying to relieve what must have felt like a tense situation.

"Let's get this meeting underway. We've got a lot to cover."

A hand on my arm led me toward the table. I assumed it was Dylan until Brand spoke.

"When this meeting's over, can I take you to lunch? I think you need a break. And I need to talk to you. Swetzler can follow us when you're ready to leave."

"I'm not at my house anymore. I'm staying with the Swetzlers."

"I know."

"I got a phone call —"

"Let's get going." Dylan interrupted, telling everyone present what I had been about to tell Brand. "First. Norrie got a phone call night before last. We think it was the Preacher. She's now moved in with Fred and Rhoda Swetzler." I heard only a rustle of movement. Seasoned cops knew better than to show their surprise.

"How do you know it was him?" Martin Jamison asked.

"I don't, Martin. What I heard made me think it was him. Rhoda Swetzler reported it. I wasn't going to say anything but she thought Dylan should know."

"The message she got," Dylan continued as though Martin and I hadn't spoken, "was that 'God would punish her'. So either we're dealing with a crackpot who just happened to phone at the wrong time or it was the Preacher. We're not taking a chance. There's a uniformed policewoman staying at the house and the patrols will continue."

"Hang in there, Norrie. We'll get the guy."

"I'm hanging Roy, but it's getting tougher."

"Miss Benedict, I'm Melanie Granger, Stanley Park precinct. I wasn't at the last meeting. I'm sorry it's become personal for you. Do you think you can continue?" Murmurs around the table told me the rest of them wanted to know the same thing.

"I have to. Because he's getting bolder, I think it will make it easier to catch him. Sooner or later he's going to make a very big mistake and we'll get him. I want to be there when that happens."

"Calling Norrie at home, making himself known to her in the precinct house, those *were* his first big mistakes."

"I agree, Hawke. Okay, people. We now have an ID on the last victim. Her name was Carol Knightly. A hooker. As far as we can tell, he met her at the church in Stanley Park. She's on their membership roll."

"You'd think after the first murder that the prostitutes in this city would be a little more careful of who they picked up. I know we haven't let on about the Preacher, but maybe we're going to have to rethink that. Anything to make these women think twice before going off with some stranger." This remark came from a new voice, one I hadn't met before.

"Who said that?"

"Sorry, Miss Benedict. Larry Simpson, Pilot Point. I was lead on the fourth murder in our precinct."

"Thank you. I'd prefer to be called Norrie and I'd like to answer your question, if Dylan will let me."

"Go ahead," he commanded from his position at the head of the table.

"I think these women are so lonely, so desperate for attention, they'd overlook anything that might seem suspicious to them. And since we haven't released details about the Preacher, we can hardly expect them to be leery of a man in a clerical collar or who calls himself a religious man."

"I agree with Norrie, I think we have to release the information soon," Brand replied. "Although all of them had another commonality. None of them could hang on to a guy. Everyone we've talked to, their families, friends, said the same thing. They were all lousy at relationships. A couple couldn't even seem to find a guy to go out with. So this crud would be the first one to pay attention to them, other than those who paid for their services. They'd be his slaves if that's what he wanted from them."

There was agreement around the table. A knock and the sound of the door opening interrupted his thoughts. Brand stood beside me, pushing his chair back.

"Thanks, Lester." I heard him flipping through pages of paper. "Did you find anything?"

The nasally voice of the computer expert gave us the best news of the day. All of it bad.

"Not much. He hasn't registered any of these so-called congregations. But when I did an Internet search, there is an item about a Peter Thaddeus being affiliated with the Charismatic Church of God. And in that little clip I found another reference to a second pastor whose name is..." Pages flipped. Lester was obviously trying to find the name but was interrupted before he found it.

"Andrew something, I'd bet." Brand's voice sounded very subdued.

"How'd you know that? It's Andrew Bartholomew." Lester sounded a bit miffed Brand knew the answer.

"Let's just say this guy is running true to form." Dylan had figured it out, too.

"Lester," I interrupted, "can you set a recurring search for any new mention of either of these names and anything else of this type where the preacher's name is Bartholomew something, and maybe another search for any name combination that is from the names of the Apostles?"

"Norrie, I doubt he'd change his pattern now, but it has been known to happen. Most serial murderers follow their pattern until it leads us straight to them, but there's always the very slight chance he might change up. Use different names. Then your search is just a waste of time."

"I don't think so, Dylan. This madman believes himself to be God or the son of God. Up to now he's used the Apostles' names, but when he talks to me, he thinks he's the son of God. Jesus. He's calling himself Jésus. That's the only change. Lester, can you also include any variations on the name Jesus?"

"No problemo. I'll let you know if I find anything." I heard his hurried footsteps and the door slammed. Lester had left us to start the new search.

"Well, we'll find out this afternoon if you're right. We have an FBI profiler taking a look at everything we've got. Let's see if he says the same thing."

Drawing a deep breath, I let them in on my worried thoughts. "I don't think we've got much time before he strikes again. He's killing closer and closer together with each woman. If you look at the dates, I think you'll find he's gaining a day or two each time. And it's been nearly a week since the last body was found. I'm afraid he'll strike again soon. Maybe as early as tomorrow."

Someone wrote squeakily on the white boards I knew were standing at one end of the room. The fumes from the ink irritated my nose.

"She's right." It was Dylan who finally spoke. "He's been gaining a day with each murder. If he sticks to the schedule he's been on, it could even be tonight. Don't anyone be too far from a phone for the next few days. I don't want to have to make the call, but I don't think we can stop him before he strikes again. We just don't have enough on him. A location would be a good start."

"A name. A name would be good, too," Martin interjected.

I hated being the bearer of another bad thought but it had to be said. "He may already have murdered. Remember, he kept some of the bodies in a freezer, spacing out the planting of corpses for us to find. It may already be too late." Turning to where I knew he sat, I asked, "Any luck finding that barn, Roy?"

"Not a thing. We've found a couple of barns that fit the description, but there's no creek or river anywhere close by. We've found a number of creeks but we can't find any barns along their banks." His subdued voice was a sign of his frustration, a sentiment we all shared.

"Is someone still looking?" I continued.

"Yeah, we've got four units on it. They're following the angler's map you mentioned. Some of the creeks only show up on that one."

"Make sure to tell them there may be horses nearby," I interrupted. "I remember the smell on the woman's blouse. It probably came from the barn, but just in case..."

Sitting back, I wondered what else there could be to discuss. This meeting should be just about over. We'd covered everything we knew so far, which wasn't saying much.

"Norrie, we've got some evidence from the last murder that we can't understand. Can you do a *reading* for us today? Are you recovered enough? We don't even know if it has anything to do with the crime. It's just one of the things they found at the scene. A card. It was under the body when we moved her."

"What kind of a card, Dylan?" My stomach dropped with emphatic speed. From sour to queasy in 2.3 seconds.

"Some kind of talisman, maybe. Looks like some kind of religious symbol."

"A cross, inside a circle, inside a square," I muttered, now nearly paralyzed with fear.

There was absolutely no noise in that room.

When I could finally move, I grabbed my purse, pushed my chair back so hard it fell over and knelt beside the table. My bag was upside down while I shook everything loose, my fingers bumped and knocked as the clutter I carried fell on the floor in front of me. When all sounds of falling objects ceased, I threw the purse aside and started scrabbling like a madwoman amidst the junk on the carpet.

"What the hell!" someone behind me exclaimed.

I tried to block out the voices but they persisted.

"Norrie, are you nuts?" muttered Martin from across the room. Footsteps approached and I assumed he was moving my way.

"What's she doing down there?"

"Norrie, what..." Brand grabbed my wrists. He was on the floor beside me.

"Let go!" My fear made me strong enough to break his grip.

"What are you looking for?" he persisted.

My fingers were splayed in front of me as I continued feeling everything I could find on the floor, sending things skittering in all directions until I found what I was looking for. I thrust my arm upward in a gesture of mock triumph so everyone could see it, nearly sprawling on my face in the process. A strong arm clasping me around my chest kept me from toppling.

"This."

Brand and Martin helped me to my feet while I triumphantly grasped my find. I'd crawled around on the floor heedless of my clothes, and now realized I'd rearranged the skirt and blouse in what were almost certainly unflattering ways.

I didn't care.

Gasping for breath, I tried to pull my skirt back up around my waist with one hand while I held the chaplain's "good luck charm". Brand pried at my fingers, loosening my grasp on the card.

"Norrie, let go. I've got it."

I relinquished my death grip on the talisman and went back to putting my clothes in order. My blouse had come untucked, my skirt was twisted, even my underclothes suffered.

"*Cyfrgolli!* Get that thing up here so we can all see it." Dylan sounded almost as angry and scared as I felt.

"I've got it." Brand's voice was sobering

Something hit the table nearby and a second noise that sounded remarkably the same came from further away.

"Damn it to hell. They're identical! Norrie, how did you get this card?"

"From Jésus Bartholdy. The man who introduced himself to me at the last meeting here, as the chaplain. And he was here again today." I heard a groan from the opposite side of the table.

"Man, this guy has balls! Right here in the precinct house. Talking to Norrie."

"It isn't balls, Roy. He thinks he's infallible. Can do absolutely no wrong." Brand's anger was in danger of boiling over, his voice low and guttural. "He thinks he's God. And so far we've played right into his hands. We let him get to Norrie while she was here. He got through to her on the phone. And he's done this right under our noses."

"Is there something on the other side of the second card? Some printing? Something like 'It serveth for protection against all earthly dangers'?" I asked.

One of the cards was flipped across the table, landing closer to me.

"Yes. It's printed on the back." Martin Jamison answered this time.

"Is that mine or the other one?"

"This is the one from the scene."

"Make sure they're the same, Brand. Please." My fear was so great I was nearly begging.

He brushed against me as he reached for the other card. Despite the fact I'd been angry at him earlier, I really wanted to grab hold of his arm and hang on tight. I badly needed some physical comfort and I wasn't getting it from anyone here.

"Hell!" Brand's outburst startled me and this time I grabbed at his arm.

"What? What's the matter?" Frantic again, my breathing sped up and I became lightheaded. Brand reached over and put his arm around me, almost as if he'd read my mind. "It's okay, babe, we're here for you."

"Why? What does it say?"

"'It serveth to protect against all earthly dangers'. But there's more."

"What? Tell me." My voice rose, my hands shook so hard I could hardly hang onto Brand's arm and I squelched the impulse to scream.

"It's handwritten. It says," his arm tightened around me and I knew this wasn't good, "it says, 'nice to meet you Miss Benedict, Bang'."

My stomach went from queasy to clenched. I nearly gagged. Brand's arm pulled me tighter again.

"You're okay, Norrie. Just breathe. Deep breaths. Try to relax."

"Hawke, drop the card, gently, on the table." Dylan picked up the phone and dialed. His voice was gruff as he gave the order. "Get someone down to the operations room right now with a fingerprint kit."

Of course! There would be prints. Mine, Brand's, Dylan's, Martin's and the Preacher's, if we hadn't managed, between us, to destroy them. How could we have been so stupid as to handle the evidence like that? Then I realized that I might have

been the only one who had held it by anything other than the edges. Sometimes my stupidity surprised even me!

"Before they take those cards, print what's on them on the board, Roy." Brand's instructions made sense. Once these cards were in the lab it would be some time before we got them back.

Discordant squeaks of a dry-erase marker accompanied Roy as he wrote the messages on a whiteboard. Something flitted into my beleaguered mind no one had thought to comment on.

"Brand, what's the last word on my card?"

"Bang."

"He hasn't used a gun so far to murder anyone. Does this mean he's about to change his M.O.?"

"Please, can I interrupt?" The nervous-sounding voice belonged to Lester, computer genius. I thought he'd already left the room so either he'd come back or I'd been wrong. This case seemed to be upsetting my normally balanced hearing relationship to the happenings around me.

"What, Lester?" Dylan's impatience wasn't enough to stop Lester, thank God.

"Bang. I know what it might mean."

"Well, don't just stand there. Tell us."

"If you're big into Internet chat rooms, the kind where people are totally anonymous and where events sometimes go so far as to break the law, and you want to get your point across? The word 'bang' is an exclamation point. Which means..."

"Which means our guy may use a computer and may be online a lot. Lester, get going. You know what we're looking for. Anything to do with one of this creep's congregations, his church, the card. Anything. Get a couple of volunteers if you need to, but get into those chat rooms and see if you can find anything. Anything at all. We've got about twelve hours, maybe a few more, if he sticks to his schedule." The sound of hurried footsteps preceded the resounding bang of a slammed door. This time Lester took that "get going" at face value.

"Norrie, they're going to want to print you for elimination purposes. You want to do it here or upstairs?" Dylan's voice came from beside me. Such was my mental state, I hadn't heard him approach.

"I don't care." I'd taken enough deep breaths I was starting to relax.

I was safe. I was sitting in a room full of people wearing guns. How much better protected could I get?

"Wherever they want me. Just so long as I can clean the mess off afterward."

"Then go upstairs. Brand, take her up right now. They'll want yours and Martin's, too. I'll send the tech back to you as soon as they pick up the cards."

"Right. Come on." He took my hand and was leading me toward the door when Melanie Granger suddenly spoke.

"Are you going to let Norrie go home after this? Or can we get her to a safe house someplace?"

"No, please," I protested. "I can't move again." The very thought scared me. "I'm just learning my way around Rhoda and Fred's place. No one, except the people here, knows where I am. Brand made sure of that when we moved."

"How'd you know that?" Brand spoke quietly in my ear.

"Tell you later," I whispered back. I didn't want to get Fred in trouble for having that scanner.

"Let's get Fred in here. See what he thinks." Dylan was already punching phone buttons.

I turned to Brand and softly explained how I knew he'd followed us the night I moved. I felt his body move against mine in silent laughter, pleased I'd made at least one of us happy about something.

A knock on the door startled me. So much for calming down. Brand's hand tightened on mine until Fred spoke.

"Norrie, sit down for a moment." Dylan waited while Brand picked up my chair and helped me find it. "Fred, what do you think? There's been a new wrinkle. The Preacher knows Norrie, what she looks like, where she lived. After the phone call we moved her. He's made contact with her—twice. In the precinct house. Is your place safe? Or do we need to move her again?"

"When did he find her here? The day I was sent to see my sergeant?" He sounded annoyed, a little fearful and I knew he blamed himself for leaving me alone.

"That day, and again this morning."

"Jeez!"

"You can say that again!" Dylan's disgust was so plain to hear everyone chuckled or laughed out loud. The tension level in the room dropped and even I felt better. And with that relief my brain began working again.

"Just a minute. Fred. You told me the chaplain sent you to talk to your sergeant. You saw him. Do you remember what he looked like?"

"Sorry, Norrie, I don't. I never saw him. Someone handed me a note from him."

I felt a terrible sense of depression come over me. Another dead-end.

"Where in the building did you see him, Norrie? Maybe someone else saw him with you," Fred commented.

It flattered me he was comfortable enough with my visual challenge to talk about what I could see, what I'd seen. Others might have been insulted, I took it as a compliment.

"In the hall up here this morning, and last week in the reception hall downstairs."

"Isn't there some kind of camera surveillance down there? Seems to me I remember a camera on the seating area. Maybe it would show something." Martin spoke quietly, his hand still on my arm.

"I'm on it," said Roy as I heard footsteps running from the room.

"How long..."

"Just sit tight, sweetheart, he'll only be a few minutes. Then I'll take you for printing." Brand patted my arm gently as if to comfort and I wondered if he meant the endearment or even realized he'd said it.

Running footsteps in the hall slowed at our door and I knew Roy was back.

"Got it. You'll have to find the time-date stamp. It was rewound. Another day and it would have been erased."

"If we're lucky, this tape will tell us what he looks like," Brand commented and moved away from my side. The cool breeze his leaving created made me shiver.

I heard the tape case click into place in a machine somewhere at the other end of the room and the whirl of the tape as it played and wished I could see the pictures unfolding. "Norrie, what time did you get here last week?"

"About two-thirty. I sat there for nearly half an hour."

"Okay, we'll fast forward...there. That's the time stamp we need. Okay, everyone, take a look. We might just have our first photo of the Preacher." Brand came to stand beside me and asked, "Norrie, do you remember what you wore that day?"

"A teal green skirt and top, with a sweater. Tan purse and my shoes matched." I knew all this thanks to Rhoda being the one to pick out my clothes that date. She'd described my outfit to me so I could try and picture myself in my new wardrobe.

"There's her feet and the purse...top corner," said a voice I couldn't place. "And there's a pair of feet that look like they'd belong to a man standing near her."

There was total, expectant silence, nothing made a sound except the VCR. Finally, when I could stand it no longer, I had to ask.

"Can you see him?"

"Nothing but his shoes. Damn him! He made sure he kept himself out of the camera's frame. Even when he moved closer to the camera, he kept his back to us and his head never got into the shot. He knew about the camera and worked around it," fumed Brand.

"Forget this. It hasn't helped at all," said Dylan. His disappointment and that of the people around me made me feel ill. To think we'd been that close and still had nothing.

"What about moving her?" Brand returned to the question again.

"I think she's safe at our place. If I change my mind, you'll be the first to know."

"Come on, Norrie, we need to do the fingerprint thing, then I'm finding you something to eat." Brand stood again, my arm in his grasp.

"Don't go far, Hawke," Dylan instructed. "Stay in the building. The cafeteria food might be pretty bad, but at least she'll be safe down there. Pick up a few others to sit at tables around you, a sort of stockade move. In case he's still in the building."

"Right. Come on. Martin, Ray, both of you come with us. Anyone else?"

"I'd come but I've got an appointment." Martin sounded apologetic about not being able to help. "Can someone else go for me, please?"

"It's okay, Martin. Go. There's others who can help. Melanie? Phil?"

I heard all the chairs move and assumed that even though they hadn't spoken, we had our stockade. How it would work was anyone's guess because no matter how hard they worked to protect me, they didn't know who to protect me from.

"You guys go downstairs and set it up. Table in the middle for Norrie and Hawke, the rest of you surrounding them. If you don't have enough bodies, get some of the guys from the bullpen. They'll help. Tell them the task force will pay for their lunch, that's sure to get lots of volunteers. We have to assume the Preacher may still be in the building. Be careful." Dylan moved closer to me as he spoke, then his hand stroked my cheek.

"I'm sorry, *cariad*, but you're going to be stuck in this building most of the afternoon. I'm going to reinforce the surveillance team. Get everyone in place. For now you can stay at Fred's. If there are any incidents or indications that he knows where you are, you'll go to a safe house."

I nodded in understanding.

"If that isn't good enough, we'll find something else. Whatever it takes. We'll protect you, love. We won't let anything happen to you."

"Just catch him. Get the bastard behind bars. I don't care if he gets to me again. Get him off the streets."

"I care, Norrie," assured Brand.

"So do I." Dylan's voice was soft in my ear. "He'll get to you over my dead body."

Cold dread seized my heart.

"Don't say that. Please."

"I'm sorry, *caru*," Dylan said contritely, "it's just an expression."

"I know, but it bothers me." I shuddered as I stood there, the thought of anything happening to anyone I knew too much to deal with.

"You go eat lunch while we work on a few of these other leads and I'll page Hawke to bring you back when we're ready."

Chapter Twenty

Brand led me down the hall, while I thought about Dylan's plan. I decided another move was out of the question. It would get harder to protect me if they moved me about from one place to another. The problem wasn't the police department safe houses, it my lack of sight. If we moved too many times, I'd be stuck standing on one spot at the front door until someone else could lead me around the obstacles.

Being blind sucked!

Maybe the best place for me *was* the station house. They could assign me my own cell, leave the door unlocked, give me the key. That thought relaxed me a little and I laughed out loud.

"What?" Brand asked.

"Nothing, really. I was just imagining me in my own cell, someplace in this building, with my very own key."

"It won't come to that." He slipped his arm around my shoulders. "We'll get him, Norrie. We're getting closer, we've got new leads. If we can find out where he's holding these church meetings, we could raid them. Maybe we'd get real lucky and catch him with his congregation."

"You wish!"

In the back of my mind there was a thought niggling away, trying to get itself out into the open. I slowed. Gave it the time it needed.

When it finally registered, I stopped walking and nearly fell. I'd forgotten Brand was holding my arm and he almost pulled me off my feet.

"That's it! That's what I couldn't remember." Turning, I pulled my arm free and grasped his hand with both of mine.

"You followed Fred's car from my place to his house the night they moved me. How did you know to do that?" If his answer wasn't the right one, I was in big trouble.

Someone, somewhere, knew too much about what I was doing, making me believe that *someone* might be on the task force, attending the meetings.

A shiver shook me, settling in my stomach. It might be Brandon Hawke. What did I know about him?

Certainly not enough to say definitively he was a good cop. I thought he was. I hoped he was.

I *really* hoped he was. If I were wrong, I could never again trust my instincts.

"Dylan's orders. He phoned me on my cell, stayed off the radio so no one else could hear, and relayed the message." He sounded confused.

"Thank you. For a minute there you had me worried."

"What are you talking about?"

"I keep thinking someone in the meetings is sending me messages. I keep seeing the old barn, as if it's a crime scene. The connotation seems to be about someone's death."

"And?"

"If they know about the barn, then I'd guess they know the killer. I'm not sure how it works, but it could be thought transference, telepathic impressions, being passed on." Another thought crashed into my brain. "Or they *are* the killer."

His silence grew until I finally had to speak.

"Tell me I'm wrong," I pleaded. "Please tell me it's not possible it could be someone I know." His silence dragged on and when he finally spoke it seemed to be with great reluctance.

"You're not wrong. If you're getting messages like that, they have to be coming from someone in there."

"Why?" His hesitation gnawed at my already frayed nerves. I was sure I knew the answer and wanted, again, to be told I was wrong. That I was so far off the beaten path as to be nowhere.

I knew I wasn't.

"Nobody else knows about the barn. But Norrie?" He stopped, and my tension ramped up another level. "Everyone on the task force knows where you're staying, Dylan told them in the meeting. Remember?"

I did. The thought made me numb.

Brand's pager beeped and we stopped again. I waited while he read his message.

"Come on," his hand moved to mine and he turned me back the way we'd come. "Dylan wants us back in the ops center for a minute." His fingers felt warm intertwined with mine and I hoped he wouldn't let go. The thought of that happening depressed me and, as though he was reading my mind, his fingers tightened. "I won't leave you alone, babe."

I decided I could walk and talk without hurting myself and I'd thought of something else that hadn't been mentioned lately. "Brand, what's happening with that reporter, Carter Grimes? How does Dylan plan to use him?"

"I don't know yet. We talked about that a bit but never got as far as any concrete plan."

He opened the door and laughed. "Speak of the devil!"

Following him into the room, I wondered what he meant. The smell of onions, garlic and something spicy, like curry, washed over us as we entered. Whoever this was must have enjoyed an interesting lunch.

"Carter, how the hell are you? Dylan finally figured out what to do with you, did he?" The reporter I'd been asking about. If he was here, Dylan must have come up with a plan.

"I don't know. He just called and said get my butt over here if I wanted to be in on this case."

"Hmmm. You know about as much as I do then, about your part in all this."

Dylan followed us into the room and stopped behind us and touched my shoulder. "Sit down, everyone. Sorry I had to interrupt your lunch, Norrie, Hawke. I've an idea how to use Carter and thought you should be in on the discussion." He stayed beside me, still holding my shoulder. "Norrie, tell Carter what you were doing in that field the night he saw you. Don't leave anything out."

"Do I tell him about the card?"

"Everything."

It took me a while. I kept it brief but gave him every detail I thought he needed. When I got to the part about the card, Dylan took over and finished for me.

"Shit, man, no wonder you were upset with me." Grimes' voice told me we'd surprised him. "Miss Benedict, I apologize. First, I didn't know you were blind. And if I'd known what you'd been through that night I might not have given you such a bad time, although you were sure easy to tease." I heard the smile in his voice and accepted his apology as he meant it.

With the proverbial grain of salt.

"Now what? Can I print any of this?"

"Not one damn word, Carter. Not one damn word. I see anything in the paper about what we just told you and you'll be in a cell so fast you won't know how you got there. And you'll stay there until this is over." Dylan's voice went from smug to hard. "I want you to report that there are very few new leads, although there will be a composite drawing released tomorrow of the man we believe may be the killer."

"Is there really a drawing?"

"You'll get to see it eventually. But I don't want it printed just yet. We have to make absolutely sure it's the right guy." Where had they got a drawing? Only minutes earlier we were bemoaning the fact no one had seen the man. Then I realized he hadn't said "yes, we had one". Only that Grimes would *eventually* get to see "a" drawing.

"And how are you going to do that? You don't exactly have any surviv... Never mind. You've got Miss Benedict."

The man's cavalier attitude was beginning to wear thin. I didn't think he really felt anything, emotionally, about what was happening. This was just a story to him. He didn't care ten women had died brutally violent deaths. He didn't care this killer was out there and we really didn't have enough to stop him. He'd been more inclined to help only after Dylan promised him a scoop. And when he'd been teasing me, his whole attitude smacked of antipathy.

All he wanted was the story.

That made him a good reporter, but, I thought, a pretty lousy human being.

"When do you want this to appear?"

"How about tonight's edition? Can you get it in?"

"If I hurry. I'll have to phone it from here."

"Make sure it's just a small item, on the front page."

"I'll try. My editor..."

"Front page, Carter." The steel was back in Dylan's voice. "And let me read it before you phone it in."

"Right. Got a typewriter someplace? I can't use them new computers. Way too fancy for me."

"Come on, I know where there's one left over from the dark ages. You two will be a perfect pair."

They left and I wondered if Dylan was doing the right thing. Telling this man everything seemed careless. Like playing in traffic. What if he didn't keep his word? He could get someone else killed.

"Come on, let's go get you printed." Brand had my hand again, pulling me along after him. "We still need to eat. Don't know about you but I'm starving." Since my stomach had been growling from the time I'd inhaled the aroma of Carter's lunch, I was in full agreement.

He led me to the fingerprint section while I thought about food and tried to forget, for the moment, about murderous men and their victims.

The technician was gentle, rolling each finger carefully onto something he called a ten card. I wished I could see the results. I had to take their word for it they were readable. The ink on my fingers—Brand told me it was black—felt sticky and a little greasy. I hoped it washed off better than stamp pad ink, which I knew had to wear off with time.

Brand's pager beeped again while I was drying my hands.

"Now what?" I complained. "Someone obviously doesn't think we need lunch."

"It's Dylan, again."

"In his office?"

"Where else?" We took the now familiar route back downstairs and met everyone else on the task force coming back from the cafeteria. "Everybody else is heading that way, too," Brand told me. An unknown fear race up my spine.

"All of us?"

"Must be awful damned important," muttered Roy.

"It better be, they had stuffed zucchinis for lunch today," somebody else complained.

I listened to them as we all filed back into the closet-like room and felt an even greater chill wash over me than I'd felt earlier.

I knew why we were here.

"Brand," I whispered, "stick with me. Please? There's been another murder. This is eleven."

"How do... Never mind. I'll stay with you."

"Find chairs, people and hurry up." Dylan's voice should have told the others but I didn't get the feeling they knew. They were still worried about missing lunch. "Another body has just turned up. This time in Markerville."

"Hell!"

"Who?"

"Any ID?" The voices mingled around the room, all rushed, all angry. He'd beat us to it, leaving another woman dead and defiled.

"None. She's an Asian female, mid-twenties they think. But this time we may get lucky. He managed to remove only one hand, the other is still attached. Something may have interrupted him. Let's hope that one hand will yield some solid DNA, something the forensic people can use."

"How long ago was the body dumped, can they tell?"

"We don't know anything yet, Roy. She was only found an hour ago." His voice took on a slightly derogatory tone before he muttered, "It took those idiots in Markerville that long to remember we had a serial case going with the same M.O."

"What about her injuries? Consistent with the rest?" asked Brand.

"Identical to the last one, except for the hand."

I heard the door open and click shut and realized someone had come in. The conversation stopped momentarily then started again.

"Martin, grab a chair. We've got another one."

"So soon?" he sounded flustered, as though the news had caught him totally off guard, yet he'd known we'd been expecting another incident if we were unable to catch our suspect.

"Yeah. Norrie was right. He's stepping up his schedule each time," Roy told him.

My body ached in sympathy for this unknown woman. If things were the same as the last victim, maybe I wouldn't have to *read*...

Who was I kidding? I *had* to *read* her case. It was the only way I had to keep tabs on the Preacher.

"I want Brand and Norrie with me. Martin, Roy, grab a car and follow us. I told them to do nothing until we get there. Norrie has to be there from the start. The rest of you, start entering the data as it comes in. Fill in the board and the database. We'll make sure Markerville sends everything here."

I was numb. I wanted so badly to stop this man but he wasn't giving me anything to help catch him. He was blocking me and he was good at it. I had to figure out some way around his block.

"Dylan, I need to make a phone call before we leave." I stood, pushing myself up from the table.

"Can't it wait? They're holding everything for us."

"No, it can't. It's important." I didn't want to explain in front of everyone there, because my doubts were fast becoming certainties about one of the people in this room.

We had a leak or a dirty cop, I wasn't sure which. I was sure of the fact. The problem was, I hadn't a clue who it was.

"It's about the case."

"All right, but make it snappy."

"Right." Turning to Brand in the chair beside me, I quietly told him, "Brand, you have to get me out of here. I need a private phone."

He steered me down a hall to a small office, carpeted in thick pile and smelling of some kind of incense.

"Whose is this?"

"The chaplain's. He's not here today. You can use his phone and dial straight out. It's not part of our phone system."

"Thanks. Pull up a chair. This could take a few minutes." I'd asked him to stay because I trusted him. Of all the people on the task force, he and Dylan were the only two I now knew with certainty couldn't be the killer.

I knew the number by heart and asked to speak with Professor Newman when I was connected. I fidgeted while on hold and heaved a big sigh of relief when I finally heard his voice. If he hadn't been there, I didn't know if I'd have the nerve to try what I wanted to do.

"Hey, Ken, it's Norrie. Need some help and I'm in sort of a hurry." Explaining what I wanted took a few minutes but he assured me I was right.

If the opportunity was there, I could do this today. When I hung up, I felt Brand's hand on my arm but he didn't move.

"You can't do that, Norrie. It isn't safe."

"Yes it is. I've done it before, although never with someone like this."

"That's just it! You don't know this guy. If he's psychic and is reading you, if you try to get into his mind he might hurt you in the process. That can happen, can't it?"

"Only if he takes over so much of my mind that I lose myself in the process. That won't happen. I'll have you and Dylan to ground me. You have to talk to me while I'm in his mind, keep asking me questions, and if I start to fade on you, wake me up. Fast. Just do anything you need to stop me."

"I don't like it. Not at all. I know Dylan won't either."

"That's too bad, Brand, I'm going to do it. If he presents me with the opportunity, I'm going to take it. It's all I have left to try."

"Let's go. We'll see what Dylan has to say about this in the car." His voice was sharp. He wasn't happy with my plan.

He was rough about leading me back to Dylan. He didn't say anything while we all made our way to the car, pushed my head down while I climbed in and slammed the door behind. He didn't even give me time to complain about being stuffed in the rear seat. The minute he was in, with the door closed, he started.

"You've got to stop her, Dylan. She's got this wild, stupid scheme to put herself into the Preacher's mind. Thinks she can get there if she empties hers of all thought and then does some fancy voodoo and sneaks up on him."

"No."

"Dylan..." I didn't get far. He interrupted me before I could explain my plan.

"I said no, Norrie, and I mean it. You are *not* to try. What if we can't keep you grounded? What if we can't bring you back to us? What happens then?"

"I'd probably do anything he told me to do, to anyone he named. You'd have to be prepared to stop me." Put like that, I was scaring myself. But it was still the only way I could get ahead of the Preacher.

"That settles it. I'm vetoing the idea right now."

"You can't. Look Dylan, I know you've worked with Ken Newman enough to know how this works. Don't put up roadblocks just because you think it might be unsafe. It's all I've got left to offer these women. I've done it before, with Professor Newman. He thinks it will work."

"Ken said that?"

"Yes. And he said that if I had two grounders with me, I'd be safe."

Dylan would have a problem with this. He respected Ken Newman. It was Newman who'd brought me to his attention. Dylan was also in charge of me as a member of the task force. If he let me do this, I might succeed and hand him the Preacher. Or I might end up trapped by the Preacher in a battle of minds that could scar me for the rest of my life.

"Ken really said that? He thought it would work."

"Yes."

"All right. I'll let you try. But when you're ready to start, you make sure you tell us. I don't want any fancy games going on here where we might lose you."

"Okay. I'll agree to that. And if I'm going to do this, I want you to get as many people out of the crime scene area as you can. I don't want to have someone else's energy interfering with me reaching him." I didn't say anything about not wanting others to see me fail.

"Done."

I sank back in the seat, relieved that he'd finally agreed to let me try and scared to death that it might work. The silence in the car told me Brand was probably sulking and Dylan was rethinking his decision, looking for any reason to change his mind. I found it hard to relax in the back seat, but somehow I kept my mind off the accident. I trusted Dylan to keep me safe and knew without being able to see that neither man would have been comfortable with the lack of leg room. My knees rubbed the back of the seat, Brand would have had to sit sideways.

The siren lulled me into a semi-relaxed state while I thought of the ways I could get lost in this maniac's mind. It frightened me to think I would take the risk, but it scared me more to think that after eleven killings, he'd still be free to kill again. I had to succeed. Get into his mind. Find something to lead us to him.

The siren growled down as we pulled to a stop and my pulse kicked up a notch.

I waited until the back door opened. There were no handles on the back doors of police cars. How I knew this, I couldn't say. Another one of those little things I just *knew*. The hand that took mine belonged to Brand. He pulled me out and placed his arm to lead me.

"Where's Dylan?"

"He went to see the guy in charge from Markerville."

"How many people are standing around?"

"Not that many. And Dylan must be telling them all to pull back. Most of them are going back to their cars."

"Good. I don't want to have to fight to find the Preacher in a crowd. It would be so much easier if he just..."

Miss Benedict. So glad to see you.

"He's here, Brand." I grabbed his arm and pulled him closer. "Look around quickly. Who's here with us?"

Cat got your tongue, Miss Benedict?

"He's taunting me. Hurry! Who else is here?"

"Nobody except the task force guys and one cop from Markerville. That's all I can see. And there really isn't any place to hide. He can't be too close."

Don't bother looking for me, Miss Benedict. Nobody will see me. I don't have to be that close to talk to you.

"Damn him. He's got to be here, Brand, otherwise I wouldn't be hearing him like this. But he says we can't see him. *You can't see him.*"

Check it out, Miss...no, let's not be so formal. Check it out, Norrie. You'll see I've left you a hint this time. Make good use of it. It's the only one you're going to get.

"Don't you call me that, you fiend. Nobody calls me that who does what you do. You're a sociopath. You need help. But if all you do is keep killing, it will be too late. There won't be time to help you before they put you to death."

"Who the hell are you talking to?" Dylan's voice made me jump.

"He's here, Dylan. He started talking to me almost as soon as I got out of the car. He's taunting me. Called me Miss Benedict, then started calling me Norrie. He's not giving me a chance to get into his mind."

"I'm sorry you're losing your chance to dig deeper Norrie, but I'm glad it happened this way," said Brand.

"Hell! Much and all as I agree with Hawke, we could have used the intel. I just hope we can get it another way." This from Dylan. "Thank God you didn't have to try getting inside his mind, regardless of what Ken said."

"Dylan, Brand, please," I begged. "This isn't helping. If I can't do this, find something to lead us to him, he'll just keep on killing. He's got to be stopped."

The pitch of my voice rose and I told myself to relax. I might only have one chance and I couldn't blow it.

"All right. I want you both to agree to this. I'm going to try once. If I can't make it I won't try again. But I've got to try."

"Okay. But only once. Where do you want us?" asked Brand.

"Beside me. Dylan, you on my left, Brand on my right."

"And what are we supposed to do?" asked Brand.

"Hold my arms. That way you'll know if I start to lose consciousness, then, you talk to me. You make sure I don't pass out. If I pass out, that's when he can get to me. If I start to look sleepy or like I'm heading for a trance, snap me out of it any way you have to. Slap my face hard if necessary. Just don't let me go too deep."

"God, Norrie, are you sure abo—" Brand asked.

"I'm sure. I have to do this."

Dylan's hand was on my arm, Brand held my hand in his. All I had to do now was find the Preacher.

I tried to empty my mind—a hard thing to do when you're scared and angry. It helped that I couldn't see the field around me or the victim's body lying alone and helpless in the grass.

Trying hard to rid my mind of that picture, I realized I was seeing a familiar building. At the same time, I knew the Preacher was showing me this on purpose. He was leading me there.

The barn. Run-down, with a lean-to on one side, bags of feed, burlap bags, standing in the corner, two chestnut horses standing beside the shelter. One of them had a baby with her. They stood under an oak tree, cropping grass. Next to them ran a stream. Not wide. Not deep. Not moving very fast.

"Norrie, where are you, love?" Brand's voice sounded worried, although he kept it quiet and low.

"I'm all right. I can see the barn." I described what I saw so both men would have the information if something happened to me.

There was a house in the background and I wondered why I hadn't seen it last time. Probably because it was now broad daylight in my vision. The nighttime shadows were gone.

"There's a house. A two-story ramshackle farmhouse. Gray. I think the roof is black. There are lacy curtains hanging in tatters at some of the windows."

Something about the house frightened me to a shudder.

"Hang on, Norrie. You're doing great." Brand's quiet voice held me back.

"There's something about this house that isn't right. I don't know what it is, but if I could find it, I'm...oh my God!"

"Norrie, what? Come back." I was being pulled closer to the house, leaving the two men behind and they knew it. "Now." Somebody's hand slapped me, hard, made me start to fall. Brand's arms stopped me. Dylan held my hands.

"Come on, bring her over here. Put her in the car." Someone was carrying me, I didn't know who, but it smelled like Brand's jacket against my face.

Tears burned hot paths down my cheeks and I couldn't stop them. Tears for everything I'd seen in that vision.

Huddled on the seat, bent forward, my head rested on Brand's chest. His arms still held me. He knelt in front of me in the open car door. Another hand still grasped my shoulder and I knew it was Dylan's.

"You're safe, love. You're back with us," crooned Brand.

That's what he thinks, Miss Benedict. Let me assure you – if I want you, you'll be mine. You won't be able to stop me. Did you get enough to find the house, Norrie? Think you know where it is? If I were a betting man I'd lay you odds it won't be found for at least five days.

"Get away from me, you madman. Go away!" I screamed at him in anger and fear.

I'm going, Norrie. But before I do? I'm going to give you one more view into your future. Watch carefully. Maybe you can do something to stop it.

The connection to his mind was lost as soon as he stopped talking. Before I could say anything I saw the barn again. I slumped forward, saying "shhhh" to the men with me, trying to tell them not to interrupt. Brand's grip on me tightened again and I knew he would keep me safe.

The barn stood in shadow, a full moon reflecting off the stream around it, and from the center of the roof came a wisp of motion. At first I didn't recognize the movement then I realized it was smoke. The barn was on fire. Fascinated despite myself, I watched as the flames ate greedily through the old, rotting wood. Soon the entire building was outlined in flame and looked very much like a funeral pyre. In fact, I could see some object atop the burning building that might have been a body. Wrapped in some kind of cloth, it first smoldered, then flared. As the building collapsed inward, I cried out in pain.

I didn't know who it was, but I was certain it would be someone I knew.

It might even be me.

Chapter Twenty-One

The wail of a siren rent the air around us, pulling me back to conscious thought.

I was in a police car. I knew who was with me, but I hadn't a clue where we were or what we were doing there. All I knew was my vision.

"*Cariad*, what happened?" Dylan's quiet question brought my head up from Brand's chest and I sat straighter, drawing a deep breath so I could tell him what I'd learned.

"I can describe the barn, the trees, the house and the stream. That ought to help us find it. And when you find it, please don't let them walk all over the yard behind the house. He showed me what was there."

The thought of describing what I'd seen sent another shudder through me.

"What, babe?" Brand asked quietly.

"Graves. Piles of dirt all over the field and each of them is a grave."

"How do you know that?" Dylan questioned.

"I don't know how, I just do. He let me in on that much. Said it would take us at least five days to find the house. Then..." I shuddered again as I remembered the burning building.

"He let me see the barn. Made *sure* I saw it. On fire. And a body, wrapped in some kind of cloth, high on the roof. The cloth was burning, the body finally caught. Then the whole thing collapsed inward. The body disappeared."

"He's just trying to frighten you, Norrie. Don't let him win."

"No, Dylan, he showed me what would happen. I think the fire was symbolic, but someone I know, maybe one of the task force—hell, it could even be me... Someone is going to die at that site. Please...please, don't let that happen. Make everyone be careful. Tell them."

I felt my mind slipping into the fog that always followed a *reading* and even though I'd held nothing, touched nothing of the victim's, I knew I'd be unable to continue.

"Dylan, I don't think I can do any more today. I can't *read* this scene for you."

"I don't want you to, love, you've done enough. Hawke will take you home and stay with you until the rest of the surveillance team is in place."

The radio in the car blared into life and the dispatcher called Dylan's name.

"This is Jones."

"Lieutenant, we've got a problem." I listened, wondering what else could possibly go wrong.

"What now?" Dylan groaned aloud.

"The uniformed policewoman you sent to Swetzler's house to stay with Miss Benedict was just taken to the hospital. Her appendix burst, they think. There's no one to stay with Miss Benedict when she gets back."

"Damn it, what else can go wrong today!" Dylan roared.

The dispatcher's words started me laughing. Brand must have thought I was becoming hysterical. He grabbed my wrists and began pulling me out of the car.

"It's okay, I'm okay. At least now one of those strange feelings I had has been answered."

"What are you blathering about?" Dylan's voice was harsh and impatient, his words insultingly cruel.

"I had a horrible premonition—an incredible stomachache, right after Francie Vine showed up. I didn't know what it meant or who it was then. Now I do." Giggles threatened to overcome me again and I swallowed hard to keep myself from letting anything more escape. "I hope she'll be all right," I said around my smile, biting my tongue. A burst appendix *was* a laughing matter when the only other topic around was murder.

Silence surrounded me. My humorous revelation wasn't making anyone happy. Maybe it reminded them of everything else I'd sensed or seen that night.

"All right, Hawke. You'll have to stay with Norrie until we find someone else to go to Swetzler's. It's certainly not accepted policy, but it's the best we can do for now. Officer Vine obviously had a room there. If we haven't got someone by tonight, you'll have to stay. Bring her into the meeting tomorrow if she's able."

"Dylan, before I leave, is there anything here that isn't the same as the last victim? I guess I could still try a little harder today. I might feel something."

"No. I already talked to the detective from Markerville and this scene's a carbon copy. *Exactly* the same as the last murder. I'd rather you went home now and were able to come to the meeting tomorrow. We've got to find the barn."

I backed away from him, Brand guiding me to the passenger door of the car we'd come in. He opened it for me and again pushed my head down and in, the second time today he'd done this and I wondered if it was something to do with police work or just his method of protecting me from the car frame. The door closed and I leaned back, my head lolling sideways on the headrest, sightless eyes staring out a window onto horror I couldn't see. Voices spoke outside the car and I knew Dylan and Brand were discussing what to do with me. Or maybe they were deciding how Dylan was going to get back to the station. I hadn't been much help to them today, but if what I saw helped us find the barn maybe it had been worthwhile.

Good luck, Norrie. You'll need it. I haven't made it easy for you.

I bolted upright, yanking on the door handle in my haste to get out of the car.

"What's the matter?" Dylan's voice was rough, probably because he was annoyed with the whole grisly scene, and especially with me.

"Dylan, he's here again. Someplace close by, taunting me."

"He can't be here, Norrie. There's no one here but the task force members and the crew from Markerville. The forensics team just arrived but they're still in their vehicles. They were told not to get out until given the all clear."

"I'm telling you, he's here. He just talked to me."

"All right, *caru*." I heard his impatient sigh. "If you insist. I'll walk around and get the name of everyone here. See if they saw anyone." He walked away, calling back to us, "You wait with Hawke, I'll be right back."

"Damn him." I turned urgently to Brand, "He doesn't believe me. But the man is here. He's close." Without realizing what I was doing, I'd grabbed the front of his shirt and was thumping his chest to emphasize my point. "I can't get these messages over long distances. Professor Newman proved that. I'm only good for half a mile at most." The ache in my right temple increased and I unclenched my fingers from the fabric of his shirt to rub my head.

"Take it easy, babe. Get back in the car. I'll take you home as soon as Dylan comes back. We'll take the list and you can go over it once you're in bed. I'll pull up a chair, read off the names, you see if any of them means anything. You've had enough for one day." He led me back to the car and went through the motions of putting me in the front seat, hand to my head the same as before.

"Why do you do that?" I pushed against his hand, unwilling to get in the car. It was really nothing more than a delaying tactic.

"Do what?"

"That thing with your hand."

"I don't know. It's something we learn at the academy. Probably to make sure the perp doesn't hit his head on the door and scream police brutality. It gets to be a habit." He chuckled, his hand on my head sliding slowly to my cheek where his fingers felt warm. "I did it to my brother Daniel one time. He had his hands full of pizza boxes and I opened the door. Just as he ducked to get in, I put my hand up to cover his head. He stood up and kicked me in the shins before he got in."

"I won't kick you in the shins. You and Dylan both do it for me and I appreciate it. Saves me whacking my head on the frame."

As I slid into the car, steps approached—Dylan with the list. We both turned toward him.

"Hawke, take it." I presumed "it" was the list of names he'd gone to get. "Phone Lester. Get him to run them through the computer, see if anything comes up. It's the names of everyone from Markerville, the forensics team and the task force. Let's get this sorted out and stop this stupidity once and for all."

Stupidity? That's what Dylan thought this was?

"Right, boss. We're outta here."

My door closed. Brand climbed in mere seconds later, the engine started and the car pulled away from the curb. I held myself rigid, not wanting to give in to the feelings that threatened to swamp me.

"Norrie, I don't..."

"Don't say it." I spoke through clenched teeth. "He meant exactly what he said. He thinks this is stupidity." Once again I'd been on the receiving end of Dylan Jones' certitude.

He *thought* I was wrong. Therefore I was. He never looked for a middle ground, no gray area. Everything with Dylan was black or white and as far as he could see I'd chosen the wrong color.

We drove in silence, the radio in the background occasionally crackling to life. On the street, the everyday thrum of rush hour was in its infancy. We got to the Swetzlers' house just slightly ahead of the mad rush that proved the Interstate and the freeway systems in the area to be the joke they really were. The garage door rumbled upward and I realized Rhoda must have seen us coming. We parked the car in the garage to try and preserve the look of normalcy on the street.

I waited for Brand to open my door before stalking toward the steps into the house.

"Norrie, stop." I stood still, sure I was about to get another lecture. However, that wasn't what he had in mind.

"Don't mention today's murder in front of Rhoda. We don't need to upset her. She'll hear about it from Fred soon enough. That's fine. Let him tell her. He knows how to..." I guess I needed to stop jumping to conclusions with Brandon Hawke. Just when I thought I'd figured him out, he surprised me.

The door at the top of the steps flew open.

"Get in here, Norrie Benedict, and tell me what happened. Fred says there's been another murder."

"So much for those good intentions," I whispered to Brand, chuckling at Rhoda's apparent enthusiasm for bad news.

"Yeah. Bad news travels fast." He guided me up the few steps into the house, his touch on my back gentle yet firm. I could feel the heat from his fingertips through my blouse.

We sat, waiting, in Rhoda's living room while Brand phoned the list to Lester. I gave her as much detail as I thought she needed. When Brand returned, he sat beside me on the couch. He didn't speak, his silence the kind one didn't interrupt.

"Dylan doesn't believe me, Rhoda, but this murdering madman was close by while we were in that field. I couldn't have received those messages any other way. I wasn't reading an object. I was getting telepathic messages. Straight from the Preacher."

"I still don't understand how that works," Brand remarked. "You know, Norrie, I can understand why he has trouble believing. Look how long it took me to start believing you could do something the rest of us couldn't. Maybe that's his problem. He

simply can't believe you have some new talent." His explanation was one point of view. I had a different idea. I figured Dylan simply didn't believe me. Something or someone put enough doubt in his mind he didn't trust what I told him.

"Brand, did you talk to him yesterday? Or today? Tell him you thought I was crazy, didn't know what I was doing or anything like that?"

"No. I kept any doubts to myself. But you gotta know, Norrie, every day they seem to be fewer and fewer." He rested his hand over mine on the cushion between us and I felt a warm glow when he made his confession. "I'm fast becoming a believer. I talked to my brother about it. He told me I was crazy not to believe. Said he works with psychics all the time. If you said the Earth was flat, I should believe you. Or something like that."

"What does your brother do?"

There was silence until finally Rhoda demanded he answer.

"She asked you a polite question, Brandon Hawke. Answer her. She deserves that much."

We waited, Rhoda's toe tapping in impatience. I knew when he was ready he would answer. I was beginning to have an idea just what his answer might be.

"Brand?" An idea was forming in my mind that I couldn't understand. I didn't know where it came from, it was just there. Something Dylan said earlier, in one of our meetings popped out of nowhere and I suspected I knew the answer.

"What?" His voice was muffled, as though he were looking away from me.

"Is your brother helping Dylan on this case?"

"How'd you know that?" That got his attention and he physically turned my direction.

"I didn't, for sure. Until you just told me. Dylan mentioned... Your brother is the FBI profiler Dylan was talking about, isn't he?"

"Mmmm."

"I take it that's a yes."

"Yeah. Daniel Hawke, FBI. Like I told you before, he's better looking, he's richer, he always gets the girl and he's never wrong when he profiles a killer."

"So what did he say about the Preacher?"

"Same thing you did. He's delusional, he's a sociopath and he probably thinks he's God."

When I could finally speak, my voice was cool going on cold. "How long have you and Dylan known this?" The arm of the couch butted me in the hip as I tried to draw away from him.

Brand's response sounded subdued. "Since this morning. He told us in a conference call just before the meeting."

"And when were you two going to let the rest of us in on it?"

"I don't know. That's up to Dylan."

"You see? That really makes me wonder about Dylan. Why he won't believe me. If the FBI says its so, it's one thing. But when you're local psychic tells you the exact same thing, you figure she's wrong. She doesn't know what she's talking about." I stood to pace, forgetting where I was, and if Brand hadn't caught me I'd have fallen face first over the coffee table Rhoda had in front of the couch. I tried to jerk away from him, but his hand held my arm like an iron fist. "Why's he fighting me on this?"

His arms were around me and suddenly all I wanted was to turn, put my head on his chest and seek comfort. I was tired of being right, tired of telling everyone the bad news and tired of fighting with Dylan Jones over every little thing. He had me on the task force to help them but put barriers in my path every time I turned around.

Pushing away from Brand, I carefully stepped around the table, took a deep breath and began to slowly make my way to the hall. I wanted to lie down. Sleep. Anything to forget what was happening.

Take it easy, Norrie, love. Don't let yourself be hurt by all this.

Brand ran into me from behind when I lurched to a stop. His arms encircled me to keep me upright.

"Rhoda? Who's here? Besides us."

"No one. Why?"

"No reason. I just..." Before I could say any more the doorbell rang. I stood there, afraid to know who might out there yet absolutely certain Dylan waited outside the door. Which would explain the warning I'd just heard. My new telepathic talents were confusing me. Seems like I didn't even have to be in the presence of the person to be able to read their thoughts.

Rhoda opened the door while I waited to know if I was right. If I was, why was he here?

"Look who's here. Oh. Sorry, Norrie. It's Dylan."

"I know."

When he finally spoke, his voice was deep, hoarse and uncertain. "I need to talk to you and I don't have much time. Come with me. We can sit in the car."

His led me outside to his car. He could say what he had to say, then I'd see if I wanted to do more than listen.

"Watch your step." He led me to the passenger door, opened it and put his hand on my head as I sank into the car. I waited while he went around to his door and let himself in. He settled back with a huge sigh. Making it easy on him wasn't an option. I was here at his request. More correctly – his command. He would have to be the one to start this conversation.

"Norrie, I'm sorry." There was one of those pregnant pauses I'd heard described. It would be interesting to see if this one had anything to show for itself. "You're not going to make this easy on me, are you? I guess I don't blame you. I was rude this afternoon."

And I misspoke myself badly.” He let out a rush of breath and I knew he found this hard. Having to apologize was something he seldom had to deal with. “I should never have called what you do stupidity. It isn’t. I know that. And we have an FBI profiler agreeing with everything you said. I’m just so fed up with everything that’s happening. Eleven murders and not enough clues to even get a lead on this damned murdering bastard!”

He moved in his seat, turning toward me, I thought. I remained facing straight ahead. It would take a lot more than fast talking to get me to change my mind. I was annoyed at him and didn’t plan to forgive him anytime soon.

“*Cariad*, I’m sorry. Seems I just keep having to apologize to you. I’ve never felt for anyone what I feel for you, Norrie. It upsets me. Makes me angry.” He pounded the steering wheel and I jumped, surprised at the level of his emotion. “I try not to let my feelings get in the way of our working relationship, but I’m not succeeding. I was afraid I was going to look the fool, having you on the task force and falling for you at the same time.”

His hand touched mine and I waited, anxious to see what he’d do.

“I can’t do it. Plain and simple. I think I love you, but I’m too involved in this case right now to be able to sit down and think it through. Once we catch this guy, I want to talk to you. See where we go from here. But for now, Norrie, I’m sorry. I can’t let you get in the way of my job.”

Incredible pain rendered me speechless. I felt as if I’d just been run over by something big and very hard. It took two attempts to make my voice work, to get the words out.

“I see.” No, I didn’t, I didn’t see a damn thing and it had nothing to do with being blind. I had no idea what was happening here. “So what do you propose we do about it, Dylan? Every time we’ve been together lately, you’ve touched me, kissed me, wanted to make love to me. Doesn’t that mean something?”

“I don’t know and that’s my problem. I think I’m in love with you. God knows I’ve never felt this way about anyone else. There’ve been other women in the past. I’m no saint. I just never felt for any of them what I feel for you. But I don’t have the time right now to work it through. For the rest of this case, I want you to work with Hawke. I’ll be there, but I don’t want us to be alone. Don’t want to take the chance we’ll start something we can’t—”

I ran from the car without knowing where I was headed. Someone had been watching for me because I suddenly heard running footsteps and a hand wrapped itself around my arm.

“Norrie? You all right?”

Brand. I should have known. I nodded, afraid to say anything for fear I said the wrong thing.

I heard Dylan’s voice behind us on the sidewalk.

“Look after her, Hawke. Don’t let anything happen to her.”

"Sure, Dylan." Hawke didn't even turn around.

Brand knew something had happened and although he had no idea what, I think he believed I was hurting. If only he knew how badly!

I wouldn't give Dylan the pleasure of seeing me cry. I wouldn't let anyone else see me shed tears over a man who had no idea what to do with his own emotions.

I'd heard of people who couldn't believe when something good happened to them. They had to browbeat every little thing they knew to see if it might mean something else. They weren't happy unless they had the scientific explanation of everything. But for real love there was no science definition that meant anything.

It meant having feelings. For another human being. And if you thought you had those feelings you accepted them or you denied them.

Dylan had denied his feelings and me.

Brand led me into the house, where I found my own way down the hall to my room. Quiet footsteps followed me but I knew he wouldn't push. He'd shown this understanding before.

I gently closed the door behind me and leaned against it.

Something inside me shriveled and died as I stood there. It wasn't my love of Dylan. That would never change.

It was hope.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Brand led me into the precinct house the next day, held my arm, stuck so close to me his body touched mine at the hip, the shoulder and occasionally the lower leg. He couldn't get any closer short of putting his arm around me. He'd been charged with getting me to the meeting without any intentional or unintentional meetings with Jésus Bartholdy, our phony chaplain and, by God, he'd make sure it happened that way.

We walked down the long hall while I worried about how I would react when I again met up with Dylan.

During a few sleepless nights after Dylan's bombshell, I came to the conclusion that if Dylan had doubts about his situation with me, there couldn't be any love there. He might feel lust and occasionally a kind of caring, but it wasn't true, deep love.

Once I accepted that, I'd slept. Not peacefully. I tossed. Turned. My fantasies took me where Dylan and I had started a few times. But something always happened. Something prevented us from fulfilling them. It was quite a revelation for me. If I couldn't get there in my dreams and fantasies, how could I possibly make it happen in real life?

Brand tried at least once every day to get me to talk but I'd refused. I think he knew what the problem was, he just wanted to hear me admit it so he could deal with me. As long as I didn't say anything, he couldn't discuss it. I think that's what he wanted to do. Talk.

A feeling of pain shafted through me at the sound of Dylan's voice. I knew now I would never hear his voice speak to me about love. I'd decided during the long night that he didn't know what love was.

Right now he was talking about a derelict barn and an old house. I heard his words and realized he was repeating what I'd told him word for word.

"Norrie also told me that if we find the place do not go walking around the back of the house. There are apparently a number of what may be unmarked graves there. She saw hummocks of earth, built up as though they were burial sites. We don't know if there are bodies in any of them."

I interrupted him to add what I'd remembered.

"As for the trees, you're looking for deciduous. Mostly aspens. Some oak. And don't forget the two chestnut horses—one's a mare with a very young foal."

"That helps. Takes it away from the foothills and brings it closer to town." Roy Ferran obviously knew his way around the area outside of town. "In fact, has anyone checked out the Monte Creek area? It's a lot like what Norrie's describing."

I heard papers shuffling and then someone whose name I'd forgotten replied to his question.

"Monte Creek hasn't been checked yet. Should I get a unit to head out there? Take a look around?"

"Yes." The sound of Dylan's voice again made my stomach sink. It would be a long time before I get over whatever I thought I felt for him. It wouldn't be easy.

"Okay. I'll have the two units that come on in an hour head out there. Four men ought to finish up quicker. There are lots of little side roads they can check out."

"All right. As for everything else, it's a repeat of the last killing. Only this time he sank his knife a little too deep when he was stabbing her. We think she died before he got to the final wounds. The ME will let us know but he thinks she bled out from a stab wound that lacerated her liver and a second one, which nicked her aorta. She was dead long before the last indignities."

"What about DNA? Anything? Tell me there were skin scrapings under her nails. Anything to get us closer to the Preacher." Roy asked the question I most wanted answered.

"Actually, there *were* some samples taken from under her nails. Maybe tissue, blood. It looks like she might have scratched him pretty good. The lab's put a rush on it and as soon as they have any results, we'll hear."

"Thank you, God." I didn't realize I'd spoken out loud until I heard a scattering of "amens" from around the table.

"Couple more things before we're done. Martin Jamison will be away for the next three or four days. Family problems, a death I believe. Hawke, you get full-time duty keeping an eye on Norrie. Officer Vine had surgery for a ruptured appendix yesterday afternoon and will be fine. I've done the paperwork for the change. Any problems with that?"

"None, boss. There's an extra room at Swetzler's. I'll just pick up clothes on the way home."

"Thanks, I know it isn't the usual practice, but with so many out on holidays and the other task force, we're seriously short-handed. Since you two come to the meetings anyway, you can come together." I heard paper shuffling, people moving. "Okay. That's it for today. Forensics will have a report for us tomorrow, so we'll meet here about three. If you want me, you know where to find me."

I listened as the chairs scraped, everyone stood up and went about their allotted tasks. I was there to reinforce the description. They wouldn't need me now until there was more evidence or another murder. I turned to Brand, ready to make a deal with him.

"Take me back to Swetzler's, then you can come back here and work on whatever you need to do. There's no need for me to sit around here all day. If something happens that you need me, you can phone and Rhoda can bring me in."

"No way. Just stay here while I go get the printout Lester left for me this morning." I was so busy listening to him leave that I don't hear Dylan approach until he spoke.

"Morning, Norrie." I turned in his direction.

"Morning. I'm just heading out. Is there something you wanted me for?" This would probably be the only time in my life I would be glad I couldn't see. I didn't want to see his face. I knew I couldn't keep the hurt off my face. I didn't want to know he could see what he'd done to me.

"I guess not." I heard him turn and walk away and I couldn't stop the tears that suddenly flowed. I turned and followed the path I'd taken earlier and found the door on the first try. I was halfway down the hall before a hand grabbed my arm.

"Sweet Jesus, Norrie! What the hell is the matter with you?" Brand's arms wrapped around me, holding me close to his chest. "How many times do you have to be told not to go anyplace in this building without somebody from the task force with you?"

"Brand, don't," I sobbed.

"Look, Norrie. I don't know what Dylan said to you yesterday, but please. For my sake, for Rhoda's sake, hell, maybe for Dylan's sake, I don't know, don't put yourself into danger." He paused. I thought he was finished. Then he added something that surprised me. "I couldn't stand it if something happened to you."

"Don't worry. It won't happen again. Take me out to the car, please. Drop me at Swetzler's. Then you can come back." I turned and headed toward the front door of the building. Brand grabbed my arm again and dragged me to a halt.

"No. I won't be coming back. If you're going to spend the day at Rhoda's, that's where I'll be. I'm your shadow for the duration of this case. You eat with me, ride with me, sit around with me, sleep with... Well, not that." His grin came through in his voice as he thought about what he'd said. "But you know what I mean. You and I are joined at the hip as of this morning."

"I'm sorry." I stopped, turned toward him.

"Why?"

"I know you'd rather be helping solve this case. Not baby-sitting the psychic."

His hands were on my shoulders and I wondered where he was headed. I kept expecting him to shake me.

"Listen to me. Dylan told us one of us had to take over from Vines. Between flu and vacations, we have a serious manpower shortage. I said I wanted the job. And just so you know, so did Martin, Roy Ferran and Larry Simpson. I convinced him I understood how to help you better than either of them, so he gave me the assignment. I'm doing what I want to do—and don't you forget it."

I worked hard to swallow a lump in my throat and made my voice soft and gracious. "Thank you. That means a lot."

"And for my first duty, we're going to have a little talk with this guy who's waiting down the hall for us."

He turned me around and we headed back down the hall, past the operations room to a room whose jasmine scent I remembered. We were at the chaplain's office.

"Why would Lieutenant Seymour want to see me?"

"It's not the chaplain. We're just using his office." He opened the door as he spoke and guided me inside. I heard a quietly drawn breath then a voice, so much like Brand's I thought I must be hearing things, was making introductions.

"Miss Benedict. Hello." He pumped my hand as though I could dispense water. "I am *so* pleased to meet you. Sit down." He turned away from me before he continued. "Don't just stand there, Bro, help the lady find the chair."

"Daniel Hawke, I presume." I smiled at Daniel's cavalier attitude toward his brother then realized this man idolized his brother. And Brandon Hawke didn't even know it.

Brand once told me his brother was smarter, better looking, richer and always got the girl. What he didn't realize was that his brother thought whatever Brandon was or had was the better deal.

"That's me. The kid here been telling you bad things about me? Always does it. Can't seem to stop himself. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was jealous of me. What do you think?"

I thought Daniel Hawke had better slow down or he was going to end up embarrassing all of us.

What I said was something entirely different.

"I wouldn't know. I haven't spent much time trying to analyze Brand. We've been too busy trying to stop a murderer."

The happy-go-lucky attitude disappeared from his voice instantly.

"You're right. You people do have a problem with this guy. But from what Dylan told me last night and what I've read, I think you've pegged him exactly. I know most people have this funny belief that profilers are psychic." He hit the desk, I guessed with his fist, and I jumped.

"Damned TV shows! They really depict profilers the wrong way. Made us out a bunch of seers. Now we have to live it down. Anyway, I know sometimes you empaths are known to do a better job than us and this time, you're right up there with me. I gathered, from something Dylan said, he was having a little bit of a credibility problem about some of this yesterday, but I think I've straightened him out."

"Danny, what are you on about?" Brand's voice might be questioning his brother, but it also held love and respect.

"Your boss decided that Miss Benedict must be wrong about something she said yesterday. Something to do with some message she got from the killer while you were at the crime scene."

Brand and I were both quiet. We knew what he meant.

"Well, after talking to me, I think you'll find him a lot less resistant to your message. Miss Benedict, do you have any idea where your messages are coming from?"

I hesitated. I didn't want to point fingers at anyone on the task force and I didn't want Brand to hear my suspicions.

"Hey, Bro, go stand in the hall a minute. We'll let you know when you can come back. Your psychic and I have to talk." The smile in his voice let Brand know his brother was trying to protect him.

"Just holler, I'll be right outside. And Norrie?"

"Yes?"

"If he asks you out, say no. I don't want to have to chaperone the two of you."

I was laughing when the door closed.

"Norrie. May I call you that?"

I nodded.

"Where exactly do you think your message is coming from?"

His businesslike demeanor was a total turnaround from his previous chatty manner. He'd moved closer, to my side of the desk, facing me and his voice had physically moved lower in the room. I assumed he'd sat on the edge of the desk.

I decided it was time to mention my suspicion. I couldn't bring this up to anyone on the task force, knowing how they'd react, but a profiler would be able to look objectively at what I said. I took a deep breath, let it out and told Daniel Hawke, "I think it's someone on the task force."

"Why?"

"I've picked up on messages in the meetings. At the crime scenes. And in other places in this building. In the testing they did with me a few months back, I could only receive messages if they were coming from less than half a mile away. Nobody knows why. Most people who are clairvoyant don't have a distance problem. I've tried to tell Dylan and Brand, but they don't believe me."

"Don't or won't?"

My head snapped up. He'd put his finger right on the problem.

"Probably won't. If they admit to believing me, then they're admitting someone they work with might be a potential leak."

"I totally agree with you. Can I get personal for a minute?"

"Can I stop you?" I smiled as I asked, reasonably sure he was about as stoppable as a runaway train.

"Probably not."

His words pretty well prepared me for where I thought he was heading but he'd have to say it. I wouldn't just tell him.

"I had a long meeting with Dylan last night and he kept trying to explain you to me. Have you two been an item? Or does one of you want to be an item?"

I decided I might as well answer, my face was probably a dead giveaway.

"I thought I was in love with Dylan. I thought for a while he had feelings for me. But yesterday he put me off. Told me he'd think about us after this case was over. When he could figure out what it was he felt for me."

"God, that's a tough one. Are you all right?"

"Certainly. Why would you ask?"

I was lying, hoping I could keep him from knowing.

"Because I think you're probably hurting and I'd hate to see it color your work on this investigation."

Put like that, I had no choice but to explain myself to this slightly older version of Brand.

"You're right. I'm hurting. I thought I was in love with this man. I thought he felt something for me besides lust. Apparently I was wrong. And what I feel isn't something I can just shut off, like a tap or a light switch. But don't think for one minute it affects my work. I can, and do regularly, put my feelings aside when I'm working. If I couldn't, I'd never be able to decide whose feelings I was trying to interpret."

"Good girl. Now tell me something else. How's my brother? He seems a little preoccupied."

"I know. I've noticed that, too. And I don't know why. I don't know him well enough to be able to read him that way, and I wouldn't try to go any deeper unless he knew I was trying to make contact."

"Well don't hurt him. I've always thought he was a little bit psychic. Somehow he knows things he shouldn't, does things out of the blue I was thinking about doing. He shows up with Chinese or pizza when I'm feeling down. Phones me right when I've been thinking of him. Knows when to take me out and try to get me drunk—which is really quite funny for two guys who might each drink one bottle of beer every two months."

I laughed along with him, listened to his description of the man who was lounging about in the hall. This profiler might not be psychic but he completely understood his brother, which was more than a lot of people could say.

"Does he ever tell you he thinks he's psychic? I used to joke I knew who was at the door when someone was coming, that sort of thing."

"No. He's never said a thing. It's just me. I'd like to be psychic in this job. It would certainly help. But I obviously don't have a psychic bone in my body, so maybe I'm just giving him that role."

"Could be. I'll listen to what he says, see if there's anything there. But Daniel," I had to warn him, "considering how much he had to overcome to believe me on this case, I suspect he's no more psychic than you are."

"Thanks. I'd appreciate if you'd check it out. Let me know."

He stood upright and moved toward me, put a card in my hand. I pulled back when I first felt it, remembering the talisman, then realized it was just his business card.

"Have someone read you the number if you want to get in touch with me."

I put the card in my purse, making sure I knew which pocket it was in.

When he spoke again, he caught me completely off guard.

"Dylan is in love with you, you know. He just doesn't know what love is. Give him time. He might get it all straightened out in his head once this case is solved. I think he's burying himself in the case to avoid having to admit he has feelings, that he does love you."

"I don't know, Daniel, it's an awful funny way of showing love. Just cut me off without any discussion. Won't work with me anymore. He's even made Brand my keeper."

"I don't see him complaining. Interesting. I like you Norrie Benedict. Maybe I should ask you out, let Brand chaperone us. Might kick-start *him* to take an interest in you."

I wished I could see what this man's face was doing. What on Earth possessed him to say that? Hawke wasn't interested in me. I wasn't interested in Brand, other than as a friend.

"Let's bring the guy back in here. He's probably going nuts out there, wondering what we're talking about."

He crossed to the door and I heard two sets of footsteps come back to the desk.

"So are you two finished?"

"Actually, Bro, we were talking about you."

I nearly choked when he said it.

"We were just deciding you could take both of us out for lunch. Someplace nice. A good steakhouse, I think. You like steak, Norrie?"

I nodded, still unable to speak. Then I remembered the cast. "Maybe not. My cast. I can't cut up a steak."

"We'll cut it for you." Daniel's voice held what sounded to me like an irrepressible grin. "I've always wanted a sister I could care for. You'll do just fine."

Before I knew what was happening, I had a Hawke brother on each side and the three of us were on our way out to lunch.

As we left the building there were no mind games floating around courtesy of the Preacher.

Carolyn

Carolyn Engelmann had never been a big believer in any religion until she'd gone, one Sunday morning, with her friend Etta Mae Carvone, to hear the preacher at the church Etta Mae attended.

It still seemed strange to Carolyn that Etta Mae had just disappeared like she had. No one had heard anything from her for over a month. And the last time Carolyn talked to her, Etta Mae had been higher than a kite. She'd had a date. A real live date with a guy who was going to go with her to meet her mother.

Then she'd disappeared. Without a word or a trace.

After Etta Mae's disappearance, Carolyn talked to the preacher. She'd wanted him to tell her that everything would be all right. That Etta Mae would turn up. That Etta Mae was alive and well and would be home soon.

But the preacher hadn't told her that. He'd brushed aside her worry and convinced her to spend some of her time with him.

She decided this would be all right. He was a preacher, after all.

Her mother would be proud of her. Her first serious boyfriend was a minister. A man of the cloth.

He'd introduced himself to her as Bartholomew James, but he'd told her to call him Bart. That made her laugh. How could you not trust a man who was named after two of the Apostles? But something in the back of her mind kept worrying her. A tiny thought about a different name. She couldn't remember what it was, but she really thought Etta Mae had called this man something else.

But then, he was a man of the cloth, a representative of God.

And if you couldn't trust a preacher, who could you trust?

This date, this night, seemed to be much different than the rest. Bart was uncomfortable with any of the affection she tried to show him. Whenever she touched him he backed away. He was curt, seemed almost angry.

She felt the hand grab her from behind too late to stop it. He'd bound her hands before she could even defend herself. She knew fear then. Deep, desperate fear. And from someplace deep inside she suddenly knew what had happened to Etta Mae. This man's name wasn't Bart James. It probably wasn't Peter Thaddeus either, the name she suddenly remembered Etta Mae telling her.

And she knew, without a doubt, she was about to join her friend. Wherever she was. Buried in the backyard. At the bottom of the closest river. That's where she was headed.

She tried. She fought using her feet. But every time she connected with him, he hit her. Hard. She felt the first thrust of the knife and knew pure terror.

This man was going to stab her to death.

Then she remembered the little story she'd read in yesterday's paper. If only they'd printed the drawing of the killer. She might have been saved. Now she knew her time was at hand.

This man would kill her. Either slowly as he seemed to want, or fast, with one fatal flick of that lethal knife.

God in heaven, why hadn't she listened to her mama? Her mama'd always warned her about men. "Don't trust them," she'd said.

Now she knew her mama had been right. But it was too late. As the fear took her mind, she felt the knife blade thrust into her at the base of her breastbone and felt the downward slice through skin and organs.

Carolyn tried to stop him with one last feeble kick only to feel the knife on her throat.

In the time it took her to bleed to death, she cursed the Preacher and condemned his soul to hell.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Earl's Steak House and Barbecue Pit was located on the highway leading to the ocean, only a mile inland from my favorite beach.

I wanted to ask them to take me to the shore, let me hear the waves, feel the salty spray and revel in the pounding noise. I thought back to the times I'd stood on the shore and watched the waves break over the jumble of rocks, let the grandeur of it play in my mind like a fine symphony. I usually heard Smetana's "The Mauldau", with its building crescendo of sound. In my mind, I saw a river running wild on its way to the sea.

While Brand parked the car, I stood with Daniel in the line waiting for a table. They'd assured us it would be only five minutes. We decided, based on their reputation, to wait.

I sensed Brand approaching behind us before I heard the door and wondered why I could read him so easily this day. I was lost in thought by the time he spoke, a soft voice telling me he was with us, we could eat now. I wondered what he'd do if I turned and told him he didn't have to tell me. I'd known he was there, had felt him coming from the parking lot. I didn't think he'd appreciate knowing his thoughts were now joined to mine somehow. That I could tell at least some of what he was thinking.

The feeling had been growing on the drive out here. His brother had been telling us about a particularly gruesome murder he had worked on and I sat there and let Brand's thoughts wash over me. He was so proud of his brother, so full of love and respect. There was something else, but I didn't know what it was. A feeling of affection, desire, but I couldn't tell where it was aimed. It was as though he was blocking the thought. He didn't want to admit it to himself, therefore it wasn't coming to me.

"Your table is ready." The waiter's voice jarred me from my reverie.

"Come on Norrie, let's get you fed. You could use a pound or two." Daniel's grip on my arm was light, as though he'd watched his brother and knew how it was done.

"What is it with you people? First Rhoda, now you. There's nothing wrong with my weight."

"Actually, Norrie, there is. You've lost weight since this case began." Brand's gentle voice held concern, something he hadn't shown quite so boldly in the past. We reached our booth and Brand took my good hand, touched it to the edge of the table and waited while I slid along the padded seat. "Move around a little more, you can be at the back," he told me softly, his body pushing against mine. Once again my stomach clenched and my heart beat faster when I felt his heat. What was my mind was trying to tell me? Now wasn't the time to try and figure that out. Better I should worry about my weight.

"So? I could afford to lose a few pounds. It won't kill me. Besides, I thought today's man liked his women skinny."

Male laughter greeted that admission. Obviously not these two men.

"I'd tell you what I like," Daniel told us, "but I might embarrass you. Hell, I'd embarrass myself."

"Daniel, don't start. Last time you did this they threw us out of the bar. Remember?"

"How could I forget?"

"You should have seen him, Norrie. One beer, he hadn't even finished it, and this young woman walked by. She was round and pleasant to look at, certainly no stick-thin model. Actually, she was pretty. Anyway, this guy next to him made some remark about the 'overweight bimbo' and Daniel took exception to his remark on her behalf. The poor girl heard this clown and her face was turning purple. I don't know if she was mad or just embarrassed."

He stopped talking while a waiter filled our coffee cups and water glasses.

"So Daniel here decides to enlighten the guy on what women should look like." I heard him tear the paper on several sugar packets, stirring them into his cup while he spoke. "Soft curves, something to hold on to, not a pile of rib and hip bones covered with flesh. Something like that. Next thing I know, he's bouncing back toward me 'cause the guy's punched him. Hard. Danny's nose is bleeding and his lip is split. And what does the girl do? She turns around and starts yelling at Danny she doesn't need his help, she can look after herself. Seems she had a black belt in karate and wasn't afraid to use it. Before Danny could even get himself upright, she's flipped the other guy onto his back on the floor and walked away. The bouncer, he never saw what happened. Just saw a customer on the floor and Danny bleeding all over the place and very politely escorted us to the door."

I laughed so hard the tears rolled down my face. I could see Danny and Brand being frog-marched out of the place, a beefy-handed bouncer holding tight to them.

"You can laugh. It wasn't your nose got broken. Hurt like hell!"

I laughed even harder and heard Brand shush me.

"I won't," I giggled, "this is too funny."

"But people are looking at us."

"So? I can't see them, so I don't care and you know you don't. You're so proud of him for standing up for her, even if she didn't need it."

"Well, yeah. And it did help me in the looks department. That crooked nose took away a lot of this boy's good looks. Gave me a boost!"

"Hey, Bro, women like a crooked nose. Right, Norrie?"

I was still laughing and shook my head.

"I've got an idea. Norrie can judge who's got the best nose here. Yours or mine. She's already touch-read my face. Now she can do your nose and pass judgment. That ought to settle it once and for all."

I was sitting between the two men in a U-shaped booth and suddenly felt my arm lifted by Brand, who was on my right. He steered my hand toward his brother. Daniel leaned closer and planted his face against my hand. I played along, touching Daniel's face and finding his nose. What little I felt besides his nose told me these two brothers looked very much alike. The only difference in their noses was the bump on Daniel's where it had healed crookedly.

"Do you have the dimples and the cleft chin that your brother has, Daniel?"

"You're good Norrie. I've seen the touch-read done before and never knew it was so gentle. And yes, I have the dimples. My cleft chin isn't as deep as Brand's but it's there. We both look like our father."

"Thank God! We'd look kinda funny being small and blonde like Mom." More laughter and I began to feel like some semblance of sanity was returning.

"I'm glad we decided to come here. I'm enjoying myself. Haven't laughed this much in weeks. Months, even."

"Good. It worked. And after lunch we're going to take you down to the shore. There's a hell of a beach out there, huge boulders, waves crashing in over them, really quite spectacular."

I sat, not moving, and wondered what had just happened. Had Brand read my mind earlier? Was this what his brother had tried to explain to me? It wasn't the first time it had happened. I remembered clearly the morning we discussed the Preacher's calling cards, when I wanted someone to hold me. He'd reached out and comforted me then, too.

We placed our orders when the waiter came back, each trying something different with promises to the others to let them sample bites of everything. I ordered something I could handle with a cast but Daniel cancelled my order and asked for rare steak. He and Brand would take turns cutting it for me, he explained.

I sat back and let the brothers catch up on news from home and listened with growing envy. I would have liked what they shared.

When our meals arrived, the talk inevitably returned to work.

"I told Dylan this morning, my bosses are going to let me stay until you get a line on this guy. I'll stay at your place, Brand, since you're with Norrie at the other house. Save on hotels and make it seem more like home."

"They'll let you stay that long?" There was doubt in Brand's voice.

"Not really. They didn't want me to stay here that long. I took some days I had coming. I figured I could help you, and I'll stop and see Mom and Dad before I go back. I need the break."

I heard the undercurrent and realized this man was taking a break after something had caused him trouble. A bad case, maybe a woman. He wasn't running away, just taking a step back.

"Good. Then you can do some of the cooking you're always bragging about. I'll bring Norrie with me and we can sit around and discuss old times."

My life was being planned in front of me without a by-your-leave or a please. And I was enjoying the idea.

Something to keep my mind off the case.

And Dylan.

We laughed and talked our way through the meal, then dessert with more coffee, and after the men paid the bill I waited by the door with Daniel while Brand went to get the car.

"Was I right, Norrie?"

I knew exactly what he meant and nodded. "Yes. You just might be. How'd you know?"

"I could see your face. You were looking just a little dazed when he mentioned taking you down to the shore and I put two and two together. Remember, I'm an agent as well as a profiler. I can read the clues as well as the next guy."

"Well, that's the second time it's happened with him." I explained the other incident and knew Daniel was right. Brand was a little bit psychic even if he wouldn't admit it. How much he could read, I might never know. I'd have to be careful what I wished for around him.

After a short drive to another parking lot, Brand notified the dispatcher where we were and gave some code that told someone something and we all piled out of the car. I could smell the sharp tang of the sea. We weren't close enough to feel the spray. As we moved closer I suddenly wanted to stand beside the water and let it lap at my bare toes. I craved the touch of the waves.

I was swung off my feet without warning and let out a little screech of surprise.

"Put me down, Brand. What are you doing?"

"I just thought you'd like to get closer. There are way too many rocks at the bottom of this hill for you to walk across without getting hurt. So I'm going to carry you."

"Put me down. This instant."

I smacked his shoulder with my hand but he ignored me. Daniel's laughter behind us told me he was enjoying this. I also heard the very low "I told you".

I gave up fighting and let Brand pick his way through the rocks. When he finally set me down I could feel the spray on my face, hear the roar of the waves as they beat themselves to death on the rocks and taste the salt on my lips. I stood, soaking it in, afraid to move for fear the moment would end.

"Where's Daniel?" I asked.

"He stayed up top. Said he'd wait in the car for us. He was writing notes before we even left."

"Well, he doesn't know what he's missing."

"Give me your foot, Norrie."

Warm fingers cupped my ankle. Without pause, I picked up my foot and my shoe disappeared. Holding out the other foot, I was soon standing barefoot in the sand, feeling it between my toes. It had been years since I'd felt this free, this alive. Brand clasped my hand and led me onto packed, wet sand. When the first wave broke over my toes, I smiled. The second wave engulfed my ankles. I stepped forward, sure I'd be safe with Brand beside me, and the water broke higher on my leg. I hitched my skirt up and waded out until I stood in the ocean up past my knees.

I threw my head back and smiled at the gods who were making this a day to remember.

"Happy, Norrie?" I heard Brand's low voice at my side.

"You can't begin to imagine. Thank you for this, Brand. I've wanted to do this for so long, but I could never find anyone to bring me. And if someone brought me out here, we always just sat up there in the parking lot. Listening." I squeezed my toes together, squishing sand, feeling its textures against my skin. "This was a place I came with my parents a lot. We were all mesmerized by the sea. Loved the feel of it, the sound of it. The majesty."

"I kind of thought that when I saw your face. You seemed enthralled by the sound. I figured the feel of it would be even better."

"You're right."

I reached up to his face then stood on tiptoe and placed a gentle kiss along his jawline. "Thank you."

"You're more than welcome. If you want to come here again, tell me. I'll make it happen for you."

"Brand —"

"No, Norrie. Don't say anything. This is for you."

I stood for a long time in the moving water savoring the waves, the spray and the taste of the salt. I committed each to memory so I would have something to remember after this day. I didn't get out here anymore and I didn't think that would change. Brand volunteered to bring me, but I knew when the time came he'd have something else to do, someone else to do it with. This promise was spur of the moment and a nice gesture, but I wouldn't count on Brand any more than I could count on others who'd promised me the same thing in the past.

"I'm ready."

I turned to where I knew Brand was waiting. His arm was around me and he swung me off my feet and carried me back across the rocks. He found a picnic table

near the parking lot where he sat me while Daniel brought a towel from the trunk of the car.

It was a laughing group that finally left the coastline and headed back to the real world.

Over the next two days, I stayed at Rhoda's, had suppers with Daniel and Brand and relaxed. I was beginning to feel more like myself again and told Rhoda.

"I'm glad, Norrie. You had me worried there."

"I'm sorry, Rhoda. I didn't mean to worry anyone. It was just that I never seemed to have time to fully recuperate before that madman struck again. Last time I didn't have to *read* as much at the scene and I wasn't as run-down. And being with Daniel and Brand these past few days has been relaxing. Brand's only job is to watch me and go through those files he brought here. Daniel can't do anything until something else happens and the daily meetings are very short and non-productive. The crime lab is backed up and test results are taking longer than they'd hoped. And I haven't got a message from anyone to tell me that something is going to happen."

"Not a good situation, is it?"

"For them, no. For me, it's wonderful."

The doorbell pealed and interrupted us. I waited at the table while Rhoda answered it. When she came back the scent of roses preceded her.

"These are for you. Two dozen of the most beautiful red roses I've ever seen."

"Is there a card?"

"Yes. Want me to read it?"

"You'll have to. There's no one else around."

Brand was out in the garage going through some files in the trunk of his car, which was probably a good thing. If he'd had to read the card to me, it might have discomfited both of us.

"They're from Dylan."

"What?"

"The card says 'I'm sorry. I think I was wrong, it *is* love. Dinner. Tomorrow. Pick you up at seven?'"

"Oh."

"Now that, my dear, is the understatement of the year. You'll have to let him know if you're going to go with him or not, Norrie. And tell Brand. He can plan a night off with his brother if he doesn't have to watch out for you."

What was Dylan up to?

A few days ago he told me he couldn't think about me until the case was over and today he changed his mind. I always thought that was a woman's prerogative. I inhaled deeply, letting the sweet fragrance overpower my thoughts, but it wasn't enough to

stop the ideas swirling in my head. How could he know this now when two days ago he wasn't sure? Had something happened to change his mind? Or was this simply his way of staking his claim so he could sort out the details later? Had he seen me with Brand and suspected there was more between us than just a working relationship? There wasn't, but Dylan didn't know that.

"Dial Dylan's office number for me, would you please, Rhoda?" I'd let him take me out, explain himself and decide if I wanted to change directions again or if I was happy blundering along by myself.

My nose was buried in the roses as I stood listening to his phone ring, realizing I was going to get his voice mail. His syrupy voice told me to leave a message so I did as directed, "I'll be ready at seven." I wanted to say "*I love you*," too, but something held me back.

I felt my way slowly to the door of the attached garage and went out to find Brand.

"Morning. You're looking much better. You must be getting some sleep, finally."

"Thank you, I am."

"I'll only be a minute, just putting these things back in my briefcase."

I waited until I heard the catches snick shut and the trunk close.

"Brand, I'm just giving you warning. You have the night off tomorrow. Dylan wants to take me for dinner and I said yes. You can have some time to make plans and do something with your brother. You can have a much nicer evening without me hanging around. Dylan can look out for me for a couple of hours."

"We don't mind you being there. Danny keeps telling me he looks on you as a little sister."

"Well, tomorrow night you're on your own."

"Okay." He abruptly changed the topic. "What's on tap for today? Another meeting?"

"Yes. At three, I think. The lab's got some of the testing done on the samples they got from the last victim. Don't know if there's anything to help us. The DNA won't be back yet. Didn't they let you know?"

"My phone's in the house. Haven't checked the messages yet today."

He came to stand by me. Close enough I could smell the maleness of him, the smell of soap and man untouched by other man-made scents. He didn't touch me. I waited, wondering what he was going to do.

His voice, when he spoke, was soft, not quite a threat, but definitely a warning. "Norrie, don't let him hurt you. I don't know what's going on between the two of you, but if he hurts you he'll have to answer to me."

"I, uh, I won't, Brand." What on Earth was I supposed to say to this kind of a warning? "Thanks for being concerned."

"I'd like to think I'm your friend, Norrie. And friends look out for one another. Just remember what I said." He took my elbow and steered me toward the steps. He opened the door for me then stopped.

"Go ahead. I forgot my keys. I'll be right in."

The door clicked shut behind me and I wandered slowly down the hall to the family room. It had been turned into our command center, where we spent most of each day. Brand spent a lot of time on the phone running down leads, I lazed around and got stronger with each passing day.

By the time he finished in the garage, I was lounging on a recliner, my feet up in the air. Brand came to sit on the couch, spreading files in front of him on the floor.

"I don't understand this," he complained when he finished with one of the files. "How can one man lead so many people astray? And why are these women so enamored of him?"

"I don't know. If we did we might be able to stop him. It's not knowing where he's going to strike next that bothers me. If there was any kind of pattern, other than the name thing, it might help, but he's totally unpredictable."

I heard him throw the file he was holding to the floor.

"I'm going to get that map I have in the trunk. Maybe if I put pins in everywhere there's been a murder in the order they occurred, I'll see something I've missed. I can't just sit here rereading everything. There's got to be something else."

He stomped down the hall and I heard the door close behind him. He'd told me he wanted the assignment of looking after me. He'd fought to get it. But I think he'd have been much happier if he were out on the streets with the rest of his team.

He hadn't been gone many minutes when I heard the flurry of the door opening and pounding feet. Brand was in a hurry and sounded wound up.

"Norrie, Dylan called..." He stopped, panting slightly. "He thinks they found your barn."

Chapter Twenty-Four

I stood. Couldn't move.

The significance of what he'd told me slowly sank in.

There *was* a barn.

I should be happy, but something about this news made me tense and nervy.

"Norrie, come on. What they found at the Monte Creek location sounds exactly as you described it."

Brand took my hand, warning me of the table in my path, "And don't slip on those files I've got scattered about," he told me as he led me toward the hall. "Get your coat. It's cooling off."

I followed Brand down the hall, turned into my doorway and bumped into him. I reached for him, off balance. He kept me from falling by enfolding me in his arms.

The overpowering scent of the man told me I'd made a mistake. I was in *his* room?

I sheepishly pushed away and wondered why I felt this way. These arms had comforted me once before, his presence made me feel secure and I really didn't want to leave. Turning, feeling my way to my own room, I picked up my wallet and jacket from the bed. Back in the hallway, I sensed he was still standing there.

"Norrie..." I held a forefinger to my pursed lips, shook my head, beseeching him in silence, no, not now.

He sighed.

"Let's go, Brand, I need to be there."

I was still apprehensive. Could it be a trap?

His hand on my elbow guided me out to the car. While I buckled up, the overhead door rumbled open. I was aware he'd turned on the strobe roof light, its motor echoing loudly in the car. The sedan rolled to the end of the driveway and stopped. He punched numbers on his cell phone and reported to someone that we were on the move. Members of the task force weren't using the regular radio frequencies. He gave our destination and an ETA of twenty minutes to the communications dispatcher.

Twenty minutes?

The barn *was* close to town, just as I'd perceived.

He listened for a few moments then informed me, "They haven't let anyone in to the site yet, Norrie. They're parked on a road leading in. They want to describe it to you, make sure it's what you saw."

"Fine. Do I have to get out? Or can I just sit in the car?" I didn't want to climb out in the area of those suspected graves. I'd feel too much anguish from too many sources if there were bodies in each of them.

"I don't know. We'll have to wait until we get there. See the layout of the place."

We raced through the night, lights flashing with the siren silent.

"Why don't you... Oh! Too much energy coming from the graves? You think it will get in your way?"

"You understand about that now?"

"Yes. I've been doing some reading, more in-depth studies, written by better-qualified people. I wanted to understand what happened to you. There's some interesting stuff about energy, auras and the other things you do on the Internet."

"Brand, do you realize what you've just said?"

He sounded a little gruff when he replied, "Yeah."

"Why? I thought you were having trouble getting past what you believed."

"I figure that if Dylan believes you and my brother thinks you're legit, then there has to be something. It's hard, Norrie, don't get me wrong, having to stow a lot of mental baggage to get past my disbelief."

We picked up speed, probably headed to a multilane highway. The first bleat of the siren made me jump.

"Damn Sunday drivers," cursed Brand. "Never look in their mirrors, never move to the slow lane. You could run right up their tailpipes before they know you're there."

I chuckled at his impatience, for a moment willing to forget why we were in such a hurry.

"We're almost there. What do you want to do if you can't stay in the car?"

"I don't know. I just need to know everything is the way I saw it to be sure. If those horses are there...and if someone can find the back of the house and look at the yard, that might do it."

"Okay. You stick to me like glue. I don't want you any further than my hand away from me. You understand that?"

"I promise, I won't move without you."

"You won't go anywhere with me either, until they tell us it's all clear. He could be out here, Norrie. He might be waiting for us."

His words made me shudder and I remembered something the Preacher said when he sent me messages at the last crime scene.

"Brand, how many days has it been since the *reading* where I saw the barn?"

I was conscious of his hesitation. Was he trying to remember or to comprehend the seriousness and validity of my question?

My nerves quickened. My hand gripped the door handle.

"Five. Why?"

I couldn't speak. I was in shock. Scared stiff.

"Why, Norrie? What's the number of days got..." He remembered, blurting out, "Five days. That's how long he told you it would take us to find the barn."

"Yes," I murmured, shaking.

"And here we are, about to drive in like a bunch of touristy sightseers."

I heard him turning on the two-way radio to connect with Dylan.

"Hawke, here. You there, Dylan?"

"Jones."

"Keep your people back. Remember when Norrie got the message about the barn? When he told her it would take five days to find it? Well, today is the fifth day. This could be a trap."

"Too late. We decided to move. The SWAT team lieutenant has twenty men ready to surround the property. Where are you?" The crackling sounds of the radio distorted Dylan's voice, making him sound a stranger.

"About a minute away. We're just at the turnoff."

"Take the right fork about half a mile up. Jamison and I are in the field beside the barn, Ferran and Simpson are on the other side and we've each got eight uniforms and Sheriff's deputies with us, spread out on either side. The SWAT team is backup and won't move unless ordered. The Corler County sheriff has called in the state police helicopter. It'll be here in a few minutes with the infrared heat-seeker operating. The fork will put you on the east side of the barn. When you get here, make sure you keep Norrie in the car. You might need binoculars to see detail but you should be able to see well enough to describe it for her and you'll be far enough away to stay out of trouble if anything goes wrong."

The car slowed. We'd reached the last turn. As we bounced off the paved road onto the rutted track, energy began stirring images. I didn't know whose energy and the images meant nothing. Yet. It was as if the heightened state of the people surrounding the house was putting out sharper images, imprints and feelings.

"Ask him if he can see the horses."

Brand and I were disappointed at his answer.

"No. But there are fresh droppings all over the paddock between the barn and the river. That's where she said the horses were."

"We're nearly at the fork now. Be there in a minute."

I heard him hang the radio mike back in its holder and was surprised to feel his hand on mine. His fingers wrapped warmly around my cold hand.

"You okay?"

I felt his strength and encouragement.

"Yes. I'm feeling energy from someone, probably all of those people around the barn. Can you see it yet?"

The car slowed and when he didn't answer I became impatient.

"Can you see it?"

"Yeah." His voice held a fatalistic note. "It looks exactly as you described it." He was seeing it in front of him. He could no longer disbelieve me.

"Was there anything in the lean-to, Norrie?"

I thought back and pictured the barn as I recalled it from five days earlier. There had been something.

"Yes," I told him, "Bags of feed. Burlap sacks, full of something." He pushed the button on the radio's mike.

"This is it, Dylan. She even remembers those bags of feed in the lean-to."

"Good. We're going to move in now. Keep back. I don't want Norrie feeling too much at one time. We'll need her inside later."

"10-4."

Radio silence became a curse. I couldn't see what was happening and didn't know what was planned.

If Brand could see, he wasn't saying. We sat in the stillness waiting for something, anything, to happen.

When it did, we weren't ready.

Chapter Twenty-Five

In every book I remembered reading, the descriptive passages blithely remarked “the shots rang out”.

Never!

Shots do not ring out.

They explode, shattering the night, making silent all living things.

The night noises ceased. The barking, cracking sounds from a variety of makes and models told of a gunfight taking place in front of us.

I held my breath, consumed by fear. Then I was pummeled by a flash of intense pain. The same as I’d experienced at the precinct house when I felt the premonition of death.

Anwylhyd.

Then, nothing.

Brand pulled me down on the seat and folded his body over me. As protection it probably did neither of us much good, but if it made him feel better, I’d let him stay there.

“If there’s only one man out there, what are they shooting at?” My muffled voice from beneath Brand’s body was barely loud enough for him to hear. I wriggled, wanted to sit up.

“I don’t know. Stay down.” He moved and I realized he was reaching again for the radio mike.

As suddenly as it started, the cacophony ceased.

An eerie quiet held the night.

No voices yelled. No low murmurs reached us. Night noises, nocturnal birds and insects, were muted.

“Hawke, you there?” When the radio finally crackled to life it was Martin Jamison who spoke, softly, tensely. Dazed.

“Yes. What happened?”

“We just walked into some kind of an ambush. Can you come and help us? I can’t find Dylan and I don’t know if we’ve got any wounded or...”

He left the rest unfinished but I knew what he meant.

“It’s SWAT’s show now, Martin. I won’t leave Norrie. You’ll have to do it yourself. Dylan said he was in the paddock between the barn and the river.”

The radio went silent again. We waited. Minutes passed. I was more agitated.

Something wasn't right. I wasn't getting messages like I should. I couldn't find Dylan.

Where was Dylan?

"Brand, there's..." I stopped — because I'd found a dark, lifeless void.

I knew. I'd heard his voice when he called me darling. *Anwylyd*.

Footsteps approached and I sensed bad news.

"Dylan..."

The footsteps kept coming.

"Dylan..." I was frantic.

"Aw, shit, no." Brand's voice told me what I dreaded to hear.

"He's dead." My stunned voice told Brand I knew. "It was his fear, his pain."

"Norrie, you don't..."

"He's dead, Brand. I feel it. It was Dylan. All along, he was the one who was going to die and I couldn't stop it." I shook. Shock settled over me like an icy fog. Tears flowed but I couldn't feel them. My mind shut down one little bit at a time.

Brand clutched me tight, held me while I shook. I sensed nothing around me.

My eyes were tightly closed — as if that would help. I tried once more to find Dylan. Anything of him.

All I found was a cold place I didn't want to be.

Like a dimmer switch, I faded. Faded until only the slightest light remained, those synapses required to keep me alive.

I heard him moving around the room and wondered why he was laughing.

"Norrie, tell me something. You're blind. So what on Earth do you need with plastic flowers? And pictures? You've got pictures hanging on every wall."

Why was I putting up with this arrogant, disdainful ass?

"I'm aware of beauty. I like the smell and the colors. I know they're there. On that wall, Bright and Sunny in a Bucket. Note the vibrant color and shadow effect. Over here, a watercolor, Daffodil Delight, next to that, one of my favorites, an oil on nylon. Today, those," I pointed in the general direction of the plastic flowers he'd mentioned, "are petunias. Tomorrow I'll imagine them as sunflowers."

I whipped around, pointing at other walls. "Here's a kitten chasing a butterfly. There's a meadowland in the Sierras. I can close my eyes and think of themes that evoke a strange sense of familiarity and nostalgia — dreams, fantasies and secrets. I want detail and clarity, not fuzz and gloom."

He hadn't spoken, tried to interrupt.

"Over there by the window my easel sits with a blank canvas. My paint box and brushes are on the stand. Someday I'll just stroke and splash. What will it look like? I really don't care."

I stood with my feet apart, one hand on my hip, my other hand pointing in his direction.

"I went through it all – denial, loneliness and aloneness following my parents' death. I became a flunky's dumpee and had to overcome more guilt and rejection. I didn't have much left over. Our friends were his friends first. Final score? Dumpers, eight, dumpee, zero. It took me the first year to get rid of most of the emotional corpses and get on with sightless singleness. Now, I face more anger, pain and horrific consequences with a curse, laughingly thought to be a gift."

I'd simmered, then it came to a boil.

"I'm tired of gray, blah, dark moods and black thoughts and I'm really pissed off at you. You're insufferable and you're mean and you can take it and blow it out your you-know-what."

The roar of seven rifles at close range startled me violently from my memories. I shuddered at each volley, heard death in the echoing crack.

Brand stood beside me, his arm around my shoulders, his fingers gently squeezing my arm. His brother held my arm on the other side. Fred and Rhoda stood behind us. Dylan had no family left, the department was all he'd had. The others on the task force pushed us to the front row. I might have thought it a secret but the rest of these men and women obviously understood my attachment to him.

The smell of the freshly dug earth brought a lump to my throat. This would be the final resting place of a man I'd thought I'd loved. When shovels dropped earth on top of his casket, it would be nothing but a symbolic end.

Dylan was no more. His essence, his being, departed when he fell in the field.

The chaplain intoned the words, "Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust."

There was nothing left here of Dylan. The body that had been the shell of the man lay in the box at our feet, but Dylan as I knew and loved him was now only in my heart, my memories.

A hand touched my arm and something was pressed against my palm. I turned to Brand, unsure, needing guidance. His somber whisper nearly broke my heart.

"It's the flag, the one that draped his coffin. Take it. He'd want you to have it."

I clasped the folded fabric to my chest, tried not to break down.

This was the end.

Straps and pulleys were maneuvered to lower the casket into the ground while the mournful notes of taps sang clearly from a corner behind us, each note sending shivers down my spine. A touch, like a warm breeze, caressed my face. I knew what it was.

I made a promise as I stood there, listening to the people around us move away.

I'll get him Dylan. I'll get the bastard who did this to you. The Preacher won't kill again if I can help it.

Reaching into my pocket, I took out the last thing of Dylan's I would ever touch. "Brand, help me?"

"Do what?"

"I want this to go on top of his coffin. So he can always be ready, always get his way."

Brand took my arm and leaned me gently forward.

"Drop it."

I let it go and listened to the soft thud it made on the wood below.

Dylan's old school tie. The one that put him into what everyone called his "kick ass" mood. Brand rescued it from Dylan's house when he and Martin picked up the dress uniform to take to the undertaker. *Here comes the man.*

Even in death he would be fearsome.

I walked between Brand and his brother, away from the graveside, away from Dylan's body.

All I had left were my memories.

The ride home was quiet. No one spoke. I wished someone would talk, say something. Then I knew I'd have to go first.

What to say? I remembered the interrupted memory in the cemetery and felt the first reawakening of my emotions.

"You know, Dylan could be a real jerk when he wanted to." The air around me was charged with horror and disbelief. No one said a word, I heard only the sound of indrawn breaths. It was obvious no one knew how to deal with my pronouncement. "You all sit here, mourning the man. I mourn for him, but I'm not blind when it comes to the faults he had. He could be cruel, without even knowing he was, his words hurting although he didn't mean to."

"Explain, Norrie."

It took me a moment to put the words together in a way that would make others understand. "Daniel, he didn't think. He just blurted out what was in his head. If it made someone sad, he shrugged. He made me cry more times than I'd like to remember. Then he'd apologize, turn around and do it again."

"You mean like when he didn't believe you that day?" Brand's voice held a note of interest. I thought he and his brother knew where I was headed and the admission I was about to make.

"I know he didn't want to believe me, but he finally did realize I was right." I leaned back into the car seat, relaxing for the first time since Dylan's death. "It wasn't just that, though." It had been six long days since Dylan died, the mandatory autopsy delaying the funeral, and I'd had more than enough time to fight my demons. On the one hand I hated him for leaving me the way he did, and told him so in my private conversations—on the other, I loved him. Then a strange thing happened. As the days passed, I realized the love I felt for him wasn't the love of a lover, it was the love of a good friend.

He'd only ever been my friend. I think Dylan knew that, and now so did I.

"I thought I was in love with him. I wanted my fantasies to come alive. But it wasn't true love. It was the love one would have for the person who'd been there for them when the chips were down and everyone else left. Dylan was that person to me. When my parents were killed it was Dylan who pushed me through to the other side of my despair. It was Dylan who took my so-called gift and found an outlet for it. And it was the same Dylan who cruelly told me when my clothes didn't match. Who made fun of me and my house."

"And for that you hated him." Daniel didn't ask a question, he was stating what he'd heard me say.

"Yes. Sometimes I did. There were days when I'd have liked to just cut loose and leave him. But he was all I had. He was all that kept me going. For three long years."

We rode for a while, each thinking our own thoughts, each conscious that the others understood. Taking a deep breath, I started my march to freedom.

"Brand, when is the next task force meeting?"

"Tomorrow morning. Why?"

"I want to be there. I want to get back into the flow of things. Be there if they need me. See if there's anything I can help with." I hesitated, my head bowed, praying this was the right thing to do. "I promised Dylan I'd help catch the Preacher. I can't do that if I'm sitting at home, grieving. Dylan would understand my thinking. That's the way he was."

The car slowed to a stop.

"Where are we? What's wrong?" I heaved a sigh of relief at the reply.

"Nothing's wrong. We're back at Swetzler's."

"Am I still under police protection?"

"You bet. Only tonight, you're getting double protection. Danny moved in here just after... He's staying, now that the funeral is over, instead of going back to the hotel. Gives us a chance to visit or talk or work. Whatever we want to do."

"We're turning Rhoda's house into a hotel, but it was all her idea. She said Brand needed to have some time to visit with me." Daniel chimed in.

"She would," I agreed. "That's Rhoda."

Brand's smile colored his words. "She's special, all right."

"Thank you. Both of you. I know I've been a total loss these past few days, but that's over."

Daniel bounded out of the car first then reached for my hand. "Come on, let's get all of us into the house. Brand needs to get out of his uniform, I want out of this suit, then the three of us are going out for supper. Somewhere loud, where the music will drown out all other conversation. Somewhere busy, where we can find life's energy at the highest level."

I laughed for the first time in nearly a week. "You have any idea where this place is? How I should dress?"

“Wear something gaudy and outrageous that would have made Dylan think you’d lost all clothes sense. Rhoda will help. She’ll know what doesn’t work.” He swung me around, his hand on my back keeping me from falling. “Let’s have some fun.”

We stood at the front door, three laughing fools just home from a full honors funeral for a high-ranking officer, making plans to have a wake of immense proportions.

When we left the house a short time later, both men assured me they wore jeans and bright T-shirts while Rhoda had helped me find the red shoes, green pants and a blue blouse, as close to the purple top-thing as she could find.

There wasn’t a matched set of coordinating buttons on any of it.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"Danny, I don't know how to tell her."

Hearing the quietly anguished voice from across the room the task force used, I blatantly eavesdropped on the conversation.

"I don't think you'll have to tell her, Brand. She'll figure it out on her own."

I surprised both men, walking across the room to their voices.

"What will I figure out?"

"Ah, it's really noth—" began Brand.

"It must be something, Brand." I let a little of my vexation through when I interrupted. "You're upset about it. Daniel thinks I'll just *figure it out*, whatever it is. Tell me."

I waited, not sure if either of them would speak.

"Come on, Brand. Tell me. The meeting is about to start and I want to know before everybody gets here. Don't make me beg. Please."

Fluttering pages made a hint of noise and I knew, with certainty, whatever was on those pages contained the information that upset him.

Without thinking I reached for them, found them, clasped them in my hand. Nothing came from the pages, but they were the reason Brand wouldn't give me a straight answer.

"Somebody tell me. Now." I heard steps behind me, turned, not knowing who was there. Holding out the papers, I demanded, "Read this for me."

"I can't, Miss Benedict," Martin Jamison answered. "Hawke's in charge now. It's up to him."

"Nnnnhh!" I growled. "Somebody tell me. What does this say?"

Brand's hand on my arm drew me away from the others who were gathering. "Come with me. Now."

His strong fingers circled my wrist and I followed him down the hall. It was either go willingly or be dragged.

We entered a room and I smelled jasmine. A pleasant voice greeted us, one I hadn't heard before in this building although I remembered it from the funeral.

"Morning, Detective Hawke. What can I do for you?"

A door closed behind me, cutting out the sounds in the building, and I wondered if I really wanted to be here.

"Lieutenant Ray Seymour, meet Norrie Benedict. Ray is our chaplain, Norrie." I barely remembered meeting the man at the funeral. Names had been exchanged, a handshake given.

Brand's formal introduction should have warned me but I was too annoyed at him for not telling me the contents of the papers to heed.

"Pleased to meet you, again, Miss Benedict, under more pleasant circumstances. I'm sorry for your loss. How are you doing now? I'm sure you know our..."

"No platitudes, please." I waved the pages in front of me. "I'm fine, but I'm getting real irritated. If you outrank him," I aimed my thumb in Brand's direction, "please make him tell me what this says."

"Norrie!" Brand's voice rose angrily, then calmed quickly. "Sit down. I'll tell you."

A chair was abruptly shoved against the back of my knees and I sat, Brand beside me, covering my hand with his.

"Norrie, what you're holding is the ballistics report on the bullets removed from Dylan's body."

I froze. I didn't want to know this. But...

I'd promised a dead friend I would help catch his killer and this would be the first step.

"Tell me," I insisted.

"You're sure?"

"Yes. I need to know," I grew more persistent.

"The ballistics report found a match, Norrie." His voice dropped, became a pained whisper. "Dylan was shot by a police issue revolver."

I gasped, raised my fingers to cover my open mouth. The ache in my chest very nearly suffocated me and I wanted nothing but to cry.

Another chair was dragged closer, my hand pulled gently from my face. Two large hands enfolded it.

"Miss Benedict, Norrie? Are you sure you want to hear this?" asked the chaplain.

Speechless, a sour taste in my mouth, I dragged in a deep breath, reached again for Brand's hand and nodded. "Please. Go ahead."

"Tell her, Detective," said Seymour in a comforting tone. With two men holding a hand each I steeled myself for the news. I could sense Brand still didn't want to tell me, but knew he would.

"The gun that fired the shots was reported stolen more than two years ago. The cop reporting the theft retired soon after. The gun was never recovered. It hasn't been used in any other crime, until now." For many long seconds I couldn't speak, couldn't breathe. Brand tightened his fingers around mine and pulled my hand to rest against his warm thigh. The contact helped calm me a little but my mind refused to believe the words I'd heard.

"How can that be? How can a police issue gun be stolen?"

"It was taken from his car. The officer in question said it was in the glove compartment. His car was burgled while parked in front of the station. The perp got in fast, got out. That gun was the only thing taken."

I wondered if that sounded as phony to Brand's ears as to mine?

"And you believed him?"

"I had no reason not to. I knew him, Norrie. He was an honest cop."

"Who?"

"Sergeant Jamison. Sergeant Martin Jamison, Senior."

"Oh." My brain shifted to neutral. I needed time to absorb this shock.

"Yeah, oh. Now you see what I mean? Fatally crashed his small plane into a mountain in Utah about six months after he retired. The case was closed by an IAD lieutenant." His hand tightened around my fingers and I braced myself. There was something else coming that upset Brand. "As soon as the bullets were matched to the stolen gun, IA strongly suggested we remove Martin from the case. Said it didn't look good, would reflect back on his father and be embarrassing to him." He deserted me then, bounding up to pace the office. "We couldn't do it. We're so short-handed the captain has demanded he be left on the task force. I know why IA did it. They're trying to cover their asses. They know they screwed up two years ago. They don't want any chance it could come back to haunt them."

"And there won't be any useful prints on the remnants of the bullets. Nothing to tell us who fired the damn thing. Right?" I retorted, bitterly. "There's never good evidence when you need it."

"No, there are no prints. Just two slugs iden—"

"Two? There were two? I thought they only found one wound?"

"There was only one entry wound. They found the bullets sort of stacked one on top of the other."

After Brand explained how the second bullet was found, I was upset, and stammered, "But that means..."

I couldn't go on. The horror appalled me and I trembled.

"It means it was deliberate," he replied quietly, putting his hand on my shoulder. "Whoever did this was standing right behind him."

An expression I remembered hearing from some movie jumped to mind and I asked, in almost a whisper, "Is that what they call a double tap? Two shots to the back of the head?"

"Yeah," said Brand.

"In other words, he was executed."

"That's one way of saying it. We have no way of knowing who fired the gun, but it happened in that field. IA is scouring records and investigating every cop who was in

the pasture when the shooting started. If we don't get a quick arrest, at least three cops on the task force will be suspended."

"Who?" I asked, trying to remember who'd been with Dylan in the paddock.

"Roy Ferran, Larry Simpson and Martin. While the others all thought the gunfire started over by the barn, we know now the only shots fired at the police were the two that hit Dylan."

"Have they searched the scene for the gun in daylight?"

"Yes. The crime scene unit has been out there since the results came in. They've used metal detectors and sniffer dogs. There's nothing to find." With those last few words, Brand's voice sounded nearly as defeated as I felt. To think Dylan died at the hand of another cop was something he'd have trouble dealing with.

"Miss Benedict, this doesn't change anything," assured Chaplain Seymour, holding my hand more tightly. "There's nothing you can do about Lieutenant Jones' death. You just have to learn to accept it and get on with your life."

"Oh, no, Chaplain. No way. I can, I *will*, help." I paused as a thought came from nowhere. "But there is something."

There was definitely something the chaplain could do. He could read, in homage to Dylan Jones.

"Chaplain, do you pray every day?"

"Certainly."

"Find something that's been written for the Welsh, by the Welsh, and recite it loudly, just for Dylan. A Welsh prayer. An appropriate poem by Dylan Thomas, maybe *Do Not Go Gently Into That Good Night*. I can't do it for Dylan, but you can. Please, for me."

His hand patted my arm. I knew he was going to say yes.

"Of course, Miss Benedict. Let me find it and if you're still here, I'll read it to you at the same time."

"I'd like that. Thank you."

I hoped it would help all of us.

"Miss Benedict, if you ever want to talk, my door is open to you. Anytime. Brand, if you're finished with me, I'll be on my way. I've a funeral to officiate this afternoon."

"Thanks, Ray, we're done here. If you don't mind, we'll just take a minute longer here for Norrie to settle down, then we're back to the Ops Center."

Before the door closed behind the chaplain, I rose and turned to Brand, conscious I would have to make a strong case for the thoughts forming in my head so he couldn't refuse. "Let's get to work. I want to catch the slime who did this." As I said the words, I thought of the three men IA suspected and couldn't accept that someone I knew from the task force could be responsible. But what better place to hide than amongst the select few trying to break the case? A cop was the last person any of us would suspect. I headed for the door.

"Stop!"

Brand's shout rooted me to the floor, his hand on my arm pulled me sideways.

"You were about a foot away from running your pretty little face into a filing cabinet, Norrie. You've got to learn to wait for me." His gentle words whispered against my ear, his warm breath on my cheek told me he was close.

"I'm sorry," it came out a breathy rush.

His nearness was doing strange things to me. My heart beat faster, the heat from his breath moved through my body and made my insides feel warm and mushy. I wanted to lean against him and see what happened, but it seemed to me that was too brazen a move. I wasn't that kind of woman. Hell, if I was honest with myself, I didn't know *how* to be a brazen woman.

"Norrie?" his voice, inches from my ear, sent shivers up my spine and made me shudder. Without knowing I did it, I leaned toward him and the next thing I knew I was clasped tightly in strong arms, held closely to his chest and his mouth, that wonderful, gentle mouth, was moving over mine. The tip of his tongue ran along my lower lip, causing my insides to tremble, and without conscious thought I opened my mouth and allowed him in. The heat behind the kiss became an inferno and there was no way I'd have stopped unless he'd pushed me away. I wanted what he had to give. No. I wanted more.

An abrupt thud in the hallway outside the office door brought us both back to our senses and we pushed back from one another, both of us breathing heavily, neither of us talking. His hands stayed on my arms and held me steady.

"Norrie, I'm sorry. I should never have done that. I had no..." My fingers on his mouth stopped the words I didn't want to hear.

"Please, do *not* apologize. You've nothing to be sorry for."

"You're okay?" he asked gently.

"Oh, Brand," I leaned into him again and relaxed in his arms, unwilling and unable to make myself pull away. "I'm more than okay. I'm...I'm..."

"You're something else, Norrie Benedict." His hard embrace made my heart soar.

Another thud from the hall had us pulling apart and this time he moved. His hand holding mine led me toward the door and I followed, reluctant to get back to the business of living.

He led me down the hall in the direction of the Ops Center. We didn't speak, there really was nothing left to say.

There was a job to do before any of us could rest. We had to pool our talents and expertise to find Dylan's killer.

Moving down the hall, I dragged my fingers along the wall, passing over two doors and remembering third on the left. An idea suddenly surfaced that I was sure Brand would never agree to. I had to try. I thought it worth the effort and probably the risk.

If he said yes, I might relive the last moments of Dylan's life. If he'd had any idea what was about to happen, I would know his terror. If he hadn't seen it coming, at least I'd know he'd had no time to fear death. What I hoped to find was the killer's energy and a lead to the man who'd pulled the trigger, taken a life.

Before he could open the door, I stopped him, pulling him against the wall and out of the path of traffic. "Brand, wait."

"What, love?"

"Show me the bullets."

"What? Why?" Suspicion and fear crowded his words.

"I want to hold them. See if they'll speak to me."

"Norrie, no. You don't—"

"I do." How could I explain this to someone who didn't know how I felt? "Dylan died instantly, the only energy should be the killer's. Let me try, please. I want to catch the Preacher as badly as you. Give them to me. Get them for me now."

His silence spoke of the battle waging within him.

If I found Dylan's energy I could be hurt, knowing he suffered before death.

If I found the killer's, could he be sure I could cope with knowing who pulled the trigger?

"I can do it, Brand, I can." He had to believe me.

"Norrie, if you do this, you have to tell me everything you feel. And if you start to collapse on me, I'll stop it. I won't let you finish. I'm not like Dylan Jones, letting you run yourself over the edge to catch a killer. It isn't worth risking your mind. Or your life."

"All right. I agree. But I'd like you and Daniel to be with me in case I find something that causes me to collapse. I'm not going to deny it could happen so I might as well agree to that too."

"All right. Wait here." We remained in the hall, and I heard the beep of a cell phone keypad then another cell phone rang on the other side of the door. We were standing just outside the Ops Center.

His quiet words to his brother made me realize I was asking a lot. He drew me back from the door as he spoke. I could feel his apprehension. He wasn't altogether sure he was doing the right thing.

The door opened, closed as Daniel came to us. His voice was low and quiet, "Tell me again."

"Norrie wants to do a reading on the projectiles they took out of Dylan."

Daniel's silence told me he wasn't sure how to handle this.

"It's all right, Daniel. I know what could happen, but I think the risk is worth it."

"You're sure? I've seen other psychics do this and they come away so whacked out... I don't want that for you."

"I won't let it go that far. Brand has grounded me before. With both of you there, I should be all right."

"All right. When?" It didn't take him long to agree and I hoped it would help Brand accept what I was going to do.

"Are the others all ready for this meeting or do we have time now?"

"Half of them aren't here yet. The other half is busy putting information into the computer and on the boards. I'd say we have about fifteen minutes. Is that enough time?"

"Yes. Let's go."

The stairs down to the evidence lockup were narrow. We went single file, Brand reaching back for my hand, Daniel behind me with his hand on my shoulder. I could feel their concern. Their thoughts were for me and I accepted they'd worry about me no matter what I did.

"We're here." We stopped in an empty, echoing hallway. "Just so we understand, Norrie. If I think we're losing you, I'll stop this."

"Fine."

"Okay. Let's do it."

A screech assaulted my ears as one of them pulled open a door. It clanged against the wall. There was more metallic scraping as Brand opened some inner door. The cool basement air was damp and musty. Too many things filed or discarded and long forgotten.

"Are there spiders?" I asked, cringing, hoping somebody would tell me no.

"And mice. But there's a couple of big cats here for that. Tom and Jerry. Real original names, but they're good mousers."

"Yech!"

Daniel's guffaw behind me helped lessen the tension.

"Hey, Hawke, what brings you down here?" a gravelly voice asked. The keeper of the evidence, no doubt.

"Need to see the evidence in case number 03-786532."

"Lieutenant Jones' murder, huh?" The word "murder" slowly sank in. Dylan had been *murdered*, not just killed. I'd never *personally* known anyone murdered before. I'd *read* scenes and belongings of murder victims, but this was a first I would not have chosen for myself. "Whatcha lookin' for?"

"The weapons evidence."

"Gotcha. Be right back."

We waited, hearing ominous clanging and banging from somewhere nearby. Footsteps echoed as the voice came back.

"Here you go. Where will we do this?"

"How about the room next door? There still a table and a couple of chairs in there?"

"Sure. Just sign here." A pen scratched against paper and I imagined Brand signing for the evidence. Someone had to accept responsibility for it.

"Great. We'll be back in a few minutes." Brand grasped my hand and I followed them with only a slight hesitation. I wanted to help but the reality was setting in.

"You can still call this off, Norrie. If you don't want to do it, say so."

Was this Brand reading my mind again, being solicitous?

"Let's get it done." I walked a little straighter, stiffened my shoulders. Daniel's hand on my back showed his understanding. He knew. He'd probably seen things like this before.

Brand held the door and, pushing Daniel's hand aside and putting his own in the small of my back, escorted me to a chair just inside.

"There's a desk in front of you. The envelope is on top of it. When you're ready, tell me. I'll remove the slugs for you and lay them out."

I bowed my head and prayed for strength. If I made contact with Dylan's lingering energy, how might I react? If it reached the killer, I needed to be ready. Neither consequence was going to be easy.

I cocked my head, listened as the plastic envelope was opened, and heard two small thunks. The bullets clattered onto the desk. I extended my hand slowly, fearfully, and Brand's fingers touched my wrist. I hesitated, wondered if he sensed my reticence. Moving my hand forward, I indicated my readiness.

The metal was cold at first touch. I expected the projectiles to be long, thin and pointed. In fact it was short, slightly crooked and dented around one end.

I picked up one small, treacherous piece of metal and nearly dropped it in relief. Either Dylan died instantly or this was the second shot. The first would have been fatal.

I got little from that first chunk of deadly metal until I palmed it, wrapping my fingers tightly around it. The hatred came to me with such force I sat back in the chair.

"Norrie?" His questioning tone hinted at Brand's anxiety.

"I'm fine. It's just...I'm feeling such terrible hatred. To think one human could feel so strongly against another is frightening."

"Do you see anyone in particular?"

"No...no. I don't think so, but there is something." When I realized what it was, I dropped the piece of mangled metal, heard it hit the floor and bounce away.

"God, no. It can't be." The energy flowed over and through me and I wanted to push it away.

"Oh, God, Brand." How could I say the words? "It was one of his own men."

"Who?"

"I can't see a face, but I see a badge. A badge with the number seventy-eight on it. I can't read the last two numbers, there's an arm in the way."

"Seventy-eight is our precinct, but without the other two numbers we can't identify the owner of the badge." I remained quiet while he thought this through. "Is the badge on a suit jacket or a uniform?"

"I don't know. It's dark. It could be either, although..."

"What? Although what?" Impatience made his words sound surly.

"I think it's a suit jacket. Uniform pockets have a button flap, don't they? And this badge seems to be attached to some kind of backing, it's not attached to the pocket."

"What about the other bullet? Maybe that will tell you something."

I held my hand toward the desk and Brand's fingers were under mine as he put the bullet where I could find it. I didn't hesitate this time, assuming I would feel nothing more than I did with the first.

I should have been prepared. I wrapped my fingers around the second bullet, nearly dropped it.

"Oh!"

Daniel's hand clasped my shoulder and Brand's voice spoke in my ear. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. This is the first bullet. For just a moment I sensed Dylan. He didn't see this coming, just felt the gun on his neck and knew life was over for him. Before he could react, he was gone." My tears flowed quietly, unbidden, for a wasted life, a lost friend. For the things I'd never get to tell him. Tears for the love he would miss, maybe not mine, but someone he'd have found. For the things most of us take for granted he'd never be able to appreciate.

I wept for him, for myself and the others who felt his loss.

I passed the bullet to Brand, wiping my eyes with my sleeve.

Daniel stood behind me, handed me an old-fashioned man's hanky. Brand thumbed a tear from my cheek.

"It's okay to cry for him, Norrie. We know what he meant to you. Stay here while I return these. Pull yourself together before we go back upstairs. Danny'll stay here with you."

He left and I tried to compose myself. Deep breathing helped and after three or four inhalations I was feeling less like bawling, more willing to face the rest of this day.

Daniel spoke softly, offering advice I was only too happy to take. "You cry until you're done, Norrie. That's your body's way of making things right."

The door opened behind us. I thought it was Brand coming back. There was a thud and a groan. Before I could even say Daniel's name, something large fell to the floor at my feet. My scream was muffled when a clammy hand clamped over my mouth.

I swung my arms and jabbed elbows into the body behind me. An arm crushed my chest. My instincts told me to fight. I kicked back with my foot, hoping to connect with a shinbone, but try as I might I couldn't seem to reach any part of whoever this was.

And I feared the thoughts that told me I knew this man. I stopped flailing as an evil energy overwhelmed me. I couldn't move.

The overpowering scent of mint assailed me. My attacker placed his mouth to my ear and covered my face with a soft cloth. The blackness engulfed me, spots appeared around the edges of my darkened vision.

I remained conscious only long enough to hear him say, "Miss Benedict?"

Norrie

I wanted to curse, rail against the fates that placed me right where this murdering barbarian could find me.

I could only blame myself. I *had* to read the flattened, misshapen pieces of lead that killed Dylan. I'd promised him we'd apprehend the butchering swine. Look where it got me.

I tried to reach Daniel, Brand, anyone. Found nothing but a void. I knew, somehow, Daniel was all right. He'd been clubbed, would have a major headache, but I sensed he was alive.

Now I sat, taped to a chair, trussed up like a Sunday chicken, as my mother was fond of saying, so tightly I couldn't breathe. I gagged on some dusty piece of stinking fabric shoved in my mouth, tape holding it in place.

I didn't know where I was but it couldn't be far from the police station. There'd been too little time to take me out of town to the old farmhouse.

Hadn't there?

"So, Miss Benedict, Norrie. You don't mind if I call you Norrie, do you? Everyone else calls you that. I've heard them. Your friends. Those men who hang all over you. Touching you. Feeling you. You can't see them, you don't know where their hands are touching. Yet you let them. You prostitute yourself, giving them what they ask for, letting them use your mind for their own ends. You take money, so you're no better than the women who give and sell their bodies."

How could I answer this babbling fiend if I couldn't talk?

Easily! He was telepathic. He'd passed me messages before.

You're a fool, Preacher. You think I don't know all about you? You're a murderer. You kill people. Don't you think that's so much worse than what you say I do?

"Oh, Norrie, no. It isn't. I only kill those who have no right to live. Those who've given themselves to Satan. To the devil."

If you use that to justify yourself, Preacher, then you're far worse than even I think you are.

"How would you know, Miss Benedict? Norrie? You don't know what these women have done. They do vile things to men, get rewarded and..."

You bastard! They don't enjoy it. Women who prostitute themselves usually do it to make a living. Three of the women you killed had babies, little children. Did you know that?

"You mean the children they had as a result of their lewd acts? They're the children of Satan. They too should die."

You've deprived the children of the one person who loved them, who did what she had to do so they could have food, clothes and shelter.

"No, Norrie Benedict. You're wrong. You're very, very wrong. Wrong. Wrong!"

His approach was silent, the only warning was the smell of him, the overpoweringly minty breath when he reached for my face. How could those women have let him get so close? They should have been revolted and repelled. Did the mint cover another problem? Maybe alcohol? Another affliction?

I wasn't prepared for the searing sensation when he ripped the tape from my mouth. The pain made my eyes water and head hurt. I wanted to yell from the torment.

I couldn't. I wouldn't.

He wanted the cries, loved the screams, lived for the torture. That was what he craved.

Suddenly the greasy rag was snatched from between my teeth. I fought for breath without the horrible, oily taste. I tried to move my jaw, but he grabbed my face between rigid fingers and squeezed until I cried out from the pain. His face was mere inches away, spewing hot breath, stinking from mint. His hoarse voice remonstrated me, "You're wrong, Miss Benedict. Miss Norrie Benedict. Wrong, wrong, wrong." Each word was accompanied by a sharp shake of my head. I wanted to spit but my mouth was too dry.

"No, Preacher. I'm not wrong. I've seen what you did. You tore families apart. You murdered daughters whose mothers must now grieve for not only the daughter they lost but the grandchildren they'll never know."

Don't push him, Norrie. Don't give him any excuse to kill you. Help us find you first.

Stunned by another voice in my head, I nearly spoke aloud.

What? Who are you?

"Who is who, Norrie? Who else are you talking to?" asked the Preacher. The gravelly sound of his voice sharpened and for a moment I sensed I knew the voice. Then there was nothing familiar about it as he moved and whispered in my ear.

"I hear you. Is there someone else in your head?" His hand moved to the side of my face, covered my ear. A hard slap nearly knocked me over, chair and all. My ear rang from the impact. "Is there someone else in your head? Are you possessed? Oh my, Miss Benedict, Miss Norrie is possessed." A high-pitched shrieking laugh accompanied his proclamation. His voice, when he spoke, was the shriek of a madman. "Taken over by Satan." He clapped his hands as a child would, high above my head. He leaned toward me, his foul breath once more on my face. "Or were you talking to me? You told me you know who I am, so why would you need to ask me now?"

I concentrated on the other voice, the one in my mind. Stayed quiet for a moment.

Where are you, Norrie? You've got to tell us so we can get to you.

I didn't answer. I couldn't. I had no idea, yet, who it was, and didn't know if they could feel my thoughts. I didn't know where I was. Didn't know where this monster

had taken me. I sensed nothing from the Preacher. His mind, except for his fixation on the dead women, was a deep black hole.

Try and picture something in your mind to tell us where you are. My remote telepath sent another message. I couldn't answer. I couldn't just look around the room and send an image. I needed to think without the Preacher overhearing.

Norrie, you've got to try and tell us where you are. There was a big write-up in today's paper. Carter Grimes printed everything we gave him. The headlines are screaming about the "Minister of Terror" the "Preacher from Hell" and the "Apostle Killer". Tell him. Use it against him. Maybe he'll let something slip.

The voice knew about Carter Grimes. Only members of the task force knew about Carter's clandestine connection to the case. Was it the same someone who'd been sending me messages of death? Could I trust him?

"Preacher, have you seen the papers, watched the TV?" I tried for nonchalance, but my voice quivered. "You're morbidly famous. You're a ghoulish star. Lately they refer to you as the 'Minister of Terror'..."

"No!" came the demented scream. He kept repeating, "No. No."

"They are!" I yelled back to make myself heard over his wailing. "And the 'Apostle Killer'. We figured out the name connection, you know. Who was next, you pious phony, you sanctimonious slimeball? You have no diabolical mission to deliver these women to Satan and you're sure as hell not the son of God. You're doing it for yourself, you piece of shit. What names would you use if you'd got away with this?"

Maniacal laughter echoed off the walls.

"Pleased to meet you, Miss mealy-mouthed, goody-goody Norrie Benedict. You've been hanging around your police friends, picking up the trash talk and gutter crap. Are you a whore now, Miss Norrie Benedict? Today I'm Matthew Simon." His voice was that of a child reciting some singsong rhyme. "And what do you mean 'if'? I've overcome the odds. I've kidnapped you from under their noses. You're mine and before I'm finished you'll be unlucky thirteen." He clapped his hands again. "Unlucky thirteen is your number, Miss Benedict. Norrie. Unlucky thirteen."

I recoiled. Goose bumps covered my body, a chill ran up my spine, I wrenched at the bindings, still couldn't move.

Ask him what he did with number twelve, Norrie. We don't have a twelfth body. There's only been eleven murders. Maybe you can rattle him good about that.

"Twelve. Thirteen. You don't know how to count too well, hey Preacher? You say I'm number thirteen, but there hasn't been a number twelve. So if you thought you were going to make some special point with my being number thirteen you just blew it. You screwed up. Too bad."

"You stupid...you dumb..." He seemed flustered, couldn't think of anything obscene to call me. "There's a number twelve. They just haven't found her yet." He shouted so loud his voice cracked.

Hell! Try and find out where she is, Norrie. Get him to let it slip. Anything.

How was my telepath hearing everything I heard? I'd been trying to reach out to anyone who could help me. Maybe my energy was getting through to someone else and everything that happened here went with it.

"Well, you can't count me number thirteen, Preacher, until they find the other one. You kill me, you're stuck on twelve."

"There's a number twelve, all right. She's right here. In the barn." He cackled. "Of course, you can't see her, you're blind. If you could see, you wouldn't see her from here." He bent to my ear. I flinched. His quivering voice dropped to an eerie, empty whisper. "She's hidden."

"Hiding her won't help you, you fool. If no one else knows where she is, you can't include her. She has to be found before she counts."

Silence greeted my harangue. I couldn't hear movement or breathing. I wondered if he'd gone to move number twelve.

Norrie, I heard him. We know where you are. Keep doing what you're doing. Keep him rattled. Whatever you do, don't let him stop talking. We'll get you out of there before he can hurt you. Please, hold on, for my sake. I couldn't stand to lose you now.

Brand?

"Who are you talking to, Miss Benedict, Miss Norrie? Miss Slut. Miss Whore."

"Stop! You can't call me that. The only thing I've done is help the families of the women you've killed. That's all. It's not prostituting myself."

"Do you let the police use your mind to find things, Miss Norrie? Do you help them find out whatever you can *read* from my victims?"

"You know I do and I'll keep doing it, too. Any time, any way I can."

"There. That's going to cost you, Miss Norrie Benedict. Benedict. Benediction. The end. It will be your end, Miss Benediction."

"What are you going to do, Preacher? Leave me here in this house? Take me out to the barn? What can you do to me? You've already killed someone I loved. I really don't care if I live." *Forgive me, Brand, I have to lie. It may be the only way I have to save myself.* "Without Dylan Jones, I have nothing to live for."

Take it easy, Norrie. Don't push him too hard.

"What are you talking about? I didn't kill your precious Dylan. I've only killed twelve women. Nobody else. You're lying. I didn't. I didn't." I heard the voice change. He seemed perplexed. Was he telling the truth? Had my telepath heard?

I heard, Norrie. Ask again. See if you can make him say anything more. Keep him talking. We're almost to the turnoff.

"You killed a policeman. Do you know what happens to murderers who kill cops?"

"No, no, no!" He was in front of me, hands clasped around my throat, thumbs pressing hard. The chair rocked backwards.

I was about to die.

I thought of the others and knew I must live for them. I had to keep trying.

"Well if you didn't do it, who did? Someone shot him." I gasped for air, struggled not to pass out.

"Not me, not me."

"In the back of the head, out in the pasture by the creek. You crept up behind him, held your gun against his head and fired. Twice."

His hands slackened, yet he didn't let go.

"No. You're wrong. I don't own a gun, never use one. Guns kill, you know. They kill. That's what everybody says. I don't have a gun. I don't. Knife. Only ever used a knife. They're okay. They only hurt the person who needs to atone. I can't make a mistake with a knife."

He released me, backed away. I coughed, spluttered.

"Well, you made a mistake this time. What did you do with the gun, Preacher? Hide it in your barn?"

"No! You're wrong." The voice was subdued, almost apologetic. I was puzzled by the change. What happened? What had I done?

"Where are the other policemen who are supposed to be guarding the barn? How did you get by them, Preacher?"

He answered in a whining voice. "They're here. Those nice Sheriff's Deputies? They're just lying down on the job." He let out a series of crazed, high-pitched giggles.

Moments passed. A wave of mint made me cringe. His mouth was at my ear again, his voice changing once more. Now he sounded the urbane host doing everything according to Miss Manners' directions. "Let's join the others, shall we?"

My chair suddenly tipped backward and was pulled along the floor. This deranged monster was strong. I'd never thought of his size, only his evil. I had no idea where we were going or why. When the chair hit cracks in the floor, the legs stuck. He rocked them loose, kept pulling until we hit a bump. He cursed and tipped the chair, knocking me hard into a post of some kind. There was fresh air on my face. The post was the doorjamb. We were outside.

I was totally unprepared for the shock of sliding down the steps we encountered, and let out a loud yelp. He bounced me down five or six of them, each drop hurting worse than the last.

"Did that hurt, Miss Benedict, Miss Norrie? Wanna do it again? Go ahead. Tell me how it hurts." His voice was crazed. I realized with a start he was *waiting*, pushing to get my reaction. My pain. He wanted to hear me admit pain with a scream.

I wouldn't.

I thought of Dylan and the twelve women.

I was pulled back and forth, through dirt or something soft, past trees and bushes whose branches slapped my face and arms. He tipped me further until he dropped the chair. I couldn't move nor help myself, didn't know where we were going.

The bindings bit into my flesh. My arms and hands were numb. I could imagine the bruising. He went downhill, across concrete or cement. I smelled a disgusting odor, yet couldn't place it. A smell so bad my eyes stung and my nose twitched.

"Time to wrap it up." He intoned the words softly from someplace close by.

I nearly stopped breathing. These were the words I'd heard each time the suffering ended.

No more time.

Brand! Please.

I held my breath. Waited, although unsure what for. The blow slammed my cheek. A stabbing shock reverberated through my skull. The strike lifted my body and the chair. I teetered, fell, my shoulder taking the full weight as the chair toppled to the side. Fragments of straw and manure plowed into my face. I gagged, spit the loathsome ammoniated grit.

It wasn't cow or horse.

I had a momentary recall of a drive in the country and the stink from a barnyard. I held my nose, crying "pee-ewe" and my father laughed. Said it was swine.

A pigsty.

"What's wrong, Miss Benedict? Take a little tumble?" came the cackling, high-pitched voice.

"You can't keep me in a pigsty, Preacher. That's not a fitting place to end it for anyone." *Brand, please tell me you're hearing this.*

I heard. We know where you are. We're nearly there, love. Hang on.

Just as I thought he must have believed me, the Preacher's hand slammed down on my face. His flat-palmed slap made my head ring worse.

I writhed in agony. Moaned without intending to. One leg was pinned beneath the chair. Malodorous fumes seared my throat. I recoiled with a shudder when he stroked my hair.

"There, there, Norrie, honey, we don't want you lying down." He jerked the chair, grinding my leg into the concrete beneath me. "That's impolite, you know. The rest are sitting. Waiting patiently." He kept trying to drag the chair along the floor. "Soon, we'll all be holding hands."

I tried to shake my head but he grabbed my hair, held me still. He must have been on one knee because he bent even closer, saying quietly, "You don't mind me calling you 'honey'? Your big dead cop called you that. I wish I *had* killed him. He defiled you, prostituted you." His voice rose in anger. "He used you!" He leaned even closer and screamed at me, "You're letting me call you 'honey' now, you blind slut!"

I wanted to cry, to sob to God to save me, but I couldn't.

I had to be quiet.

Excruciating pain pierced my head, as if my scalp was ripped. He clutched my hair, dragged and heaved the chair into an upright position.

It wouldn't stand.

"How clumsy of you, Miss Benediction, you've destroyed two legs."

There was an abrupt tearing sound and my bonds unraveled. He hoisted me backward into some round and solid object. I couldn't help myself, I cried out. Something sharp jabbed between my shoulder blades down to the base of my spine. Tape ripped and there was a slight tightening around my arms. He wound more tape tightly around my chest, put a palm over my face and shoved me back against the wood.

My head hit and bounced. I slumped, defeated, sure I was about to die.

The tape around my chest loosened, sagged.

I peered through the gloom. Was I imagining it? Was it a dream? An hallucination? I saw a figure silhouetted in candlelight, head bowed, shuffling slowly in front of a long table. Why could I see him? What had happened...

He stopped, calling out, "In your sorrow may you be comforted by the love of friends gathered here."

What was he talking about? Who was he talking to? Was this the Preacher? It was his voice.

Stopping again, he uttered, "Thoughts and prayers are with you in this sorrow." He moved further along the table. "For you, a very special feeling. Our hearts still feel your pain."

Each time he paused, he picked up two objects from the table and held them to his face before setting them down. When I realized what those objects were, my mouth dropped in horror. I tried not to scream but a mewling sound escaped and drew his attention. Turning to me, he stepped my way, intoning, "All who have been called according to his purpose, step forward." He moved again, behind a chair that appeared to be occupied.

"Norrie, honey, meet number twelve, whoever she was."

He glared at me in the glimmering candlelight and shouted, "We're not all here yet!"

I caught the reflection of candlelight in his eyes, yet couldn't see his face.

He returned to the table, picked up a long object, held it at arm's length and twisted it, his version of a salute. There was a glint of red and orange from the candles.

A blade.

I wanted to scream but controlled myself. That was what he wanted. He needed to hear my pain and fear. As long as I didn't let him have it, he might let me live.

I sagged in despair. That's when I felt it. The tape hadn't held to the back of the post. Perhaps, long ago, creosote or another kind of greasy preservative had been brushed on.

I wiggled, dropped to my knees, clenched my jaws. No matter what happened, I had to be quiet.

There were now several inches between me and the post. My cast still stuck to the strapping. The other arm was almost free. Leaning, stretching the tape, I was startled by his screech.

"Norrie, honey, come to supper!"

I panicked, threw myself against the tape, stunned when it split and dropped me into the manure and straw. I groveled for anything with which to defend myself. There was a round pole. My fingers stroked its smooth length and I realized I'd barely missed landing on curved pieces of cold metal. I picked up a fork of some kind. I used my other hand to push myself off the floor. Light reflected off a wide strip. A belt and something else. An empty holster. Beyond that a mound with fabric covering it.

I'd just found one of the sheriff's deputies. He was indeed "lying down on the job".

In a fury, I pushed myself up off the floor, tripped and stumbled, the rake handle in my hand. I advanced toward the flames and the Preacher, swinging the wicked forked teeth in an arc in front of me. He stood, legs apart, an arm on one hip, yelling unintelligible words to Satan and scything the air with the blade. One swipe inadvertently knocked over lit candles. He hadn't seen me or the licking tongue of flame that began to consume a path across the table covering. He continued to swing, not realizing or maybe not caring he'd started a fire in this derelict old barn, a fire like the one he'd shown me in one of the visions.

"You must come with me, Norrie. You are filth. You are unclean. You must come and meet your proper end."

I backed away, waiting for his attack. An explosion filled the space around him. He appeared to be consumed by a ball of flame. They told me later the methane from the manure probably ignited when he disturbed the cloud of gas around him.

I tripped, fell hard and realized I'd backed into the space where the second deputy was laid. I cried out. I couldn't help it.

The Preacher, arms flailing, tried to beat out flames on his burning clothes as he headed toward me. I slowly pulled myself up on all fours, almost faltering. There was a crash and a rush behind me. Air swept in with a swoosh, making the flames leap higher. I tried to rise again but my legs wouldn't hold me.

Something caught my arm, half lifted me, and I was dragged through an opening in the wall.

You're safe. Lie still.

I lay there, gasped cool fresh air, and watched as the barn was engulfed. The flames burned brighter for a moment. I hid my face as the barn collapsed, sending a shower of sparks high into the dark night air.

There was no noise save for the crackle of the flames. Suddenly, I heard it. A faint, wailing cry.

“Norrie!”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Orange flames reflected in the dark eyes searching mine, shadows played across the slightly hollowed cheeks, making the face above me look dangerous. Soot streaked one side of the anguished face. I searched his eyes for some sign to tell me what had happened and who he was, but all I saw was pale skin, shocked eyes and hair singed in a few places.

"What happened?" Hacking coughs from the inhaled smoke racked my body. No sooner did I stop coughing than he wheezed and spluttered.

Whoever he was.

"Who are you? What happened?" Something about the face hovering above me made me think I'd *seen* this face before. I'd *touched* this face before. Slow tears began.

"Brand?"

My voice was no more than a whisper. My fingers reached to trace the cleft in his chin, moved slowly to the creases bracketing his mouth even though he wasn't smiling. I moved slowly, caressingly, up his cheek to his temple. There was a silver streak shining amid the darker hair there and my fingertips stroked it back while I worried about what caused it. I could barely speak, stunned to silence by how my fingers had lied to me. This was not just a good-looking guy. I saw in his eyes a look that made me feel warm, wanted.

"Oh, my. You're...you're..." I stuttered, had to swallow before I could continue. "You're beautiful!"

"What?" he seemed totally confused. His confusion and his frown made me reach up and stroke the creases on his forehead.

"Brandon Hawke, I presume?" My cheeks nearly cracked from the grin slowly forming.

"What are you on about, woman? What do you mean, I'm beau..." The look stealing over his face was absolutely wonderful to behold.

"Norrie, can you see me?" he whispered.

I nodded, afraid to speak. It was the end of a nightmare, the beginning of a dream.

The noise around me finally sank in. Sirens, voices, dogs whining. Red and blue strobes flashed reflections on the trees making everything seem like a surreal dream. Black and white vehicles sat at crazy angles all around the landscape. The red and stainless steel of a new fire truck reflected a kaleidoscope of other lights. I watched men in yellow coats rushing from one side to the other of the fiercely burning relic.

They must have brought the entire precinct, fire department and the K-9 unit to help the Corler County sheriff's office.

I turned to look at the pile of rubble that had been the barn. Seconds later there was a crash and a shower of sparks flew skyward as the rest of the building fell in on itself. Between the vehicle lights and the spray of sparks, it was like watching Fourth of July pyrotechnics in shades of orange to blue.

I turned back to my rescuer, saw a worried face hovering above me. I smiled up at him, ran a finger of my right hand across the smiling lips.

"You could get off me now. I'd like to sit up." His eyes hungrily roamed my face, coming back many times to mine. His smile was so wide he reminded me of a kid on Christmas morning.

"My God, Norrie, you can see?" He pushed up slightly off my chest and bellowed over his shoulder. "We need a medic over here! Now!"

Footsteps hurried across the grass and I saw a tall, dark-haired man incongruously wearing a suit jacket, tie and dress shirt with his jeans and sneakers. His face was streaked with soot, like Brand's. In fact, his face was nearly Brand's with a few extra furrows in the brow and no gray hair. It was the bump on his nose that gave him away. He carried a large flashlight and a blanket. I smiled at him as he approached.

"Daniel, your brother once told me you were taller, darker, better looking and always got the girl." I gazed back to Brand. "He was wrong about at least half of that."

Daniel Hawke knelt beside me, clasped my hand. "Is this for real? She can see?" He couldn't decide where to look, eyes shifting like those of some enthralled spectator at a tennis match, back and forth between his brother and me. "Can you?"

"I can." Crying again, I blinked furiously, attempted to stop the tears. Looking through them made everything wavy. I closed my eyes and let Brand's lips brush my forehead, then each eyelid. His kisses felt so good, I wanted them to go on forever.

"You know, if you'd let me just sit up I'd..." I appealed.

"You stay right where you are. Don't move any more than you have to, either," Brand replied. "You're on your way to the hospital right now. I want you checked out. Why can you see after all these years? It's wonderful, but why? I don't want anything to make the miracle go away, Norrie. For me, please, lie still?" The concerned look on his face entreated me to remain absolutely motionless.

I watched him while he rolled away. He returned, sat beside me, stared into my eyes and held my good hand.

Hours later I was propped in a hospital bed, a thermometer under my tongue, a nurse taking my blood pressure. Again. They wanted to keep me overnight for observation and in preparation for an eye examination by a specialist. My cuts and scrapes had been cleaned and treated, the few blisters from the fire bandaged.

Last time I was here, I stared through a gloom of passing shadows and hazy images, resigned to subsist in a monotonous and colorless existence. The walls today were dull yellow, the flooring speckled tile and the fixtures stainless steel. I could

hardly contain my excitement, wanted to get up and touch everything. A red-haired nurse in a pastel blue pantsuit completed the basic examinations and pulled away. I stopped her, took her hand. She wore an emerald engagement ring. Red. Blue. Yellow. Green. I was heady with the motley surroundings. It had been so long.

Brand and Daniel hadn't left my side. There were muted phone conversations, excuses why they weren't available. Neither wanted to leave.

"Doll, what have you done to yourself?" came a muted shout from the doorway.

The silly pet name and familiar voice made me lift myself up on my elbows, eager to greet the small, plump dynamo who swept in. She resembled Mrs. Claus. Blue-white hair circled a round face, a big smile made ruddy cheeks stand out like cherries. What a nice surprise package. Rhoda pushed past Brand and Daniel and threw her arms around me.

"Fred told me you can see." She burst into tears. "Is it true, doll, is it true?"

I sobbed with her. "It is and you're a sight for sore eyes, Rhoda."

Everyone laughed. I laughed, too, realizing what I'd said. She stepped back, motioned toward the door.

A tall, smiling, stoutish man in police uniform cradled in his arms two of the most vibrant bouquets I'd ever seen.

"Brought you some color," he exclaimed and I grinned at the sound of the familiar voice.

"Fred!" I cried out joyfully.

He strode across the room, handed the flowers to Daniel then wrapped me in a bear hug, rocking me back and forth like a baby.

The nurse returned with a small white paper pill cup and announced visiting hours were over.

"Take this, Miss Benedict." She filled a water glass and watched me swallow the little pink capsule. "Time for bed."

"See you tomorrow, doll," said Rhoda, squeezing my hand. "Come on, Fred."

"I'm so happy for you, Norrie," affirmed Fred, after checking with the nurse that she'd find vases for their flowery gifts. He kissed me on the forehead and waved as he left.

The nurse turned to the two brothers. "Mr. Hawke?"

"Yes, Nurse?" they replied in unison, with shrugs, baffled looks. I suppressed a grin, recognizing their boyish antic, which I was sure they'd practiced all their lives.

"Which of you is Mr. Hawke?"

"I am." They did it again, with more quizzical glances.

She frowned, hands on her hips. "Mr. Hawke, I'm not amused."

I squinted at her badge. "Miss Flynt, meet the Hawke brothers."

They smiled, she didn't.

"Whatever." She pointed to the door. "I repeat – visiting hours are over." Her finger rose and she pointed toward the door. "Out."

"Can't. She's under police protection." Brand flipped his wallet open.

"Can't. The FBI requires her expertise." Daniel flashed his ID.

I nearly giggled aloud at the scene. Itty-bitty, five-foot-two Nurse Flynt versus the badge-totin' Hawke brothers. She stared, feet apart, hands on her hips. The Hawke boys were side-by-side, looking serious, trying not to laugh.

"This is my patient, she's my responsibility and if you boys don't get out, I'm going to call a lady cop." She leaned toward them, whispering conspiratorially. "And you know how bitchy they can get." She pulled herself to her full height and moved toward them. "Mr. Hawke, take your chair out in the hall. Both of them. While Miss Benedict sleeps, you're out. Scoot!"

Chortling, they raised their arms in mock surrender, hunched their shoulders at her brisk order. "Please, don't call the fuzz, Nurse Flynt, please," Daniel pleaded.

Brandon Hawke had another request. "Give us five minutes to discuss some police business, then we're outta here."

She cracked a slight smile, held up five fingers, turned to me and winked. Picking up the empty paper cup she went to the door, pivoted, said, "Don't disappoint me now. Sleep tight, Miss Benedict." We all watched the door close behind her.

I shook my head at the brothers. "You've done this before, haven't you?"

"Sure," boasted Daniel.

"Yeah," agreed brother Brand. Both laughed again. "We're lucky to escape alive. Daniel, wait for me in the hall, please. I need to talk to Norrie in private."

Daniel leaned over the bed and dropped a gentle kiss on my forehead. "Sleep tight. See you tomorrow."

Once the door closed, Brand sat on the side of the bed, held both my hands and pressed his warm lips to mine.

"I'm so happy for you, love, but until I know the Preacher's reign of terror is over, you're still under police protection. I'll respect Nurse Flynt's order while you're in her charge. I'll be right outside that door if you need me. Come morning, as soon as you're finished with your examination, we'll get the reports from the fire investigator; confirm the Preacher's dead."

"I want to know who he was. What were his motives?" I yawned, tried to stay awake. "He ranted and raved he was a messenger of Satan. I can't believe it."

"I want to know why he killed Dylan," Brand stated. "We've got our work cut out for us, but we can't do anything until we identify him."

"I don't think," I yawned again, "he killed Dylan." I couldn't stop the next yawn either.

"We'll talk about it in the morning, love." He got to his feet, lips curved, and pulled my hand to his lips, kissing my fingers then my palm. "Go to sleep. Remember, I'm out in the hall. You're safe here."

I lay back, relaxed, eyelids heavy, watched Brand reach the door. He waved and I floated away.

It was wonderful. After three interminable years of grays and blackness, I awakened to brilliant sunshine streaming through my window, sparkling on metallic surfaces. It shimmered on the flowers, created a kaleidoscope of color. I loved it. I wanted to paint the hues, capture the scene. I remembered the easel waiting at home and knew exactly what I wanted to paint. I could hardly wait.

Daniel Hawke sat in a chair using his pocket PC. Brand conversed with a candy striper. A nurse walked in and fluffed my pillow. She wore an aquamarine outfit the color of a warm ocean and I thought of that wondrous day dining with the brothers by the sea, wondering if that was the color I'd missed.

"Miss Benedict, how do you feel this morning? Those blue eyes of yours still working?"

"I haven't seen that for years." My finger aimed where I gazed in a kind of trance at the window.

"We take many things for granted," she responded, popping a thermometer into my mouth, taking my wrist and studying a tiny watch on her lapel. "Did the boys behave themselves? I hear 'Captain' Flynt gave an order—her way or walk the plank."

"I think so," I lifted my sheets and looked under, "everything's here."

She snickered. "Good for you! Glad to see the sunshine puts you in good spirits. Better medicine than most I have to dispense."

She retrieved her thermometer, turned to the Hawke brothers, told them, "Okay, fellas, she's in your custody now until Doctor Alfred gets here. Visiting hours are open." She turned back when she reached the door. "By the way, Miss Benedict, we're going to change that filthy cast this morning. Only clean white plaster on my ward, thank you."

Brand and Daniel stood by the bed as she left.

"It really happened, didn't it?" I marveled. "I had a nightmare. I got to see for only one night. I woke up, the room was dark. Shocked, I thought I was blind again. A voice told me I was being punished." I gazed into Brand's eyes, seeing compassion and amusement. "Prostituting myself to the department. That's what the Preacher screamed. I was terrified until ambulance lights at the emergency entrance flashed in the window."

Brand fluffed my pillows, clasped my hand. "Forget it, babe. You don't have to worry about him. He couldn't have survived the fire."

I sat up, threw myself at him and buried my head on his chest.

"It's okay, love, you're safe," he assured me, surrounding me with strong arms.

When he called me "love", the warmest fluttering sensation swelled, something I hadn't experienced before, even with Dylan. There'd been no intimacy. We'd shot from ignition to liftoff, burst into a shower of sparks, fizzled within seconds. Sexual tension had been present, fulfilling love absent. Dylan had been my friend, my protector. When we were apart I'd missed him fiercely. But we'd never meant this much to each other.

"So how's our miracle this morning?"

I opened my eyes in surprise. Brand dropped his arms, rose from the bed, turned his head abruptly, seeming to stand between this newcomer and me as though protecting me from some strange, unseen danger.

A tall, gaunt, stoop-shouldered man with half lenses perched at the end of a beak nose stood smiling at us. He wore a button-down checked shirt and a maroon cardigan with elbow patches. Under his arm he held a clipboard and a file folder. At his side the redheaded nurse from the night before—pastel blue uniform, emerald ring—with a tray of instruments. My mouth dropped, amazed at my new adventure in detail and color.

"I'm Doctor Alfred." He spoke to me, nodded at the two brothers. They recognized the gesture and excused themselves to the hall. For almost an hour the doctor and I chatted about everything. He'd heard I was an artist and I thrilled at his descriptions of the paintings in his den and offices. While we discussed preferences in style and substance he peered, probed and occasionally sat back to ponder.

"Miss Benedict, I'm going to send you home this morning." He motioned to the nurse, "Have the others come in. I'm sure they'd like to share in my good news, bad news announcement."

Brand and Daniel came back, one to each side of my bed, held my hands and faced the lanky specialist. I think they were as nervous as me.

Doctor Alfred referred to the file then handed it to the nurse. He spoke slowly, deliberately. "The doctor who gave you a diagnosis of hysterical blindness probably called it right. There was never any physical or neurological damage. What set you free? Many of my esteemed colleagues in psychiatry, psychology and numerous other 'ologies' would argue back and forth, none of them agreeing. The shock of nearly dying again? Perhaps." He stuck his hands in his pants pockets and paced between the bed and the door, turning to add, "The realization you weren't meant to die just yet so you didn't need to feel guilty about surviving your parents? Maybe. Oh, and those glasses you didn't like to use? Donate them to an institute for the blind or one of the overseas relief agencies. The underprivileged will appreciate your generosity. You won't be needing them again."

I was still confused and asked, "What's the bad news?" Brand and Daniel gripped my hands tighter and I stiffened.

The specialist took off his own eyeglasses, slid them into his shirt pocket, crossed his arms, frowned and cleared his throat. It was like watching a play, the actor forgetting his line, waiting for someone to throw a prompt.

"When I came in here, I was in great anticipation of being able to write an astounding paper about a new procedure or protocol. I would be invited to forums, make speeches, even have journals hounding me for articles. Alas, Miss Benedict, you gave me nothing." He looked very seriously at Brand and Daniel, then smiled slightly. "Gentlemen, take her home, after she gets a new cast." Doctor Alfred walked to the door, pointed a long narrow finger at me, "I'll be seeing you," he called.

I leaned against Brand and sobbed while he hugged me. Daniel, hanging over Brand's shoulder, beamed and passed me a tissue. In the midst of our happiness, Brand's phone bleeped. He stepped away and went to the window. I watched furrows form between his eyes and he scowled, shook his head and muttered, "Are you sure?"

I let him to his call and hopped out of bed, clutching the hospital gown tightly behind. Daniel slipped me a cosmetic case left by Rhoda. I scurried into the bathroom, carefully separated a compact, blush, eye shadow and lipstick.

I stared into the mirror. Behind me in that reflection, hanging on the door, was a teal sweater and skirt. There was a shoe bag and a small cellophane bag with earrings and a necklace pinned to the lapel. I turned, looking at the outfit Rhoda had picked out for me, knowing these were the same clothes I'd worn the day the Preacher had first spoken to me at the police station.

Turning back to the mirror, I scrutinized the facial reflection, tilting to the left and right, scrunching up my nose, and knew I'd been right. It still didn't fit my face.

It took me only a few moments to dress, the buttons and snaps so much easier to deal with when my hands had eyes to guide them. The cosmetics were a little more difficult, made harder because it had been more than three years since I'd used them last. I finally gathered up the makeup case and emerged from my cocoon. My fingers were crossed while I yearned for a good review.

"Wow, Norrie, you look awesome," professed Daniel as I did a twirl or two and curtsied.

"You looked gorgeous the first day you wore that," smiled Brand, "and today you look even better." His eyes bathed me in a heartwarming glow.

"Thank you, dear sirs, all compliments greatly appreciated. Who was that on the phone?" I tried to be offhand and nonchalant or I knew I'd be in tears again, which, for the sake of the newly applied mascara and eye shadow, I couldn't afford.

Brand was immediately sobered. Daniel looked at me, frowned. It was Brand who finally answered.

"That was the fire inspector. They found three bodies in the barn, Norrie, among other things. It's the bodies you need to know about." He glanced down at the phone still in his hand. "Two of them were positively identified as the deputies from Corler County." He glanced away, drew a deep breath and looked back at me, his eyes dark with some emotion I didn't recognize. "The third was his twelfth victim."

When he paused, I pushed for more. "What about the Preacher?"

"They found other bones. Small bones, scattered around. Being a pigsty, the room might have been used for slaughter. They didn't know what to make of them at first, until they realized they were human hand bones. The Preacher had saved them as trophies."

"I know. I saw him." The memory sent a shudder through my body and I dropped the makeup case, spilling items on the floor. I knelt to retrieve them, looking up at Brand. "He went from one place setting to the next, picked them up and used them to caress his own face. He even talked to them. I wanted to be sick." I stood again, facing him, moving closer. "What about him?"

When Brand didn't answer, his face pale with a pained look, I insisted. "Brand, what about the Preacher? Did they find him?" Panic invaded my body.

"He wasn't there, love."

"What do you mean?" I whispered, rigid in fear.

"I'm sorry, Norrie. He got away."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I gazed around the oppressively hot operations room and couldn't believe my recovered eyes. If they were actually sitting at the places they normally used, I could put faces to voices I'd been talking with for weeks.

It seemed like a repeat of the first time I came here. Once again, no air-conditioning. It quit the day before during a power brownout. The room was once more a sauna. Everyone had taken off their jackets, rolled their sleeves and loosened their ties. They looked very uncomfortable, even Melanie Granger, the only woman present besides me, who fanned herself with a piece of cardboard.

A deep voice behind me made me jump and spin around.

Roy Ferran.

I turned to find the tallest, heftiest, downright meanest-looking individual I could imagine. Tight curly black hair cut short all over, bull neck ringed by his open collar and loosened tie. Black eyes peered at me from a dark brown face already covered in beads of sweat. Once, weight had been an asset. Today a rumpled and sweaty Roy had more heft than muscle. He laughed it off. Too many stakeouts. Too many crullers.

"Roy. You used to play football for the Washington Huskies. I remember your name now. You were one helluva defensive linesman. I saw your last game."

"Norrie? What are you... You *can* see! Somebody said they heard that last night and I didn't believe them." His beefy arms were suddenly wrapped around me. Gentleman Roy, so accommodating and understanding at crime scenes, was holding me now like a long-lost relative.

"I can, Roy, really can. It's so amazing!"

"I'm happy for you. You deserve this."

"Thanks." I pulled back and looked him up and down. "So what's happening?"

"Hang on, there's a few others here you need to meet and who want to see you."

"Hey guys. Listen up." He let out a piercing whistle and shouted, "That rumor we heard last night? About Norrie? No bullshit, it's true. She did regain her sight."

A wall of people crowded around, making it even warmer. By the time they all introduced themselves and congratulated me I felt as though I'd come home to family. They were my link to Dylan and the past—they were my future.

"Okay, let's sit and get underway."

Brand and Daniel accompanied me to the end of the institutionally green, windowless room where the easels stood. Looking at them, I realized, with surprise, the

photos and cards taped to the boards represented everything known about the man who'd intended to make me his thirteenth victim.

"Sit down, Norrie, you can look at that later," said Brand. "We have to discuss the fire report and it's getting late. Some of these people may want to go home to supper tonight."

I took a chair proudly, without assistance, and watched my hand, fingers unconsciously bending and stretching. They'd removed my cast, told me I'd only need exercise to get my muscles back to normal. For now the itchy skin was dry and cracked, a little like a snakeskin or the parched, scored earth of some dry desert.

"Brand," interrupted another friendly voice, "the fire marshal's upstairs, said he'd be back down in about five minutes." It was pleasant to look at Larry Simpson, warm blue eyes, reddish hair and freckles. Not very tall but a keen, dedicated look on an intelligent face.

"Okay, we'll wait. He's the first order of business," said Brand. "Anyone seen Martin today? He was supposed to be back two days ago."

A few shook heads, others laughed, Roy loudest.

"He's downstairs getting coffee. Seems to me we'd all do better with somethin' cold, but he wants coffee. Can't figure him out. You should see him, Brand. He takes time off to go to some long-lost aunt's funeral and comes back looking like he collided with a truck. *Says* he tripped in the cemetery and fell into a tombstone. If you ask me, he insulted a mourner who let him have it. But don't tell him I said that." There was more laughter around the room, which abruptly stopped. I turned toward the door as a man, a dead ringer for Brand's description, entered—a donut in one hand and a steaming Styrofoam cup in the other. It seemed odd, in this heat, that he had his shirt and tie done up, still wore a jacket. His face was flushed a bright red, like a sunburn. Down his cheek ran the series of scratches Roy mentioned. Scabbed over, they were obviously quite a few days old.

As though he knew about my good fortune, his eyes met mine and he smiled broadly. I smiled back, amazed at how much like Brand's description he actually looked.

There was a commotion behind me and I turned in time to see the fire marshal, resplendent in his navy blue uniform with shiny buttons and gold braid. The moment the heat reached him he unbuttoned his jacket and loosened his tie.

His report was brief. They'd identified two bodies, and the small piles of bones were being tested to see if they matched the bodies already in the system. Bone DNA, hair, if any was left, and dental records were the only hope now of identifying the woman who'd been the Preacher's twelfth victim. The fire had been all-consuming.

The fire marshal was ready to leave when there was an even louder entrance made behind us and a foul smell drifted over the room. I peeked quickly at the fire marshal's face when he saw the lit stogy. He looked like he was swallowing fish hooks. I think he

was about to protest when Rawleigh Randall held up a pudgy hand and snorted, "Sorry to interrupt. Miss Langdon and I want to know what happened last night."

He took a long draw on his cigar and blew it out slowly. Even had the audacity to flick ashes in the general direction of the floor, some drifting down to speckle the shiny black toes of the fire marshal's highly polished boots. "Hear you had a little excitement, Miss Benedict."

"Yes, sir," I replied, thinking, you tub of lard, if you didn't have the clout, everybody here would take turns stuffing that smoldering brown leaf into every available orifice.

"I heard we don't have the Preacher in custody."

Hawke hesitated, squinting at Randall, wondering, I'm sure, what the pompous fool was up to.

I noticed the commissioner's current squeeze didn't have the hand-held recorder up to her boss's shoulder. This redress of the troops was not "for the record". She stood calmly, smirking, in a low-cut sheath. Sleeveless arms were in front of her, holding a leather notebook. She pushed herself against it sufficiently to show off additional cleavage and well-rounded breasts.

"I also heard that a certain so-called psychic regained her sight. Is that true, Miss Benedict?"

"Yes, sir," I managed while trying to stifle a cough brought on by Randall's odious stick of leaves.

"Well isn't that just lovely," he continued sarcastically. Everyone around the table looked my way. "You get your sight back but we lose a serial killer. Pardon me if I don't get too excited over your news, Norrie. May I call you that? Possibly for the last time. I can't get too excited when we don't have the murdering bastard you were after in custody. It's time this task force cancelled your consultancy and got down to the business of solving crimes the good old-fashioned way, with leg work. I'm going to be bringing it up with the mayor this afternoon. We'll see how long you last now that what's-his-name isn't here to push his seniority and weight around."

There was dumbfounded silence around the table, faces around me registered shock.

Hawke recovered first, pushed to his feet and faced Randall. "Commissioner, that is quite enough. You sir, are not only off base, you're way outta line. You owe Miss Benedict an apology. She's been the only one on this task force who has been able to do anything concrete. She's the one who told us how these women were murdered. When, where, why, even gave us leads to their identities. It's hardly her fault we haven't been able to catch him."

By the time he'd finished, Hawke had pulled himself to his full height and was eyeballing the Commissioner, daring him to say another word.

The Commissioner, more fool he, took the dare.

"Detective Hawke, until this task force is wrapped up, you're temporarily in charge, as Acting Lieutenant. Your first order of business, command decision so to speak, is," he took another deep puff, gestured in my direction and blew smoke past Hawke's left ear, "is to see she's out of here. Today. The paperwork will come from the mayor's office this afternoon." Rawleigh Randall spun on his heel and started for the door.

"Commissioner?" I called after him, "A word with you, please? Privately? The hall will do." I jumped out of my chair and walked toward him, elbowing Miss Langdon solidly as I pushed past. I stopped beside her, scanned her chest, looked her in the eye, whispered, "Too firm, not enough jiggle, sweetie. Did Rawleigh pay for the implants? Second-rate job if you want my opinion. You wait here, bossman will be with you in a minute."

She was taller than me, a striking, black-haired beauty in her early twenties, suddenly miffed but wise enough to hold her pouty mouth. It, too, looked manufactured on the layaway plan.

Rawleigh Randall had to be in his very late fifties, perhaps early sixties. And I saw now what Dylan meant when he'd called him a ponce. His manner was groomed for TV by image brokers for maximizing sound bites and photo ops.

Randall opened the door, pushed through, shoving it back in my face, obviously no Southern gentleman.

"This is far enough, Commissioner," I called after him and waited.

He never took his shrewd eyes off my face. A frown began to form and I thought he knew I might be trouble.

"Commissioner, you just ran roughshod over me in front of a bunch of very fine detectives. You put them down, put me down and insulted me. Worse, you insulted their integrity." I grabbed the half-smoked cigar, dropped it near his foot and ground it into the floor. "You're flaunting fire regulations and littering on public property."

He was livid, left eye twitching, sweat beads forming on his forehead.

"Who the hell do you think you are, you little bitch?" He should have quit there, but his mouth motored on without conscious input from his brain. "Jones' little psychic blind bitch."

"Blind no more, Commissioner. I can see your blood pressure rising and I'm guessing you left your pills in the Town Car." I crossed my arms and leaned back against the wall, wondering how long he'd let me go without blowing his temper.

He snarled, reached into a pocket, pulled out a handkerchief, dragged it around his face.

Before he could answer, I pushed off the wall and warned him, "If I were you, I'd think twice before you force me out of this unit and off this investigation. Not for my sake but for those officers who rely on my expertise. The information may bring closure to the next of kin, mothers and families finding relief from grief and suffering. Undermine me, you hurt the team."

"Makes no difference," he said. "They'll get along without you."

Before he turned to walk away, I grabbed the fabric of his coat sleeve. "All right, Commissioner, you leave me no choice."

He backed up a couple of feet, glared at me as though he suspected I might bite. He appeared to be mulling over a multitude of options, suspecting he was about to be blindsided.

"What are you talking about?"

"You, rescinding your order about me, leaving me on this task force."

"What? You can't make me do that."

"I'm doing it, Commissioner. Let's just say the mayor wouldn't appreciate hearing that his favorite stooge is screwing around with a woman half his age, a year or so younger than one of the stooge's daughters. Your political backers, if there's a hint of scandal, will be hitting the speed dials looking for your replacement. You'll be back counting thing-ma-jigs and do-hickeys in one of your father-in-law's hardware stores in North Dakota."

"That's blackmail!" he sneered. He hesitated, adjusted his tie, collar probably feeling two sizes too small, dropped his voice. "How did you know?" he whined.

"I didn't. However an address, suite ten-ten, Avord Arms, came up in a conversation I overheard." I winked. "When I used to be Jones', and I quote, little psychic blind bitch, end of quote. I'm sure you understand. Tell Lieutenant Hawke you changed your mind. And, oh, yes," I held up my finger as if this last point was tantamount to the entire conversation, "there is one more thing. When you're meeting with the mayor, you tell him that after careful consideration, Detective Brandon Hawke is to remain a lieutenant when this case is over. Make it official. Understand? What's it to be, Rawleigh," I paused to make it more dramatic, "Langdon's ass or yours?"

He stared at me a long time. Finally he broke eye contact, turned back to the meeting room door, pushed it open and slouched past his bewildered first-year intern. She was about to speak until he hushed her with a finger to his lips. She took the hint.

A much-subdued Commissioner Randall told Hawke the good news and his change of heart. He left immediately, glowering at me as he headed for the door, the voluptuous Miss Langdon meekly following behind.

There was a ripple of laughter from the group around the room when the door swung shut. Roy Ferran cracked a smile and quipped, "You know how it is. Kind of hard to point a finger or throw a stone when you know you're guilty of something worse than the guy you're accusing."

I picked up the notes someone put at my place and tried to forget the last couple of minutes.

There's a law against blackmail in this state. Thank goodness, Rawleigh Randall didn't call my bluff.

The meeting came to an end. I was both scared and depressed. Daniel must have seen it on my face.

"Let's get out of here." His quiet suggestion was welcome. I wanted to get away from this place and the reminders of murder, death, violence and cruelty. Daniel caught Brand's eye, motioned we were leaving.

"I'm taking your psychic out for a while," he confided. "I need to talk to her about something and can't do it here."

"Give me a minute. I need to discuss something with her first." Brand's arm slid under mine. I curled my fingers around his muscular forearm, squeezed gently and smiled up at him as we went to the hallway.

"You don't have to do this now," I told him. I squeezed my fingers around his arm so he'd know what I was talking about.

"I know, but I like touching you and this is a good excuse. Let's go. There's an empty office down the hall."

We turned, headed for an office I thought of as partly mine. Chaplain Ray Seymour's door wasn't locked and fortunately he wasn't in.

Once inside, I turned to Brand and found him standing so close his body brushed mine. I blushed, he did, too. His eyes burned, fixed on mine, hands clasped my face.

His mouth descended to my lips and his hard, almost violent kiss stopped my breath. One hand moved to the back of my head, the other wrapped around my back, encouraging me closer. I complied. His heart beat fast. Faster.

A new emotion left me gasping, without regret, without coherent thought.

This was the Brand I hadn't had time to know, caressing my body, plundering my mouth, surrendering his heart. I gave what he asked for, pressed closer as my own heart stampeded through my chest. When he roughly pushed me away, the rejection hurt and I cried out.

"God, I'm sorry, babe," he gasped apologetically. "I shouldn't have done that. When I saw you sitting there, and the fire marshal told us what happened in the barn, it was more than I could bear. You came so close to being one of them."

"It's over, Brand," I tried to reassure him. "I'm safe now."

His fingers traced my eyebrow and glided down my cheek. His eyes never left mine.

I kissed each cheek and left smeared lipstick even more visible than on his mouth.

What the hell! My arms circled him, drew him nearer. He let me lead, didn't resist. Agile tongues sought each other, mating in a heated duel. One of his arms let go as the other pulled me with him. I went willingly, wondered fleetingly what he was up to, heard the click as he locked us in.

We were blissfully unaware of the world around us until there was a soft knock on the door. I leapt back. Brand looked at me, grinned, followed me across the room. His arms encircled me once more.

"Hold the thought, babe. Or, as my brother would say, keep your motor running." His whispered words were accompanied by a quiet laugh. I smiled stupidly in his direction, so happy I thought I might burst.

"Brand, are you going to answer the door?" I whispered against his ear. I wanted to taste him again, feel him. Have his arms around me.

"Only if they insist on it." His words were spoken softly, his breaths were small, hot gusts on my cheek, not far from my mouth. His lips carved a trail toward my mouth while the polite knock became a loud banging.

"Damn!"

He unlocked the latch and stepped away while I tried hurriedly, without much success, to wipe my lipstick off his face.

It was Daniel. He looked from me to Brand and laughed. "I might have known!"

"Look, Bro, get lost, go make an arrest or something, will you? Norrie and I need some time to ourselves."

"No way. We three are going out to dinner. I just told your desk sergeant, Rolf, I believe, you'd be gone for about two hours. Maybe longer for traveling time. We have a reservation at a real nice seafood place. The lobster's waiting and time's a-flittin'."

While he talked, Daniel reached into his pocket, removed a handkerchief and handed it to Brand, who took the hint immediately.

"All right. Until we get more of the reports back, we're stuck. I recommend some R 'n' R."

"Let's go!" I was the first one out the door.

Dinner should have been a celebration. Instead we sat, trying to pass the time without asking once more how the Preacher got away.

"Here, you need to try this." Brand held out his fork with a morsel of lobster dripping clarified butter. I took the bite and as I tasted the delicate flavors, Brand leaned toward me and kissed the corner of my mouth, licking up a drip. It stirred a memory of another time, another place. I pushed it away. We finally finished everything, although with some difficulty, as it seemed none of us could keep the real world from butting in.

"Come on, you two, let's get back. We'll have lots of reports to go through by now." Brand took my hand and led me to the car. Daniel followed sedately behind. We were all quiet while Brand got us moving in the direction of town, then he reached for my hand. The car sported a bench seat in front and I'd already moved toward the middle. He pulled me the rest of the way across and wrapped his arm around me. I was about to tell him he should use both hands to drive when the cell phone on the dash beeped to life. He extricated his arm from behind me.

"Hawke," he said sharply, slightly annoyed. He listened a moment then snapped the phone closed.

"Daniel, your office is trying to locate you. Seems they have information you asked for but they can't get through. Where's your phone?"

Daniel frowned at his cell phone then punched the on button. "The battery's dead." For a moment there was silence. "I forgot to charge it last night."

"I'll drop you off at the precinct and you can phone them from there. My cell phone battery wouldn't last one call. Norrie and I are going to her house so she can get some clean clothes. Then we'll meet you back at the office."

We rode in silence, each with our own thoughts. The sun had set and I thought about the Preacher, free for another day.

Daniel jumped out as we pulled up to the door and ran up the steps. Brand called after him, "Meet us in my office in an hour."

Daniel waved back he understood.

"We could wait to get the clothes, Brand. I'm okay for one more day."

"We've got time. Let's do it now."

He pulled away from the curb before he finished speaking. I was full from all the food and tired by the stress and laid my head on his shoulder.

It was the tag end of rush hour so it took us nearly half an hour to reach my little box. As we crawled to a stop in front of the darkened house I realized Dylan had been right. Even in the orange glare of nighttime it sported a hideous color scheme.

"Remind me to call a painter tomorrow," I mumbled, shaking my head at the thought someone had once found this jumble of color appealing. Or maybe it was his idea of a joke. A bad joke, at that.

"Thank God!"

I turned to look at him when he sighed, "I thought maybe you liked those colors." Brand smiled, stepped out of the car, pulled me to slide under the steering wheel after him. Hand in hand he led me toward the front door.

"Don't you have your lights on a timer? To make it look like you're home?" he asked as we mounted the front step.

"There's something set. One of my neighbors looked after it for me. I never knew what the lights were doing, they were too low to make any difference to what I saw."

He took the key from my hand and unlocked the door. "We'll soon set it right. I don't ever want to know you're coming home to a dark house." His voice took on a speculative tone. "Although, maybe we can arrange it so you're never coming home alone..." He opened the door and flipped the inside switch.

Nothing happened.

"Well, hell. What's the matter with your lights?" He backed up and looked both ways and I wondered what he thought he should see.

"Your neighbors both have light, it's only your house. Got a delinquent power bill?" he asked over his shoulder.

"No way. It's paid automatically. Monthly account debit."

"Where's your fuse box then? Something isn't working."

"Down the hall," I pointed, "beside the back door."

"Stay here until I fix it. I want to have a look around before you go into the other rooms."

As he left me and disappeared down the hall, a faint tremor of worry passed through me. I felt it, ignored it. I listened, expecting to hear footsteps on the linoleum floor. Must be too far away to hear.

"Brand?" I called out tentatively. No answer, save my voice echoing back to me down the empty hall. Had he gone out back?

"Brand," I called, louder than the last time, "are you having trouble finding the fuse box?"

Still no reply.

There was a shuffle behind me and out the corner of my eye I saw movement. I tensed, didn't move or speak or breathe. The smell of mint chilled me to the bone.

"Preacher?"

Chapter Twenty-Nine

"Don't turn around, Miss Benedict. Norrie." His hand, flat on my back, pushed me. He shoved again and pinned me to the wall.

I recognized his voice the moment he spoke.

Dear God! Martin.

Martin Jamison, Brand's partner was the Preacher.

This man had sent me messages while we tried desperately to save women he'd set out to kill. He seemed unable to comprehend the enormity of his actions.

I swallowed uncomfortably, shivered violently at his touch.

This was the man who could murder and mutilate, massacre without minding the consequences of his actions. Who thought nothing of ending a life because he thought the victim guilty of living a sin.

A sickening panic began to grow. *Think. Think hard, it's up to you to stop him.*

His arm rose to lay across my throat. He leaned into me, then pushed harder, cutting off my breath. Could I talk to him, sidetrack him? Or was I going to die after all at the hands of this madman. I'd called him a madman so many times that to now hear his voice and know who it was made me momentarily dumb.

I began seeing black spots float in front of my eyes. I was losing consciousness but I didn't dare stop now. I had to save myself, and though I didn't know why, I knew I might have to save Brand as well. If Brand had been able, he'd have been with us by now.

"What are you doing here?" I gagged from the increased pressure and the pain of being jammed against the wall. "How did you get in? What did you do with Brand?"

"That's way too many questions, Norrie, but I'll answer a couple." He spun me around, slammed my back against the wall and placed his forearm back across my neck. Those few seconds had enabled me to catch a few breaths and I had another chance. He snarled, "You already know it's me, although how, I'll never know."

I wouldn't tell him it was his voice gave him away, he wouldn't believe me and it might make him more desperate. In his current mindset he'd never understand that being blind made my hearing more acute.

"How did I get in? Dylan had a spare key made. Left it in the task force office. Real easy to borrow."

His face was by my ear, chin on my shoulder. I choked at the overpowering minty odor and averted my head. I was repulsed, stunned by an agonizing indecision. Did I wait or fight now?

"Where's Brand?" I croaked.

"Your boyfriend is probably gonna be dead by the time I'm done with you." He sounded perversely disappointed. "You owe me, big-time."

I flinched as his fingers moved between our bodies and he stroked my stomach, groped the front of my blouse. I stiffened and fought to seize his wrist.

He giggled, then let loose a short, nasty laugh. "That's the spirit. More effort than your gigolo put up, but then—he never saw it coming. He's bleeding pretty good back there. Quite a puddle. Growing bigger by the second."

He wrenched his arm away, snatched my forearm sharply, rammed it up under my breasts, pushed hard into my stomach and whispered, "Maybe I'll leave you two holding hands as you take your last breaths together. Just to prove I can be nice when I wanna be."

I choked back an unbearable ache in my throat, bit my lip, wanted to cry. The thought of losing Brand brought incredible pain. I never had a chance to tell him I loved him.

I glanced at the restraining arm and the cuff. There were edges of what appeared to be gauze bandages.

That's why he hadn't taken his jacket off this morning!

"I hope your burns hurt." I relived the terror in the darkness of the barn, the horror of the fire and forlorn hope that I would be saved. Why was I talking so coherently with this barbaric savage?

Martin Jamison was the Preacher.

Why was I not surprised?

I knew why.

All along I'd known someone on the task force knew about the barn, had been sending me threatening messages. Martin spent most of his time in my presence being overly kind or condescending. At least with Ray Ferran and Larry Simpson the kindness had been honest and sincere. That should have clued me in but I'd overlooked his attitude because I didn't want to make waves. He was, after all, Brand's partner.

I'd always wanted to believe it couldn't be someone I knew.

The palm of his hand slapped against my ear, making it pop. Instant pain. He did it again, harder. My head spun.

"Don't you call me that, you psycho bimbo. Oh, sorry, that should be psychic bimbo, I guess. The telepathic slut of the 78th precinct."

Now he was the Preacher, disgust and hatred in every word he spit my way. He snapped like a hungry animal.

"People like you make me sick. Always trying to do good and help others. All you really wanted was to be around all those men. And since you were blind, you didn't care what they looked like."

Martin spun me around and dragged me against him. His grasp tightened on my arm, his arm squeezed my ribs. I stifled a whimper. He edged me down the hall.

"Come on, bitch, move it." He suddenly released my arm, shoved me harshly toward the back hall door. I stumbled and tried turning to look at him. I met with a fist to the temple. I stumbled again. He caught me, jerked my arm behind me, shoving it upward toward my shoulder blades. I bit off the scream as pain knifed through my shoulder.

"Don't bother trying to look at me now. I don't want to see you. I want you down there with your lover, so when I decide to end it for you I don't have to drag your filthy slut's body to his."

I pretended to trip, feigned a step away, but it didn't work. He held my arm firmly. As we reached the door I moaned and made one more attempt with the pretense of fainting. I went limp.

He grabbed me again from behind, his arm tight around my neck. "Try another stupid stunt like that and I'll kill you right now. Slice your throat so clean you'll only suffer for a few seconds, but you'll know it was me and you'll know I won. I'll stand and watch your eyes roll up, watch the blood pulse from your neck. You'll drop where you stand and there won't be shit you can do about it." He let go of my arm. A hand between my shoulder blades propelled me through the door. "Move!"

I fell toward the wall. When I put both hands up to save myself and tried to duck under his arm, he hit me. I backed up and he followed me, aiming another blow at my head.

"You bitch! You stupid, stupid bitch! Didn't I tell you? You shoulda believed me. Now," he grabbed my hair, pulled my head back, "you die." A blade, cold and sharp, moved against my neck. He scraped it up and down as though shaving.

I'd seen the flash of curved steel with a bony handle. Coated in wet blood. Brand's blood. "This is for you and what's left of lover boy."

Instead of panic or fear, a calm, serene peace came over me. If this was how my life was going to end, so be it.

There was only one thing I needed to do.

Brand? I'm sorry, love. I didn't mean for this to happen. If you can hear me, please know I love you. You and only you. When I'm gone...

Why was I unafraid? I should be terrified, but I was accepting this as though it was part of my daily life. Take a break with a psycho. Drink mocha with a maniac.

I was suddenly aware of an intense burning sensation in my shoulder and left side. Was I feeling Brand's injuries?

Martin and I turned the corner into the back hall and I saw Brand huddled below the breaker panel, using the wall and his weakened legs to push himself up. The pool of blood on the floor told me he might not make it. His shirt and jacket were black where blood had soaked through. His left hand was clamped over the gut wound, his face

drained of color, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. In his right hand, his gun hung by his side. He raised it slowly, in agonizing jerks, until it was pointed, albeit waveringly, at Martin. His partner.

"Don't try it, Brand. You won't live long enough to help her. I'm very good with my knives. I'll do her, let you watch, then finish you."

Martin pulled me tight to him and I realized there was no way I'd be able to get away. I couldn't break his hold. I let my head drop, closed my eyes. I didn't want to see all this ugliness. If I was going to die I wanted to remember Brand in a happier time. But I couldn't keep them closed. I had to see Brand's eyes one more time, tell him what my voice couldn't. Before I did, though, there was something I needed to know.

"Why'd you kill Dylan, Preacher?"

I heard Brand's gasp and knew I might have asked the wrong question.

"That crud?" I was shaken when Martin, not the Preacher, replied. "After what he did to my dad, he didn't deserve to live. Then he started investigating me! Seemed to think I had something to do with the disappearance of the gun two years ago." He laughed, a harsh, cruel sound. "'Course, he was right. I *did* take it. But thanks to Dylan Jones, my dad had to retire early, half pension, and a jacket that included IA's suspicions. He couldn't get a job doing squat in the real world." Martin's words carried no remorse.

I was suddenly conscious of his burned arm clenched around me. With my free hand I frantically pounded my fist into his elbow and forearm. He yelped, loosened his hold. I hit him again. He lost the grip on my blouse. I slipped under his arm, twisted to the side. He reached for my hair, seized it, yanked me back. My hands found his wrist. Nails clawed under the gauze. He yelled, his fingers opened. The blade swiped past my ear as I fell backward and dropped to the floor. He stared down at me, eyes hard and evil, ready to lunge, plunge the knife. He uttered a blood-curdling howl.

"Martin, give it up!" came Brand's weakened shout.

The killer jerked his head to look at Brand. Hesitated an instant too long.

It was enough.

A thunderous explosion reverberated off the walls. The monster—Martin—shuddered, slack-jawed, bug-eyed, and let out a gurgled scream, but still kept a firm grip on the raised weapon. I covered my face, held my breath and watched through splayed fingers. A second shot, more deafening than the first, from the other end of the hall, twisted and pitched him sideways with a crash onto a wall table. I turned my face. Two of my favorite watercolors and a mirror bounced off their hooks. I shielded my eyes as glass smashed, sending shards everywhere.

I was paralyzed with fear and adrenaline. My ears rang. I rolled on my side and glimpsed the horrible blade lying by Martin's foot. The foot twitched. There was a wheezing gasp and the body was still. It was quiet for the first time. I struggled. Forced my feet beneath me, slipped on glass, stepped over the corpse onto a splintered picture frame.

Brand's lifeless body, the acrid crimson stain growing ever bigger, was on the floor again, fallen against the wall beneath the fuse box where he'd strained to stand. In his limp hand lay the gun that fired the first shot.

I was on my knees, shaking. I clutched him to my breast, his blood seeping through fabric to my skin.

"Please, don't die. I need you. Oh, God, Brand. Please. I love you. Don't you dare die on me." I felt a sudden burst of elation. I'd found a heartbeat. A flicker of eye movement. His lips parted.

Teary-eyed, I glanced down the hall. An armor-vested, helmeted figure, face covered by a hood and shotgun resting on shoulder, peered at the Preacher.

Daniel, behind him, gave orders and rushed past.

I mumbled, "Please. Please save your brother. He has to live."

Daniel lifted me from the floor and told me I had to move. As I numbly obeyed, he steered me to the wall. His arms enfolded me, I buried my face in his chest. "Let them help him, Norrie." I followed his look down the hall and saw the EMTs advancing.

"He can't die, Daniel, he can't." I beat on his chest with my fists. "I won't let him."

Chapter Thirty

I knew as soon as he turned right out of the parking lot of our favorite seafood restaurant. Instead of heading back to town, he drove south in the direction of one of my favorite places. This time I would be able to see the wondrous variations of color and detail, watch the constant interplay of movement and light. Sight and sound would only be part of the experience.

A glorious feeling of relief, a heady exhilaration came over me—unfettered by the shackles of the Preacher’s reign of terror, starting out anew with the man I loved.

I noticed a change in the air, the delightful aroma of the sea. It was a soul-lifting, mind-giddy few minutes of anticipation. We drove a winding road between hillsides of wildflowers and grasses, passed fallen rail fences and an abandoned, gray-shingled cottage. Enormous billowing clouds hung lazily in an azure sky.

Brand must have noticed my flush of eagerness. He smiled and said, “Go ahead, I’ll catch up.”

I was out of the car before it stopped, running pell-mell down a worn path to the bottom of the hill. I held up to catch my breath, tossed off my shoes and dashed across hot sand. Terns, skittering along the water’s edge, took flight. Groups of crabs sidled behind small rocks. I waded in. The coldness between my thighs, a mild discomfort at first, only heightened the thrill of contact. Forcing my way through roiling water I delighted in the changing scene and reflective light. Finally I plunged into the surf, swam under a few feet through bubbles and leaped up, crying out, “Yes, yes, I love it! Oh, how I missed it.”

I fingered my hair back and looked out across the water at a smudge of ship on the horizon. To my left, in a little cove, there was squawking and fighting over some floating debris. Other seabirds bobbed nearby, ignoring the squabbling gulls.

I swung around, saw Brand silhouetted at the top of the path, a faint half moon appearing in the daytime sky over his shoulder, an airplane’s contrail dissipating far to the east. This man I loved saved my life that night three weeks earlier, in my house. His shot took Martin’s life. It hadn’t been an easy thing to do, shooting his partner, but he hadn’t hesitated.

Daniel discussed everything that happened that night with the police psychologist then reported to Brand and I while Brand remained in the hospital. No one knew for sure what started Martin down the road to hate and mayhem. Whatever it was, happened when he was a teenager. I suspected it was his mother leaving but the psychologist wouldn’t go that far. The young Martin might have thought it was his fault she was gone and reacted by taking out his hostilities and hatred on other women. Why was it only prostitutes? Maybe his father had taken that step after his wife left and

Martin thought they were to blame. I'd asked the psychologist to explain the ritual with the women's hands but he seemed loathe to pin a reason on it. Seemed to think that without having talked to Martin, he would get it wrong.

The mint odor that frightened and repelled me was explained when they did the autopsy. Tucked into Martin's pocket was a small spray bottle of mouthwash. Just another part of his disguise.

Those things we learned over a passage of days, but we'd never know for sure we were right. It could only ever be a guess.

One thing was for certain, we'd never know all the answers. Martin's death left more questions than explanations and his passing was itself the greatest of these.

Why had he turned on his partner? Why had he turned on me? We'd never know.

We could wish forever for a different outcome, but we were stuck with the knowledge that, at the end, all he felt for Brand and me was hate.

It was a moment we'd remember all of our lives, but we'd agreed never to talk about.

Brand waved with a cane, shouted something and started toward me, choosing his steps carefully. He lingered, stepped off the path and after a few seconds proceeded down with flowers tucked into the arm sling.

The waves propelled me back to shore and I walked slowly to meet him halfway. As I picked up my shoes, he grinned. "I like the wet T-shirt look. Here," he held out the hastily gathered bouquet, "notice I didn't spare any expense." I buried my nose in their fragrant petals and inhaled deeply, letting their perfume soothe me further.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think. I'd waited so long for this moment."

"Don't apologize, babe." Brand's grin was approving and he winked. "We're here for you. This is your place, your special piece of beach."

"I know, but I should have helped you." I put my hand on his, on top of the cane, pressed flesh to flesh. I wanted him—unwilling to release him, refusing to let it end. The need to touch was unbearably strong whenever I was near him. I leaned forward expectantly. We kissed and hugged, setting my body trembling.

"You've been taking care of me a lot lately, Norrie. And for that I'll always be thankful. No more. I don't need all this extra attention. If you don't let me do things on my own I'll be forever getting over this." His words trailed off and he shook his head as if to ward off painful memories.

"If it keeps you from leaving me and going back to work, it's worth it." I was honest. It frightened me to think he could be severely injured again, even killed, on the job.

My forehead rested on his chest. I closed my eyes and listened to the breakers crashing to an end on the rocks beyond the cove. Peace was finally mine. When I opened them again the gleaming water was a myriad of colors, changing before my eyes.

Brand's good hand on my back held me tightly, warmly, to him. "Come on, sweetheart, let's sit in the sand."

Coming close to death had changed him. He now took nothing for granted, appreciated everything in the moment.

I guided him back to the beach. He stopped to catch his breath. "Man, I'm as weak as a baby," he complained.

"You'll be fine. Give it time. You've only been out of the hospital for two days. I guess I shouldn't have let you drive. You wore yourself out."

I was about to whisper in his ear, "This is so perfect," when his lips touched my cheek. He kissed my forehead, the tip of my nose. My mouth opened to his, our tongues questing, dueling, deepening the kiss with a haste born of urgency. I wanted to be oblivious to all but the pleasure of his presence. I pressed harder against him, so great was my desire for ultimate lovemaking with this man. Hands caressed curves and crevices. Fingers traced shapes of sensation and points of pleasure. It was all we could do. This was where I belonged.

For now, the first day, we would be content to treasure this beach, admire the ocean and savor the moment.

"Thank you," I whispered, my head on his shoulder, nuzzling his neck. I don't think he heard me as another wave swirled and swelled. The gulls began the noisy chatter again.

You're welcome, my love. An arm dropped around my waist, pulled me around. He placed his mouth to my ear, nibbling. "I'm just glad I'm the one who gets to bring you here." *You're sure about this?*

Positive.

"No regrets about Dylan?" he asked quietly.

"None. He was my friend. I'd spent too much time and energy feeling unlovable, searching for a love relationship because it helped heal, compensate for the awful visions and vibrations from the readings. I now know, wanting to love another person, I was hiding my own need to be loved. I think, in my fantasies about Dylan...it was more lust than love. It was romantic, created some instant electricity, at least with me. If we had taken it further, become serious..."

"Did you sleep with him?"

"No. We almost had what might have become one short heavy-petting party, half tangled in Nellie Belle's cramped quarters, but it was interrupted by a murder. Probably all that was meant to be."

"Good. Because I want you, need you, Norrie and I don't want to share you with any damn ghost."

"Never."

"I love you, babe."

I'd give myself to this man. Now. For eternity.

I was his.

Love you, babe.

The eventide reminded us we couldn't stay. Brand was exhausted. We'd spent the afternoon on the sand, letting the sun heal us.

"Are you warm enough, babe?"

I nodded, not wanting to spoil the moment with words. He seemed to understand.

Good. Because there's one more thing we have to do out here.

"You can really do that, can't you?" I said. I marveled how easily it came to him, the ability to transfer his thoughts to my mind. "Have you tried it with anyone else?"

"When I first realized something strange was happening to me, I didn't want to acknowledge it. I fought it. I guess that's why I fought you even harder because I didn't want to believe I was different. It scared me. I'd heard Dylan was able to converse with you, he mentioned it that first day at the Preacher's house." I noticed he said Preacher, not Martin, still a painful reminder. "I tried it with Dylan once, just before he died. If he got anything from me, he didn't let on. Somehow, I don't think he'd do that. I may receive Daniel's emotions, but there isn't interplay or transference. I guess that means I can't get through to him." He appeared saddened.

"It's all right, you know. As long as you can receive his thoughts and emotions, you can stay tuned to him. He'll just miss out on sharing. When did you realize you were able to reach me, Brand? How long ago?"

He didn't hesitate. "Rhoda's. I sent you a warning. I think you thought it was Dylan because he arrived within seconds."

"That was you?"

"I knew you were upset. When Dylan told me to take care of you, then walked out, I decided your feelings wouldn't be trampled again." Brand hung his head, stared at the ground, drew a circle in the sand with his foot and added, "Didn't think he'd have to die for it to happen."

We gazed at the water, where the rising moon's reflection lit a path of silver running far out to sea. Pale stars appeared. Venus had taken her resplendent place several minutes before. Down the coast a motor yacht with running lights skimmed across the rolling surface. A gentle breeze made me shiver and realize my underthings were still damp.

"You *are* cold." He hung his jacket around my shoulders and I drew a deep breath, capturing his manly scent.

"I have something for you, babe," he said enthusiastically. "It's from Dylan's lawyer, delivered today. He instructed me to give it to you." He withdrew an envelope slowly from a breast pocket, held it for some time before continuing. He swallowed hard, his voice cracking slightly. "I'm executor of his estate. I was astounded. I hardly knew the man, figured I'd be the last one he'd entrust. Why me? The lawyer hinted what was in it and I knew this was the only place to announce the contents. There are

other formalities, papers to sign, but we'll leave those until tomorrow." My hands trembled as I opened the unsealed envelope. "He loved you, you know, to do what he did. He knew about us. This is dated two days before he died."

Hawke reached to his jacket pocket, pulled out a small flashlight, turned it on. Its beam lit up a handwritten note. The script made me smile. Dylan's writing never was very legible—he must have worked hard at this. I could read every word.

I'm sorry, cariad. If you're reading this, I'm gone. I won't know when or how, but I can say before I left, I knew what true love was. You made me see. Made me believe. I know I wasn't meant to be yours but you taught me I could love. For that you have my love and gratitude. Am byth. Dylan.

I studied the other pages, not believing what I saw. Dylan rewrote his will. Left me everything—house, money, stock portfolio and Nellie Belle.

"Do you know what this says?" I held the pages out to Brand, the papers fluttering in my trembling hand. His smile said yes.

"You're a very rich woman, my love. Do I still get to call you 'babe'? Or will you make me call you 'Madame Babe'? 'Miss Benedict, your wealthiness?'" His lips found my temple, nuzzled my hair.

"Don't know. You might have to bow and scrape occasionally, but I'll try not to let it change me." I found his mouth, delivered a kiss. "Any other surprises for me, tonight?"

"Actually, there is. But we have to drive back to town to get it. Daniel and the surprise are waiting." He turned and hobbled to the path. I stood looking out to sea, not wanting to leave, soaking in enough atmosphere to last me until next time.

"What, Brand? What have you got?" I hurried to catch up, picking up my bouquet of slightly wilted flowers from the sand. All they'd need was water and a gentle hand. They'd last for a few more days, remind me of today's wonderful memories made on this deserted stretch of beach. He met my eyes and smiled mischievously.

It was quiet as we crested the top of the hill, only surf and distant highway traffic. A flight of birds passed overhead, wings whistling in the deepening twilight, heading out to open water. A fresh sea breeze brushed my face.

His arm caught me when I reached him and he pulled the other out of the sling.

"I want you to come home with me tonight, Norrie, and be part of my life." He hesitated. I wanted to hear it all. The silence was unbearable. "I want to marry you. Make you my wife. Please, love?"

Before I could reply we heard a car coming fast, headlights on high. I was frightened until I realized I knew the sound, the low, rumbling exhaust, the purring motor. What was Nellie Belle doing here?

I stared at the Jaguar gliding majestically to a stop. In the dim light I could make out Daniel at the wheel and a commotion in the other bucket seat. Daniel rushed around to the passenger side, opened it slowly, quieted the movement then held the

door fully open. To my surprise, Daniel had something in his hand. A rope? Some kind of nylon rope. A golden ball of fuzz scampered from behind the door, headed straight for Brand and me. A dog cavorted at the end of a leash, tail wagging high, wide, fast.

Daniel called out, "She doesn't have her harness on, knows it's not work time, that's why the exuberance. Sorry, brother, but she was getting to be too much!"

"Where'd you get this?" I asked, dropping to my knees to meet the golden whirlwind. We cuddled and its tongue lashed my face. My hands were in the Golden Retriever's coat, stroking from head to tail.

"Well, I was, unh...you tell her, Brand," said Daniel.

"Norrie, meet Sunshine. Sunshine, meet your new owner."

The dog flopped over on her back, legs flung crazily skyward. I giggled, gave her a tummy rub.

"I've never had a dog. I hope I'm doing this right."

"Sunshine seems to think so," Brand assured me as the dog got up and continued to bound in animated, exaggerated motion.

"She's gorgeous, a real heartbreaker," I exclaimed. "She's mine?" Still unsure what he'd told me.

"Yes, thanks to Dylan she's yours."

I burst into tears, at the same time laughing with uncontrollable elation.

"She smells so good. What is it? I know lavender's in there..."

"I took her to a groomer, who gave Sunshine a trim, a pedicure and a lady's proper bubble bath," said Daniel, beside the dog and me. "The groomer asked what essence of shampoo to use. I said make it a challenge because the new owner has a particular nose, prefers something flowery."

Daniel rubbed the dog's belly behind her ribs. Her back leg came up, scratching an imaginary itch in midair and her behind wiggled to and fro. "Got your weak spot, didn't I, Sunshine?"

"How did all this happen?" I asked eagerly. "I'm on emotional overload here. Not only overwhelmed by Dylan's generosity but Brand's almost marriage proposal."

"He's going to make it official, is he?" said Daniel, glancing up at his brother, then at me. "And what will your answer be?"

"Don't know yet. Can't rush a girl. I'm thinking it's a definite maybe."

We laughed. Sunshine jumped up, whining and yipping at Brand. "As you can see, she's a handful, only calm when she's asleep," he said. "Some months before Dylan died, he arranged a dog guide for you. He even insisted on her name because he wanted to give you a little bit of sunshine. You would have received her in six months, except Sunshine flunked out. Couldn't handle escalators and busy parks. She's too playful, wants to fetch anything in the air. Dylan specified if she wasn't suitable, he still wanted you to have her. You know," mused Brand, "she could be a working stiff like the rest of us. Drug sniffing, bomb retrieval, search and rescue, all that good stuff."

"Not on your life!" I chimed in. "Two policemen in the family is quite enough, thank you. I don't care if she's imperfect and unemployed, do I, Sunshine?"

"I think you just said yes, Norrie," chortled Daniel.

With more conviction in my voice, I voiced an idea growing within me. "I want to use some of the money to help organizations involved in assistance dogs. Help others trade the coldness of a white cane for the warm heart and wet nose of a four-legged guide."

I raised my eyes, saw Brand's were still on me. His expression changed, his eyes darkened. He gestured to the dog.

"Check out her collar, Norrie. It's special." I glimpsed a half-smile playing on his lips.

I crouched, pulled Sunshine to me and fumbled for the collar amid the golden hair. The leather strap with a metal buckle had something attached to it. I found the end of a ribbon bow, freed the hair stuck to whatever weighted the end.

I gasped at what I found.

Brand knelt down, removed it, turned directly in front of me. He cradled my left hand, kissed the tip of my fourth finger. "You did say yes, didn't you?" he asked as he slid the ring along my finger, his eyes boring into mine, the slight frown disappearing and a smile tilting his lips.

Daniel cleared his throat. We looked his way and found him back on one knee, shaking his head, an arm around the dog. "Sorry, Sunshine," he seemed to console, sighing, "it was puppy love at first sight but right now your mistress has adoration in her eyes for someone else."

Sunshine didn't seem to mind, busily munching a flower stem from my wildflower bouquet.

"Listen, you two, I'm going to turn off the headlights," Daniel continued, getting up to leave. "At this moment, the moonlight feels more than right. I'll take Sunshine down to the water and let her splash around. It's been awhile since I took a girl for a stroll on the beach."

Brand rose, pulling me with him. We watched his brother and the dog walk away. Softly, caressingly, he kissed my brow, my eyelids, my lips. Once more his eyes held mine.

"Will you marry me, Eleanor Benedict?"

"You know I will."

Love you, babe.

The End

About the Author

Kelsy George is the pen name of a writer living in Canada, where she, her husband and three Labs are full-time RVers, going wherever the road leads.

Writing wasn't always important to Kelsy except as a way to make a living. For years she wrote copy for newspaper ads, radio scripts for a classical music program, radio commercials, and the occasional script for serious issue-type programming. An article in an equestrian magazine was her first published work, with a children's coloring book story next.

Kelsy is an award-winning (RWA Golden Heart—twice—for *Blind Justice*), multipubbed author in the romantic mystery and suspense genres.

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