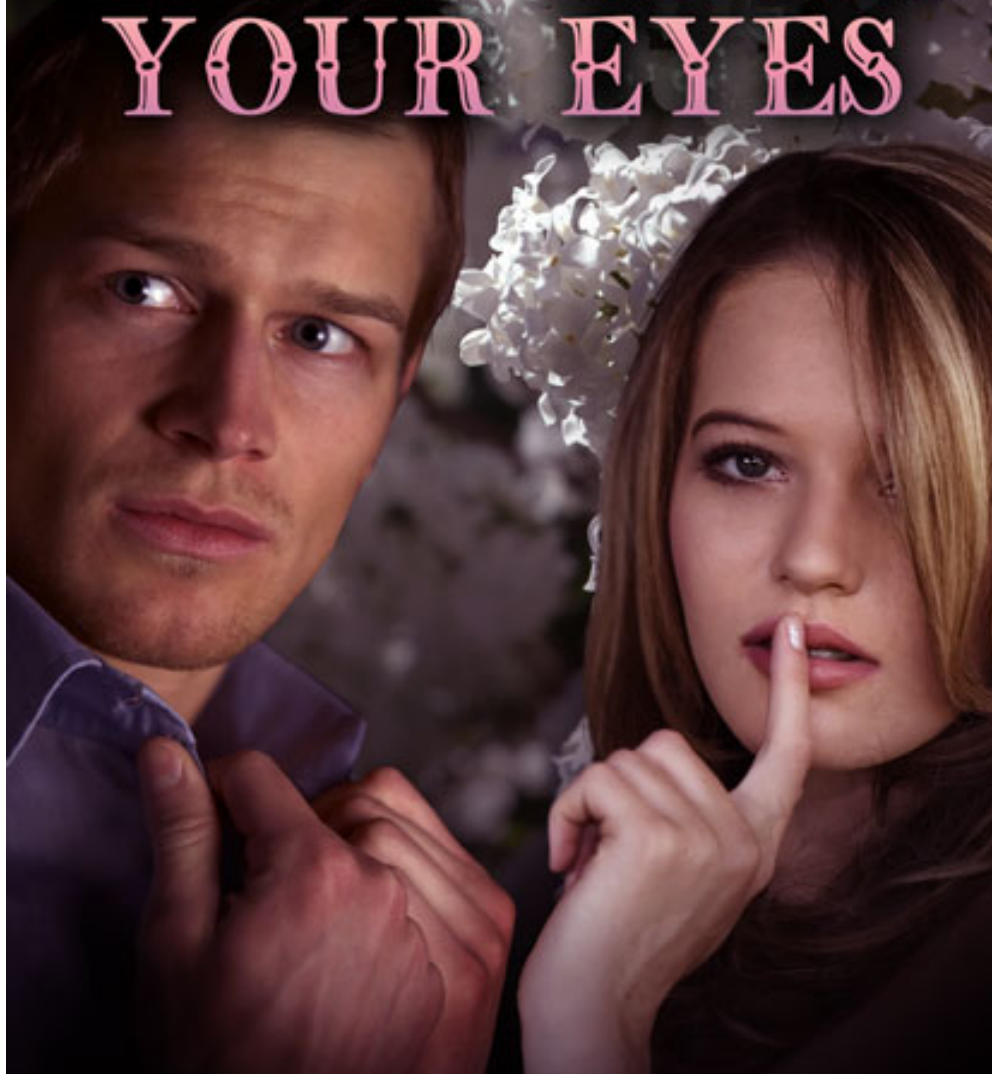


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MARY EASON

DON'T CLOSE
YOUR EYES



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Don't Close Your Eyes

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DON'T CLOSE YOUR EYES

Mary Eason

Dedication

To my husband and family for supporting this crazy dream. To my editor Helen Woodall for challenging me.

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BMW: Bavarian Motor Works

Denny's: DFO, Inc

Glock: Glock, Inc.

Hermès: Hermès International Corporation

Jaguar: Jaguar Cars Limited

Kevlar: E.I. du Pont de Nemours and Company

Mini Mart: Mini Mart, Inc.

Sonic: Sonic Industries Inc.

Suburban: General Motors Corporation

The *Post*: Washington Post Company, The Corporation

VW Bug: Volkswagen AG Corporation

Wal-Mart: Wal-Mart Stores Inc.

The Beginning

"Are you ready to die?" he asked. With a seductive little grin he handed her the white lilacs.

She returned his smile after a moment. Still somewhat uncertain, she believed this to be part of the game. "Lilacs? Where on earth did you find them at this time of year?"

Her question annoyed him. How many times had he heard that same remark from the others? They were all so desperate and needy that thought receiving lilacs in the fall made them special when half a dozen online florists around the country carried the things. There was nothing special about them or the flowers.

The drive over to the seedy side of town where deserted buildings polluted the landscape excited her. It felt dangerous. None of her previous lovers had ever been so daring.

Once they entered the building some of her earlier enthusiasm disappeared. She became nervous suddenly. She suspected something.

He smiled just to reassure her, stroking away the worry. She had no way of knowing how much her fear excited him.

"Are you ready?" he asked again.

"For what?" A little nervous giggle escaped as her anxious gaze went to his for reassurance. "What are you talking about?" Something of what he had planned for her showed in his eyes. She grew more uneasy.

He must remain calm for just a little while longer. She was almost his.

"Where did that mattress come from?" she whispered, moving a little closer to him for comfort. "Did you bring it or was it here already?" Her eyes met his filled with questions she couldn't ask. "Because I don't think I can—"

He took the white silk Hermès scarf from his pocket and wrapped it around her eyes as a tiny cry escaped her. She didn't like being blindfolded. He could tell from the way her anxious hands fought to untie the scarf. The game no longer excited her.

"Oh yes you can. Trust me. You're going to die for it."

"What are you doing? Stop it. I don't like this."

"Shh." He took her hands away from the scarf and tied them behind her back. He could feel her fear increase with each new trick. Along with his excitement.

"No!" She tried resisting but it was too late. She was no match for him.

"Don't worry, love," he whispered softly against her ear. "I'll make it good for you too before you die."

At those words, she struggled harder to free herself.

“No,” she whimpered pitifully, then stopped when she felt the cold blade of his knife against her throat. His body convulsed with excitement he could no longer control.

“No... Please!” At last she understood her fate, as every inch of her filled with fear. She was too afraid and stunned to do anything as the knife slipped over her exposed flesh.

She responded with another frightened whimper. It sickened him. He wanted to punish her for her weakness. She was spoiling the game. Her tears soaked through the silk of the scarf. He wanted her to struggle. To fight him the way he knew Megan would fight, with every breath of her being. But she wasn't Megan. She was a coward.

“Is that the best you can do?” At her weakness, his anger spiraled out of control. He plunged the sharp edge of the blade deep into her throat. Her pain was excruciating and thrilling to watch. Each kill became more heady than the last.

Than the ones six years earlier.

He took the scarf away from her eyes so he could watch her die. It was everything that the others were. But it was only the beginning. The one he wanted—his ultimate challenge waited for him in Texas. Thinking of Megan excited him and made the kill more pleasurable.

Through the years, he'd become an expert at killing. Perfecting his game. Neither his victims nor those who thought they'd killed him had a clue. But this time he planned to make it more personal. This new game would be his biggest challenge yet and all but guarantee that he would go down in history as one of the greatest.

“Do you feel it, Megan?” he whispered into the air thick with death. “Do you feel her pain? I'm going to do the same to you. Only I'm going to take my time. Savor your pain. After all, I've waited so long to feel your pain again.”

* * * * *

Jack Montgomery couldn't sleep. Six years and he still couldn't move beyond this feeling. It happened every year around this time. The anniversary of the first Angel of Death killing.

His first major case as head of CASMIRC, the Bureau's Child Abduction and Serial Murder Investigative Resource Center. He'd been more than a little cocky and just as unprepared to handle what would soon become the biggest case of the division's history.

He'd made so many mistakes with the case, including falling in love with his subordinate. But the biggest mistake of all had been letting Megan Beaumont go.

Jack got out of bed, abandoning the pretense of sleep altogether. Thinking about Megan made it impossible.

Their love affair had taken precedence over everything, including the Angel case. It had almost cost Megan her life and Jack his job.

He could still picture the fear in her eyes when he'd found her in that abandoned building. He'd almost been too late. But another memory haunted him far more. The expression on Megan's face when he told her he'd chosen the Bureau over her. Jack couldn't get that final scene out of his head no matter how many years passed. He still loved her so much. But he'd hurt her badly.

Outside, a full moon illuminated his backyard as if it were midday. It was a warm fall night in DC but there was something brewing on the horizon. A storm. Jack closed his eyes and tried to ignore the uneasiness at the back of his neck that told him the past he'd hoped had ended with Eddie Stephens' presumed death was about to return. And there would be more unfinished business to be dealt with than what lay still unsettled between himself and Megan.

* * * * *

The smell of crushed lilacs mingled with the acrid scent of smoke. He was here with her again. In the one place he could still reach her. Her dreams.

Megan fought to wake herself but he was not ready to let her go just yet. She could hear his voice as if it were only yesterday.

You think you can get rid of me so easily, Megan. You can't. Don't you know you've become part of me? Part of this thing. You became part of it the moment I chose to make you part of it. You can't leave me until I say it's over. And it's not over. There are more games to play. More victims.

The smell of smoke quickly overpowered the fragrant lilacs, making it impossible for Megan to breathe. He'd bound her hands together. Her fingers fumbled with the knot. She could feel his breath against her cheek.

But she couldn't see. The silky blindfold felt soft and familiar against her skin. A contradiction to the horror she knew lay just beyond its comfort.

Megan heard her scream. Melissa Billings. The woman who took her place. She could still hear her pleading for help after all these years.

"Hold on. I'm coming!" Megan forced the words out.

This is just a dream, Megan. It's just a dream!

"Mommie..."

He touched her shoulder and whispered her name but something wasn't right. His touch felt soft and gentle. All wrong.

"Mommie!"

Mommie? Megan forced her eyes open with a tiny gasp, her fearful glance searching the familiar bedroom of her home outside of El Paso, Texas. He wasn't here. Thank God, he wasn't here. Just her daughter, who stood next to Megan's bed trying to wake her mother. Emmie's frightened little face screwed up in fear.

“Oh baby, I’m sorry. Did I wake you?” Emmie’s expression relaxed a little at these words. She climbed into bed with Megan, her tiny arms wrapping tightly around her mother’s waist for comfort.

“Baby, its okay. It was only a bad dream.” Megan wished she could believe those words. But in her heart, she feared the worst. It had started again.

“It’s the same dream, isn’t it, Mommie?” Emmie asked in a sleepy little voice. It sickened Megan that her innocent daughter knew this dream so well.

“Yes.”

“Mommie, will it ever end?” She would give anything to be able to answer yes and mean it.

As Megan tried to find something believable to tell her daughter, Emmie’s quiet breathing made lies unnecessary.

Slowly Megan untangled Emmie’s clinging arms and climbed out of bed, holding her breath for a moment. Emmie didn’t wake. She quietly pulled the bedroom door closed, leaving it open just a sliver in case her daughter should wake up.

Outside the Texas night still held the heat of the day. From her front porch, Megan could see for miles.

This stretch of desert outside El Paso, where it met the foothills of the Davis Mountains made for a great lookout point except for one problem. There wasn’t anywhere to hide and there was no chance of running away from trouble. Nothing could last a day in the blazing desert heat except for the vultures.

But then, wasn’t that the very reason why she’d moved here in the first place? To escape the past and become normal again.

So far, Megan hadn’t accomplished either.

Tonight, nothing moved on the desert’s surface. Up above were thousands of stars as far as the eye could see, and a full moon fitting the Texas night blazed across the surface of the sky.

It was the same dream as always. It had haunted her for six years. It always got to her. But then, coming so close to death was bound to lead to a few unpleasant dreams.

If only it were that simple. Megan knew better. Just thinking about him made her want to check on Emmie again. She needed reassurance.

Megan quietly opened the bedroom door and tiptoed to the bed, looking down at her sleeping child. Emmie—Emily Marie Beaumont, named after both Megan’s mother and grandmother, slept peacefully in her mother’s bed. She was so like Megan and yet so like her father that at times Megan could almost feel his touch again.

She stroked a strand of silken brown hair, so much like her own, away from Emmie’s damp forehead. Even in the air-conditioned house, the heat at three in the morning could be suffocating.

Recognizing her mother’s touch, Emmie opened her eyes for a moment. Startling gray eyes so like her father’s never ceased to stun Megan.

"Mommie, what's wrong?"

"Shh... Nothing, baby. Everything is just fine. Go back to sleep now." Already Emmie's eyes had closed. Soon her breathing grew deeper with sleep.

Megan kissed her daughter's forehead softly then crept from the room.

Bubba, their faithful golden retriever waited for her outside, standing guard against the coyotes howling off in the distance. Beyond the cry of the coyotes came a much stronger one.

The sound of things to come.

They were coming again. Dammit, they always came back, no matter how much she discouraged them.

Why couldn't they leave her alone? Six years and every unsolved case brought a fresh group of them to Megan's door, searching for an answer to the impossible. And just desperate enough to come to her for help. No matter how much she didn't want to be found, they always managed to track her down.

Through all those years, her answer had always been the same. She couldn't help them. She had nothing left inside her to help them. The gift was gone.

Grandmother Marie called it a gift but nothing could be further from the truth as far as Megan was concerned. It wasn't anything to be welcomed in the same way that a gift should be. This was a nightmare. Seeing into the minds of the most deviant people on the face of the Earth felt nothing short of terrifying.

But the gift of seeing ran in their family. Her great-grandmother had used it to make money. Megan's own mother Emily had been twenty-eight years old when she'd committed suicide because she couldn't handle the gift. Grandmother Marie made her peace with it long ago.

Megan tried to do the same.

From the moment Emmie was born, Megan watched her daughter carefully for any of the telltale signs of its existence. There were times when she'd almost been able to convince herself Emmie was going to be lucky. But then the little girl would say something curious and all the old doubts would resurface.

For as long as Megan could remember, she'd possessed the gift. But as Grandmother Marie loved to say, there was always a defining moment when it came to the sight. Either for good, or for bad.

For Megan's mother it was visualizing the death of her husband. That was the bad. For Megan it came in the form of watching the death of a young child, a total stranger and later solving the case, much to the surprise of the local Austin police department. That was the good. Or so Megan believed until another case came her way, followed by another.

And then her real defining moment happened when she came face to face with the Angel of Death.

Eddie Stephens took away all the good from the gift. Until then, Megan never realized how truly twisted the human mind could become.

But Eddie taught her all the intricate workings of the mind of a serial killer and in the process became Megan's biggest challenge and almost her greatest downfall.

Seeing into Eddie's mind brought her to the attention of the FBI and Agent Jack Montgomery. Jack broke her heart, left her picking up the pieces of her life with a baby he didn't know he'd fathered and never would if she had anything to do with it.

As far as Megan was concerned, the only good to come from that part of her life was that little girl asleep in her mother's bed.

Chapter One

Throughout the long, sleepless hours of the early morning, Jack couldn't escape the feeling something bad would happen today. It had to. It was the anniversary of the Angel of Death.

Six years ago, that same day had started out just as innocently. The warmth of an Indian summer brought the tourists out in droves to visit the nation's capital. It ended with the discovery of Amy Sinclair's body. The first Angel victim.

As head of the FBI's DC branch of CASMIRC, Jack had seen his fair share of bad situations. But oddly enough the past few years at the center had been relatively tame. They'd been working cold cases just to stay funded.

Unfortunately, the last of his remaining doubts were about to be blown to smithereens and his gut instinct confirmed the minute he walked into his office that morning, guaranteeing he'd remember this day for the rest of his life.

When Jack's assistant Joy met him at the elevator door with coffee in one hand, he knew she carried bad news in the other. "Dan wants to talk to you right away. There's been a murder."

"This is DC Joy. There's always a murder somewhere." He took the coffee she offered and headed for his office with Joy in tow. "Why isn't DC homicide dealing with it?" he questioned when Joy didn't volunteer anything further.

"Why do you think? Dan asked me to let him know the minute you arrived." Joy ignored Jack's bad mood. Picking up his office phone, she arched a well-manicured eyebrow at his glare. Joy had grown accustomed to his moods and the reasons behind them by now.

Megan—always Megan. He was no closer to getting her out of his head than he was to forgetting the reasons that brought them together in the first place.

"He's on his way," She said replacing the receiver before spotting the evidence of another sleepless night. "You know, I could cure you of her in a second. It would only take one night and you wouldn't even remember her name."

Jack tried to remain in his bad mood but Joy knew how to bring him out of those black moments. Although most of the time, he wished she'd leave him there to suffer.

Of course, he'd have to be crazy to consider taking her up on her offer but still Joy refused to give up hope. He considered her to be a kid sister. She considered him a challenge.

As good friends of her parents he'd practically watched her grow up.

"Thanks but I'll keep my memories. And I don't want to have to fight your father when he learns I've corrupted his little girl."

Before Joy could answer, Dan Martinez, Jack's second-in-command, appeared in the doorway.

"Thanks Joy. Can you give us a minute?" She glanced at Jack waiting for him to give the okay before budging.

"Go ahead. If we need anything, I'll buzz you." Jack told her with a smile.

"What's up?" Jack asked once he got a good look at Dan's worried expression. This was going to be bad.

"DC police found the body of a woman in an empty warehouse off Arlington Boulevard," Dan told him before taking his usual seat across from Jack.

"So?" Dan didn't answer right away, which only served to increase Jack's apprehension. "So what's so special about this one to make DC homicide want us involved in it? Don't tell me it's a politician?"

"No such luck. Jack, I'll be honest with you, I don't know what to make of it. I received a call from homicide this morning. The detective I spoke with who caught the case wanted to talk to you."

"Well what is it, Dan?" he asked, wondering why Dan didn't just get on with it.

"The thing is, Jack, the case has some similarities to another case. That's what caught the detective's interest in the first place. Then there's the scarf, which is downright odd."

"The scarf?" Jack forced the words out, forgetting all about his bad mood.

"Yeah. They found a white silk scarf tied around the victim's eyes. An Hermès scarf. He'd bound her hands until after he killed her. Jack, she's been mutilated and there's evidence of rape, although there's no DNA on the body. This perp knew what he was doing."

"Was it..." Jack never intentionally let himself think about the Angel of Death case even though it was never far from him emotionally. The case left its mark on him and everyone who worked it, including Dan and certainly Megan. It cost him dearly in losing the woman he loved.

"Not only similar to the scarf used in the original Angel case, Jack, it's the same scarf."

"What are you talking about? That's impossible—"

"He used the same scarf as in the original Sinclair murder. The initial lab report indicates there is more than one source of blood on the scarf and since the perp didn't leave any DNA at the crime scene we're almost certain it isn't his. I had the lab compare the blood to Amy's blood type and it's a match."

"How is that possible?"

"That's what I wanted to know, so I checked on the evidence file from those first cases and Jack—the scarves have all gone missing from the Angel of Death case."

"What did you say?" Jack's thoughts went instinctively back to the last time he'd seen those scarves. They'd remained at CASMIRC for three years following the official

closing of the Angel case even though they'd never recovered Eddie's body from the Potomac. Later, they'd gone into storage at the Bureau's evidence storage facility.

"How is that possible, Dan?"

"That's a good question. And one we'd better figure out soon. Before the press gets wind of this."

"Have you talked to the evidence clerk?"

"Yes, I called her as soon as I discovered the missing evidence. But nothing unusual happened to her knowledge and she's squeaky clean. She's a dead end, Jack."

"Does Peter know about this yet?"

"Are you kidding? I wanted to give you the heads-up before I mentioned anything to him."

"Good. Keep it that way for now. He's going to blow when he hears someone waltzed into our evidence facility and took evidence from one of the most notorious serial killer cases in centuries. The one case none of us wants resurrected again." Jack didn't really need to add that last part.

"Hey, you aren't telling me anything I don't know, buddy. I'm meeting the two homicide detectives working the case in a few minutes. I've asked them to turn over all the information they have so far to us. You want to sit in? I can have them meet us here."

"Yes. But let's try to keep a lid on this for now, Dan. This could all just be some screwup at the lab. No need getting anyone worked up unnecessarily. Did you find anything else missing from the evidence files?"

"Nothing and I drove out there this morning myself to check on it personally. Just the scarves."

As he waited for Dan to bring the two detectives round, Jack glanced at the calendar on his desk. Six years ago to the day. The anniversary of the discovery of first victim in the Angel of Death murders. The first of many to follow. He still remembered everything he'd felt about that day because he'd felt the same way today. God he hoped this wasn't going to prove to be another bad omen.

* * * * *

"Where are we going?" She gave him a sexy little smile then glanced into the back seat where the white Hermès scarf lay. "What's this?" She thought he'd bought the scarf for her. He had but not in the same way she believed. Rebecca craved attention, starved for years by a neglectful husband who chose to screw another woman instead of his wife.

"You'll see. Are you excited?" She blushed demurely, unable to meet his gaze.

"Yes but I wish you would tell me where you're taking me."

“It’s a surprise. You’re going to die for it.” His choice of words brought her gaze back to his face. This was one of his favorite parts—watching as his victim realized her fate. Rebecca was both smart and beautiful. She was beginning to suspect something. It became harder for him to control his excitement.

“I thought you liked being surprised. Your ex never surprised you, right?”

Her favorite subject consisted of how badly her ex-husband wronged her. Rebecca still loved the guy in spite of what she wanted him to believe. Soon she could take her memories to the grave with her. Rest in peace sweet Rebecca. He attempted to stifle his amusement but she spotted it.

“What’s so funny?” she asked with a confused little grin.

“Nothing. You’ll see. I can’t wait for you to see. We’re almost there love. Are you excited?”

“Yes,” she answered slowly, hoping to please him. But he could sense her fear. Just the way he liked them.

He pulled off the interstate onto the farm-to-market road heading outside town. Just like the third one. When they pulled into the cemetery and parked next to the makeshift headstone that bore her name, she turned stricken eyes to him looking for answers and reassurances.

“Are you ready, Rebecca?” he grinned, no longer pretending. She shrank away.

“For what?” God, he loved the fear in her voice.

“To die, my love. This is your night to die. Don’t you think I’ve picked the right place for it? So fitting. Just like Renee. Now it’s your turn, love. But don’t worry. I’ll give you so much pleasure before you give me so much pain.”

Hours later, covered in her blood, his body still throbbing with the excitement of the kill, he turned in the direction where he imagined Megan waited for him.

“Are you ready for me, Megan?” Elation flooded his body at the thought of doing to her what he’d just done to Rebecca. The irony of it was almost too rich.

He could feel Megan fighting to resist his pull. She didn’t want to play with him again but she would. She would have no other choice. Megan Beaumont had become as much a part of this game as he was. She’d escaped him once. She wouldn’t again. They were destined to play out this final scene together to the bitter end. She was the only one worthy of his talents. He’d failed once but never again. He’d made sure of it with Rebecca’s death. Megan’s future lay here in DC with him.

* * * * *

“Mommie, do I have to go to school today?” Her daughter’s heavy footsteps trudged into the kitchen where Megan sat downing her fifth cup of coffee of the morning. The dreams kept her nights sleepless. The frequency of them a foreshadowing of things to come.

Emmie hated school and looked for any excuse to get out of going. Another something she'd inherited from her mother. Megan knew every trick in the book because she'd use them all with her grandmother.

"But I don't feel good!" When Megan spotted the emergence of her daughter's pout, somehow she resisted the urge to smile.

So far this year, Emmie had faked five tummy aches and three sore throats. It wasn't as if Emmie didn't love her teacher, Miss Alopay, because she did. And Emmie did well in school. So well that she'd been moved up to the first grade even though Emmie was only five.

But Emmie struggled to fit into the structured confines of school life, even a school as small as the one on the reservation in which Emmie and Megan lived.

The simple one-story house Megan purchased six years earlier sat at the very edge of the Apache reservation. Although Megan wasn't a descendant of Apache blood, the desert and the reservation was the only place where she felt safe anymore. And the Apache people didn't ask questions.

"Yes, you do, little girl." When Emmie's pout disintegrated into tears, Megan reached for her daughter and sat her on her lap.

"Baby, I know it's hard but this is only your first year. You'll get used to it and you've known most of the kids in your class all your life."

"But Mikey Tsisnih was mean to me. He pulled my hair—twice yesterday during recess." Emmie sobbed uncontrollably, her tiny arms clinging to Megan's neck for comfort.

Megan smiled against her daughter's unruly brown curls. Emmie smelled like innocence itself. She wanted her to stay that way for as long as possible. She couldn't tell her daughter that this was Mikey's way of letting her know he liked her. Never mind that. She'd learn that lesson soon enough.

"Did you tell Miss Alopay?"

"Yes. She told me to be nice to Mikey, because his mom's sick." In truth, Elizabeth Tsisnih was dying. According to Sarah Alopay, Mikey didn't talk much about his mother's illness. He just acted out.

"Well, try not to be too upset with him baby. Mikey needs a friend right now."

Emmie's gray eyes searched her mother's face for a moment, sending an unsettling reminder of the past. Every time she looked into her daughter's eyes, she saw Jack. Once again, old guilt and familiar doubts consumed her along with old desires. She still loved him after all but she hated him as well for the way he'd ended things between them.

"Honey, try to be nice to Mikey and maybe he'll stop pulling your hair." Megan sat her daughter on her feet and retrieved Emmie's lunch box from the fridge. "Come on. We don't want to be late for the bus."

“All right,” Emmie wasn’t happy but she knew better than to argue a lost cause. She followed Megan out the door and down to the dirt road that ran in front of their house. The bus stopped here each morning at eight-fifteen. And every morning their faithful dog Bubba along with Megan would make sure Emmie got safely onboard the bus before going on their morning run.

Megan kissed her daughter’s mutinous face, waved to Roger the bus driver and waited as they drove slowly away in the one beat-up bus the reservation’s school possessed.

A committee met each month to discuss ways of raising funds for new ones. With any luck, they’d have two new busses in another year’s time.

As the cloud of dust settled around them, Megan could see her daughter’s unhappy expression looking back at her.

Her heart went out to Emmie. She’d hated school as well. In the beginning, she couldn’t seem to control the images going round inside her head and ended up in constant trouble because of it.

By the time Megan was just a little older than Emmie, she’d grown accustomed to the visions and dreams. But Emmie would be different. Megan was determined her daughter would never know about the gift. Each time Emmie showed any sign of possessing it, Megan had a logical explanation for her daughter. Emmie would never know the dark side of human nature if she could protect her from it.

Once the bus disappeared out of sight and the uncomfortable quiet settled around them again, she could feel him trying to enter her thoughts. Megan started out across the desert but he grew more persistent. The more pronounced the images became, the harder she ran until she felt nothing but the exhaustion of her body.

Her tiny house came back into view after miles and miles of open desert. She knew every inch of this place by heart as well as its inhabitants and the black Suburban scattering the peacefulness of the morning wasn’t one of them.

They’d come again.

“Dammit.” Megan stopped a few miles away from the house, hands on her knees, watching as the SUV sped down her dirt road. Bubba let out a low growl in answer to her anger. She reached down to pat his head, trying to reassure him before retrieving her water bottle.

Through the years, she’d gone from walking to running five miles every morning before going to work at Desert Oasis, the clothing boutique she’d opened a few years back in El Paso.

If she’d learned anything from her time with the FBI, it had been how to stay in shape and be prepared at all times for anything. She’d never been better at both than at this moment.

Bubba growled once more, drawing her attention back to the SUV. Megan was tempted to send him charging after them. Fiercely protective of Megan and Emmie, Bubba lived for the hunt.

"It's okay, boy. I'll get rid of them for you." Slowly Megan covered the remaining distance to the Suburban that had now stopped in front of her house.

A few yards away from the SUV, she settled into walking again. Megan reached the vehicle just as two men dressed in black suits emerged from out of it. Jeez, could they be more obvious?

Both men glanced up at the house. They weren't aware of her yet.

"Can I help you?" Startled, they turned quickly around at the sound of her voice, weapons drawn. Even though they were wearing sunglasses, probably Bureau issued, she could sense their uneasiness. They looked hot and tired. Megan smiled. The desert heat had that effect on outsiders.

She recognized the taller of the two right away. Daniel Martinez. She'd worked side by side with him on the Angel case. Dan and Jack Montgomery had been best friends since their academy days at Quantico.

"Hello, Megan." Dan smiled beneath his Bureau-issued sunglasses, which prevented her from seeing his eyes. Not that it mattered. She knew Dan wouldn't be happy to see her again, no matter how much he might be smiling.

The other agent, a rookie, appeared shocked by his partner's recognition. His curious gaze moved from Dan to Megan.

"You're wasting your time here, Dan. I can't help you." Some of his practiced Bureau tactics slipped a little with her answer but for the moment, Dan chose to ignore Megan's rudeness entirely.

"Megan, this is my partner, Agent Stan Kellogg. Stan this is the legendary Megan Beaumont." Dan's expression revealed little but she recognized his sarcasm all too well. Apparently, his partner did not.

"Wow, you worked on the Angel case along with Agent Martinez and Agent Montgomery. This is an honor, ma'am." Megan cringed over the younger man's spit and polish manners. It seemed like only yesterday she'd been his age. Had she ever truly been so enthusiastic about the Bureau? Dan didn't bother hiding his amused reaction to his partner's enthusiasm.

"Agent Kellogg." Megan reluctantly shook the young man's hand. How did someone so green rate partnering with Jack's second-in-command?

Megan turned back to Dan wanting only to get rid of this reminder of her past. "What do you want, Dan?"

"Always so impatient, Megan. No wonder you had Jack crazy about you." Dan resented Megan's relationship with Jack from the beginning. He'd been good friends with Jack's wife Rebecca as well and blamed Megan for breaking up their marriage. Never mind the fact that Jack had been the one to seduce her first. Or maybe not. She and Jack had been crazy for each other right from the start, choosing to ignore Bureau policy preventing employees in ranking positions from getting involved with subordinates. As a result, her love affair with Jack Montgomery almost cost Megan her life and came close to ending his career as well.

Dan removed his glasses for the first time. He'd aged over the past six years.

"May we come inside?" he asked quietly, at last dropping the pretense of pleasantries.

"No." Megan didn't break eye contact even though she could feel Agent Kellogg's curiosity growing.

"No?" When she didn't respond, he added, "Megan this is important. I need your help."

"And I told you, Dan, you've wasted your time in coming here."

"There's been another murder." She didn't need to ask what he meant by this. The Angel murders would be the only thing to bring Dan to her for help.

"I'm sorry. But I still can't help you —"

"Jack needs you. It's Rebecca, Megan. She's dead." Nothing could have prepared Megan for hearing this news. She closed her eyes and tried to keep her composure from shattering in front of Dan.

"Dead? How?" She forced the words out expelling a shaky breath along with them. Megan hated that the very mention of Jack's name still had the power to shake her. No matter how badly he'd hurt her, a part of her would always love him for giving her Emmie.

"Rebecca was murdered." Dan added quietly. She and Dan had one thing in common. They both loved Jack.

"Oh God — I'm sorry. I didn't know. When?"

"Two days ago. Megan, whoever did this is following the same MO as the Angel."

Eddie Stephens, the monster known as the Angel of Death took six innocent lives before he disappeared into the dark depths of the Potomac. All of his victims followed the same pattern. Rich young women, snatched randomly, blindfolded, raped, tortured horrendously and killed by having their throats slashed. Megan knew the MO by heart. She'd been the only one of Eddie's victims to survive.

"So you can understand why I need your help, Megan. This person is good. He's managed to stump our best profilers so far."

For once, for Jack's sake, she almost wished she could help. "Dan, I can't help you. I'm sorry but I can't."

"Dammit, Megan, Jack needs you. I need you. Can't you put the past aside for one moment?"

Megan turned to Agent Kellogg. "Can you give us a minute here?"

"Ma'am —"

"Don't call me that. I might be old enough to be a ma'am in your eyes but I'm not in the mood for more Bureau bullshit."

"I'm sorry ma — Ms. Beaumont, I was only extending you professional courtesy."

"I'm not part of the Bureau, Agent Kellogg. And I never was."

"That's not what I heard." Megan turned to give Agent Kellogg the full force of her perfected glare, while wondering what exactly he'd heard about her relationship with Jack.

"Whatever you've been told, Agent Kellogg, it's wrong."

Stan Kellogg's mouth opened and shut for a full minute resembling a fish out of water and then he quietly stepped around to the side of the house with Bubba following close on his heels to keep an eye on him.

Megan heard Dan laugh. "You've changed, Megan. You're not that innocent, small-town girl anymore. All wide-eyed and head-over-heels in love with your boss."

She took a step closer so that only he could hear what she had to say.

"Let's get one thing straight here, Dan. I know you never liked me so you can drop the act. I'm sorry about Rebecca. And for Jack's sake, I wish I could help you with the case but I can't. I don't have the gift anymore. It's gone. I can't help you, Dan."

That he didn't believe her became instantly clear. Dan doubted her abilities in the beginning. Now he didn't believe her lack of them. Instead of calling her a liar, he shoved the folder he held out to her but Megan stepped away.

The photos spilled to the ground at their feet. Crime scene photos. Gruesome photos.

She couldn't stop herself from looking, even though she tried. Rebecca's naked body, tortured and mutilated, wearing the Angel's signature white silk scarf around her eyes. Her throat had been slashed along with other, more deviant forms of torture. Her death would have been welcomed at that point. Rebecca's hands had been untied postmortem. Megan could see the rope marks clearly. Now, they lay crossed in front of her chest, holding a spray of white lilacs.

Everything about the crime scene resembled the Angel of Death's MO. But this case had one thing different from the original Angel victims. Rebecca wasn't wealthy. She didn't come from a moneyed background.

"Was there a quote from the Bible?" Megan asked, unable to stop the question.

"Yes, Exodus 12:23, 'For the Lord will pass through to strike the Egyptians and when He sees the blood on the lintel and on the doorposts, the Lord will pass over the door and not allow the Angel of Death to come into your houses to strike you.' The same as in the original Angel case."

"But they're not the same, Dan. Rebecca and the others' – they aren't the same."

"I thought you didn't have the gift anymore," he said with a smug smile.

"I don't –"

"Then how do you know there were others? Nice try, Megan. You still have it. Even if you don't want it."

"You're wrong. And now I'd like you both to leave."

Dan struggled with growing frustration at her answer before finally accepting he couldn't demand her help.

“All right. I can’t force you can I? Do you mind if I use your restroom before we leave? It’s a long drive back to town.” He didn’t wait for her answer but stepped inside the house, slamming the screen door.

Megan held her breath, praying he wouldn’t see the photos of Emmie scattered around the house. Living on the reservation had its benefits. Not in the least was the sense of security she felt. The crime rate out here was next to nonexistent. Megan rarely locked her door while jogging.

Please don’t let him figure it out.

She stood silently ignoring Agent Kellogg entirely while listening to his attempt at making nice with Bubba. She couldn’t keep from smiling. Stan Kellogg didn’t know this but until Megan gave the word, he would remain Bubba’s enemy.

Dan walked out of the house a short time later. Megan searched his expression for some sign he might have discovered her secret but Dan had once again perfected his Bureau’s blank stare. He walked past her to the driver’s door of the SUV without saying a word. Agent Kellogg moved to the passenger side.

“Tell Jack I’m sorry, okay?” Dan nodded then got into the Suburban.

“It’s good to see you again, Megan. And I mean that. Take care of yourself.” With those parting words still hanging between them, Dan put the Suburban in reverse, turned it around on the dirt drive and sped away.

Leaving the photos of the dead behind.

Megan couldn’t look at them. She listened to the Suburban as it made its way along the dirt road leading out of the reservation. Then she began walking, slowly at first but when that didn’t extinguish their voices she started running. Before long, her footsteps raced across the open desert with only the sound of her labored breathing and Bubba’s thundering gallop overtaking the tortured cries of the dead in her head.

* * * * *

“I’m...what?” Jack felt as if someone had kicked him hard in the gut. He tried to focus on what Dan had just said but Megan’s sad expression, the one she’d worn when he told her he would be going back to Rebecca for a time, filled his thoughts. He couldn’t get it out of his head. He’d put her life in jeopardy. Almost lost her to the Angel—had lost her to the Bureau and now he must learn, secondhand that he’d fathered a child with her?

“What did you say?” he asked again and waited as Dan repeated the same sentence one more time.

“Megan had a baby. A girl.” Dan told him slowly, his expression filled with sympathy.

“So you’re saying—”

“I’m saying you’re a father, Jack. Congratulations, you have a daughter.”

"How do you know this?" Jack asked but knew the answer already. Dan disobeyed a direct command and went to her.

"I saw a picture of the child, Jack. She has your eyes. She's yours. You didn't know, did you?" Jack's shell-shocked expression confirmed the truth easily enough.

"What do you think? Of course, I didn't know. How could I? I haven't seen Megan in years."

"So what are you going to do?" Dan knew Jack well enough to answer this for himself.

"I'm going after her," Jack told him without a moment's hesitation.

"You think that's wise?"

"Wise? Probably not. But I'm going just the same."

Hours later, once on board the flight bound for El Paso, he let his thoughts return to Megan. Jack couldn't think about her reaction to seeing him again and not drop the whole thing. She wouldn't welcome him there. She'd be angry and resentful. The same way she'd reacted at hearing him tell her he needed to go back to Rebecca until the fallout from the Angel case ended.

How many times had he wished he'd just walked away from the job then and there – damn the Bureau and its policies. But he'd thought he was doing the right thing. He couldn't have been more wrong. Jack always wondered how different their lives would have turned out had he simply walked away as he'd wished a thousand times since.

When the captain announced the flight's departure, Jack turned off his cell phone and laptop. The files called out to him but he couldn't look at them yet.

Rebecca had been the deciding factor for him. He knew with her death it was over for him. He'd never be the same again. He'd seen too much. Once they'd solved these copycat cases, as the Bureau had labeled the new killings for the press' sake, he'd leave the Bureau once and for all.

Because of his personal connection to Rebecca, Dan had taken over as lead investigator in her death. Peter figured it would be easier. Unfortunately, Jack soon discovered he had a personal relationship with all the latest victims. He'd been humiliated to learn about his past relationships with the first two victims. He hadn't remembered either of them. College seemed years away but he'd had a brief friendship with one victim and a one-night encounter with the other. As much as Jack wanted to believe this might only be some strange coincidence, he knew better. And he feared the worst. The Angel had decided to make this thing personal.

Six years ago everyone but Megan believed Eddie Stephens, the Angel of Death, died when his car plunged into the Potomac after a high-speed chase, even though his body was never recovered. Now, Jack had begun to see the holes in that theory.

But if Eddie hadn't died that night, then why had he waited six years to resurface? All of the FBI profilers believed serial killers thrived on attention. They loved hearing about their crimes in the press. So where had Eddie been all these years?

Jack closed his eyes and tried to nap. What awaited him in El Paso would be an emotional tug-of-war. But sleep once again proved elusive.

When the seatbelt light went off, he pulled out the folders, glancing around briefly before opening them. The gruesome details contained in those folders would shock most normal people.

The first new victim, Amanda Shelly, bore a striking resemblance to the original Angel death. But the most compelling piece of evidence that the Angel might still be alive came from the name of the victim. Her initials were the same as the Angel's first victim. Whoever did this, enjoyed taunting them, flaunting his victims before them—just like Eddie. But more frightening to him was the name yet to come. Megan's name. Without a doubt, Jack knew the Angel would come after her again.

Chapter Two

"Hey, where are you? Are you coming in to work today or not?" Jessica Ybarra's nineteen-year-old voice filtered through the noise in Megan's head.

"Hi. No, Jess, I'm not feeling very well. Can you handle things on your own today?" Of course, Megan knew she could.

Located in one of the more exclusive shopping areas in El Paso, Megan's boutique, like all the others in the area, had been experiencing a slump in sales due to the time of year. Late Indian summer by most business terms meant a lull in customers.

"Sure. Are you coming down with something?" Jess' arrival in her life had been an answer to prayer. When she walked into Megan's shop two years earlier asking for a job, she proceeded to make Megan's job easier, not to mention more entertaining. Now, at nineteen, Jess was at a crossroads in her life. She wasn't quite ready for college yet. Instead, Jess decided to take a year off from school against her family's wishes. Her father, the corporate attorney, wanted Jess to follow his example like all the other Ybarra children were doing. But Jess' heart leaned more along the lines of relief work abroad.

"No, I think I just overdid it yesterday." Megan didn't miss Jess' girlish giggle and somehow she resisted the urge to remind Jess, once again, that she and Frank Juarez, the captain of her co-ed baseball team, were just friends.

"Okay, I get it," Jess added at Megan's pointed silence. "But for crying out loud would you date again? Or just sleep with the guy. What's it going to hurt? He certainly wants you badly enough. You need to start having some fun before you shrivel up inside."

Jess believed in living in the moment. Megan wished she could be so carefree. Unfortunately, the past stood heavily in her way.

Everyone around town believed Emmie to be the product of Megan's failed marriage to a make-believe ex-husband named Ryan Beaumont, who'd later passed away. It seemed easier to make up a normal past than try and explain her history. Only the Apache people suspected the truth.

Once Megan hung up from Jess, she walked outside to the back deck and sat down. Her head throbbed with pain. The voices of the dead called out to her from their resting place in the dusty front yard where Dan left them. Megan hadn't bothered to pick them up when she returned from her run. She'd simply walked past them, showered and sat down on the back deck with Bubba at her feet, wishing she could ignore them.

Although Dan didn't initially say as much, Megan knew there were others. Two others to be exact. Rebecca would be just his latest. But they all cried out to her, along with Rebecca, the wife of the man she both hated and loved.

Megan had no idea how long she'd been sitting like this. She needed to pick up the folder and put it away somewhere safe before Emmie got home from school but she couldn't bear to touch them. If she touched them, she would feel their pain. And in experiencing their pain, they would become real to her. She'd want to do something to help them. She couldn't. She'd left that part of her life behind in DC. She was a mother now – a boutique owner. She was no longer a psychic.

As much as Megan tried to block out the voices of the dead, she tried even harder to break the link between her grandmother and herself. She couldn't talk to Marie about this and not fall apart. And she couldn't fall apart for Emmie's sake.

When the phone rang once more, Megan didn't need to look at the caller ID to know it would be Marie. She ignored the phone and listened as the answering machine pick up. Marie never left messages. She detested modern technology.

Silently, Megan promised to call her back later.

She found an old box containing clippings of her past successes hidden away in the closet. Megan scooped the case photos up into the box without touching them, then closed the lid and shoved the box onto the highest shelf in her closet, safely out of Emmie's reach. For the moment, the voices grow silent.

It felt as if hours had passed but in fact it was barely noon and she didn't know what to do with herself. Too much empty time for thinking.

Megan's glance slid to the phone, thinking of Jack. If she picked up the phone, would she be able to reach him? Would he even want to hear from her?

Slowly she dialed the familiar number to the CASMIRC headquarters and waited.

"Good afternoon, CASMIRC's DC Division. How may I direct your call?" the pleasant voice of the receptionist inquired politely.

"Agent Jack Montgomery, please."

The silence following her request lengthened along with Megan's fears. One click, followed by another, then another before the receptionist questioned, "May I ask who is calling, please?" It took Megan longer than it should to realize what the clicking noise represented but when she did, she slammed the receiver down.

Idiot! She'd been out of the game far too long. She'd grown rusty. Jack's wife had just been murdered. Of course, they'd monitor his calls for clues.

Megan still stood with the cordless handset in her hand when it rang again and she feared the worst. Surely, not enough time had passed to trace the call. Still, she couldn't pick up.

The answering machine clicked on and her grandmother's frantic voice came into her living room.

"Meggie, it's your grandmother. Meggie if you're there pick up. Child, don't do it. Don't take the case. Don't go back to the past with—"

"Gran, I'm here." Megan picked up the handset wanting only to reassure her grandmother.

"Meggie, don't take the case. It's too dangerous for you."

Of course, Megan knew what her grandmother meant. After all, they both shared the bond of vision.

"I'm not. I'm not taking the case, Gran." Megan paused for the moment before asking slowly, "What have you seen?"

"It doesn't matter." This meant it had been bad. Whenever her grandmother refused to share something, it was bad.

"Tell me, Gran." She remained silent. "Is Emmie in danger?"

Dear God...no.

"No, child but you are." Megan drew much-needed air into her lungs. She couldn't go through this again. She'd almost died the last time.

"Not like that, child. It's far worse than that. Don't go there, Meggie."

She wanted to press for answers but Megan knew Marie wouldn't reveal them to her.

"I'm not taking the case, Gran," she said instead.

"Thank God, Meggie." Marie paused for a moment before asking, "You've seen him again haven't you. He isn't dead."

"Gran, Eddie Stephens is dead. He died that night. That's over. Whoever is doing this now is just a copycat. They'll catch him."

"You don't believe that, Megan. I can tell it in your voice."

"They'll catch him," Megan repeated once more and really tried this time to mean it.

"Without your help?"

"Yes, without my help."

* * * * *

El Paso, Texas appeared to be little more than a place for the desert sand to collect in the middle of nowhere.

Why in God's name had she come here? The heat assaulted Jack the second he walked out of the airport terminal.

Dry desert heat.

Inside the rental car, the temperature felt blistering. Even though it was early evening, the heat showed no sign of letting up.

And Jack didn't have any idea what to say to Megan.

What do you say to someone you haven't seen in six years? How've you been? Oh and by the way, why didn't you tell me I have a child?

He left the airport, still not ready to go to her just yet. He knew very little about her life here. She might be involved with someone. The thought was not nearly as terrifying as his reaction to it.

He passed rows and rows of fast food joints along the highway leaving the airport. Jack pulled into one and got out. He found a phonebook but she wasn't listed.

Megan didn't want anyone finding her.

Dan told him she owned a small boutique in town. He flipped through the yellow pages until he found the name of the shop. Desert Oasis.

He called the number and waited through the fifth ring before the answering machine picked up. Hearing Megan's voice again after so long took him back to other times. He loved the sound of her voice. Soft and sexy, that Texas drawl drove him crazy and reminded him of what it had been like making love to her. The way she whispered his name when he held her close.

Now her sexy voice informed him the store's hours were from nine to six. Jack hung up and glanced at his watch. Just barely five-thirty.

He went back to the rental, punched in location of the shop and drove to the small shopping center in a more upscale section of town where he spotted the Desert Oasis.

Dan told him there had been a light blue BMW SUV parked in front of her house. He could only assume it belonged to Megan. The SUV wasn't here, only a bright orange VW Bug.

He parked next to the Bug and tried the door. The shop was unlocked. When he walked inside, a tiny bell above the door announced his presence to the only person still in the place. A young woman, who barely looked old enough to legally work, stood behind the counter counting the money in the register. She didn't look at him until she'd tallied the last bill.

Her Mexican heritage revealed long flowing black hair, dark eyes and a flawless olive complexion. The combination made her appear fragile, exotic.

For a moment, she didn't say anything but he could tell his appearance had her curious. He didn't fit in.

She stepped from behind the counter and came over to where he stood pretending to look through a group of women's blouses.

"May I help you find something?" She smiled as he fumbled with a hanger. When her eyes met his, something registered. He knew she'd figured it out.

"Well, well. So you're what she's been hiding. I always knew it had to be good. No one moves to this God-forsaken place deliberately, not without having a very good reason. I'm guessing your Megan's reason."

"I beg your pardon?" Jack asked trying not to reveal anything.

"She's not here," she added without explanation.

"Where is she?" The girl didn't answer. She just stared back at him, unnerving him.

"I just want to talk to her."

"Uh huh. Well, you'll have to do better than that. So, who are you and why do you want to talk to Megan? And more importantly, why doesn't she want to talk to you?"

When Jack left the shop, he headed back in the same direction he'd come. He'd learned, among other things from Jessica Ybarra that Megan hadn't gone in to the shop at all today. Maybe after seeing Dan again and hearing about Rebecca she would have kept right on running.

God no.

He waited another fifteen minutes before considering a possible plan. The girl promised to keep her mouth shut but how much weight did he place in that promise? After all, she considered Megan her friend as well as her boss.

Dan said Megan insisted she no longer possessed the gift but Jack didn't believe that for a minute.

Megan had hated her gift from day one. But she'd told him on countless occasions it wasn't something that ever went away. She'd certainly tried enough in the past to block out the images.

So, if he went there now, would she see him coming and run? He'd need to wait until dark at least. Hopefully give himself some advantage.

He stopped in at a Mini Mart and grabbed some cigarettes. Jack had stopped smoking after the first Angel case. But with the long grueling hours he'd put in recently trying to solve the new cases and the unspeakable evil surrounding the death of people he'd known personally, he needed some vice. Smoking beat the hell out of drinking.

He unwrapped the cellophane from the cigarette pack and lit what would be the first of many cigarettes of the evening. The nicotine rushed to his head, sending it spinning for a moment. But the rush didn't stick around long. Soon he'd tossed aside the first and reached for another.

Jack stood outside of the Mini Mart loitering, while those passing by easily pegged him for an outsider. The suit and sunglasses made them suspicious. He hadn't taken the time to change. His mind had been on what lay ahead.

The cigarettes, added to the stress of the day, churned inside his empty stomach. He needed food to counteract their effects. Jack ignored the fast food joints, choosing a somewhat nicer restaurant instead where he hoped to find a quiet table to think about what to say to her.

But too many other thoughts pressed down on him.

God, he wished he could understand how he'd become so enmeshed in this thing. Why had the killer—because he couldn't accept that Eddie might still be out there somewhere waiting to make a fool out of all of them all over again—chosen to make Jack as well as Megan part of his gruesome game this time?

Chapter Three

Emmie had been grumpy and sullen since Megan picked her up at the bus stop hours earlier. She complained about the homework Miss Alopay assigned and took no interest in their usual evening routine of reading. When Emmie's bedtime finally rolled around, Megan's nerves were raw from trying to remain patient with her daughter.

"Okay little girl, off to bed you go." When faced with going to her room, Emmie's sullenness turned to tears. She clung to her mother's waist and sobbed.

"Mommie, I can't sleep in there! There are too many noises!" Megan's pulse skipped a beat at her daughter's confession.

She picked Emmie up in her arms, "Honey, what are you talking about? What noises?" The only sound in the house came from the low murmur of the TV in the living room.

Please, God, not the voices of the dead...

"It's too quiet," was Emmie's tearful response. But at least Megan could breathe again.

"Then we'll turn the radio on in your room to help you sleep and Bubba can stay with you this one time, okay. Come on baby, you need to get some rest." Megan untangled Emmie's clinging arms and kissed her gently. With all of Emmie's emotional turmoil, sleep was not long in coming. Megan barely finished one page of the book they'd been reading before her daughter drifted off.

With Emmie finally out, Megan closed the door confident in Bubba's abilities and returned to the living room to the comforting sound of the TV.

Sleep for her would not be possible. Now that she knew about the dead, the dreams of the Angel of Death would be more real and more frightening than ever. They took on the feeling of a reality waiting for fulfillment.

Inside her top dresser drawer, way in the back, she found the silk scarf. Megan kept it to remember, not that she needed much help.

The second her fingers touched the silk, Eddie appeared before her. Even though she'd never seen his face, she knew his smile. Strangely innocent, it made her wonder again how someone like Eddie could lure all those women to their deaths. But then, Eddie wasn't a monster until he found his victims, just a sweet, well-mannered kid. Attractive even, in a boy-next-door kind of way. Every young girl's dream until the truth appeared.

Megan took the scarf and stuffed it into the box with the photos. Tomorrow she would burn them all. And then, she would make plans to leave El Paso behind, because the sanctuary she so longed for no longer felt safe.

Sitting in the dark, in her favorite chair, somehow, she must have drifted off for a moment. She was awakened to the sound of a door closing softly somewhere within the house.

“Emmie,” Megan whispered into the darkness only to have someone’s hand cover her mouth forcing the breath from her body.

Oh God – Emmie! Her thoughts were all for her daughter sleeping close by. Megan struggled to free herself from her attacker, her fingers searching frantically beneath the cushion of the chair.

Working for the Bureau taught her to expect the unexpected. She’d expected this moment for years. But only she knew about the gun. Her fingers had just wrapped around its grip when suddenly her assailant realized what she intended to do.

“I wouldn’t, Megan. I really wouldn’t.” His familiar voice slipped out of her fantasies, coming back to her from the past she’d tried so hard to leave behind – along with the Angel.

Jack! Jack Montgomery was here!

The gun surprised him. But then, in the beginning Megan had detested weapons. She still remembered how Jack had to force her into learning how to use one when they were working the Angel case. She’d taken to it easily enough. Almost as easily as she’d given him her heart.

Megan pushed those memories aside. She couldn’t think about loving Jack now. Not when the flesh and blood version of him was standing close enough to feel each heartbeat, reminding her of all the times past when he’d held her close after making love. She needed to remain strong. Anger was the only way.

Jack took the gun from her unresisting fingers, tucking it behind his back.

“Don’t scream. Don’t you dare scream, Megan.”

She nodded against his hand and he slowly released her. In an instant, Megan got to her feet and put much-needed space between them.

“What the hell do you think you are doing here, Jack?” she hissed keeping her voice as low as possible in spite of the emotion it carried. “Get out! I don’t want you here.”

“You don’t want me here?” Jack asked incredulously. He stepped into the light of the TV and looked at her with all the anger and resentment she’d dreaded for so long. “When were you planning on telling me I had a daughter, Megan?”

For a moment, she couldn’t get words to come out of her mouth. Her stormy gaze slipped over him in disbelief.

“Never. I never planned to tell you about Emmie.”

He still looked the same. How was that possible? Handsome. Strong. Familiar. Incredibly sexy. But then, she’d seen him each night her dreams. She knew every inch of

him by heart and every inch of Jack Montgomery still possessed the power to take her breath away and make her long for him to the point of giving up everything to be with him.

But not her daughter.

She watched Jack struggle with her answer. She wouldn't blame him if he hated her for not sharing their child. She almost hoped he did. It would make seeing him again easier.

"Dammit, Megan, I had the right to know I'd fathered a child from our —"

"From our what? Our affair? Why?" She stood defiantly before him, refusing to give in to the need to back away when he moved closer. The expected hate wasn't there in the same gray eyes she saw each morning in their daughter.

But there was no mistaking Jack's anger.

"It meant more than that and you know it. I loved you! You were the one who walked away from us, Megan, not me."

"You went back to your wife! What did you expect me to do? Hang around and become the laughingstock of DC? For once it wasn't just about you or your precious Bureau, Jack!"

"I thought you didn't give a damn what the Bureau thought about you?" he said, his mouth twisting wryly.

"I didn't. But I cared about us. I cared about me. I left because of me, not your precious Bureau."

"I did what I thought was best for everyone involved, Megan. Including you."

Megan fought to control the raw pain once more. He was lying. For Jack the only thing that mattered was the Bureau. "Don't lie."

"It's true," he repeated more softly. His husky whisper still filled her with longing. "I thought about calling you a thousand times. But then I kept remembering the look in your eyes when I told you about going back to Rebecca. I didn't want to hurt you anymore."

"Very touching, Jack. But you'll forgive me if I don't believe you. If that was true why are you here now? Let me guess — Rebecca's case?"

"You think I came because of the case? Dammit, Megan, I came for my daughter." They faced each other in a silent battle of wills, like so many times in the past, both completely unaware of the little girl who joined them until Emmie spoke.

"Mommie, she's scared!" Emmie's frightened words brought Megan's attention to her daughter in an instant. Tears streamed down her flushed cheeks. Emmie's eyes were glazed but not from sleep. Megan recognized that familiar look too well.

Dear God — no!

"Baby, it's okay. You're just having a bad dream." Silently she pleaded for Jack not to say anything.

"No, Mommie, she's scared for real. She's scared for real!" Emmie began to cry earnestly out of fear. Megan knelt in front of her daughter, taking her by her arms. She could feel her daughter's shivering running through her tiny body.

"Who's scared, Emmie?"

"Jessica, Momma," she said through hiccupping sobs. "She's afraid of the man."

Megan's breath lodged against her throat. From close behind, she registered Jack's shocked reaction.

"Oh God. She has the gift?" There was no denying the dread in that question.

"No she doesn't." Megan threw him a warning look but her thoughts were all for her assistant Jessica.

"What about Jess, baby? What is she afraid of?"

"I told you, Mommie. The man. He's coming to hurt her. She's afraid of him." Emmie's tiny voice broke into another round of sobbing. She clung to Megan, who picked her up in her arms, heading for the phone while praying this truly would turn out to be just a bad dream on Emmie's part.

"Baby, it's okay, Jessica is fine. I'm going to call her right now so you can see."

It took Jess more than a dozen rings to pick up. "Hello?" Megan could tell from her voice that she'd been sleeping.

"Jess, are you okay?"

"Megan—is that you? What are you talking about, of course I'm okay. Do you know what time it is?"

"Jess, I know and I'm sorry but are you sure everything's okay there?" Megan asked while trying to keep from alarming Emmie as well as Jessica.

"I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be? Is this about that man who stopped by the shop today? Jeez, Megan, couldn't it wait until morning? I was sound asleep until you called."

"Good. I'm sorry—no, what man?" Megan glanced at Jack and saw the truth. "Never mind that now. Jess, don't go back to sleep just yet, okay. I'll call you right back." Megan didn't wait for Jess to argue before hanging up the phone.

She soothed her daughter's hair from her eyes. "See baby, Jessica is fine. Now you need to go back to bed."

Emmie's eyelids had begun to grow heavy until she spotted Jack.

"Mommie who's that man?"

Megan's gaze collided with Jack's. Before he could say anything, she stopped him.

"Baby, let's get you back into bed. We'll talk about this in the morning, okay? Now close your eyes," Megan lowered her daughter back into her bed and pulled the covers up over her.

"Sleep tight, baby. I'll leave the hall light on and the door open. It was only a bad dream, Emmie. Okay?"

“Okay, Mommie.” Emmie rolled over onto her side, already fast asleep.

When she turned to leave Emmie’s room, Jack stood in the doorway, blocking her exit. Emotions long since buried resurfaced between them in an instant before he quietly stepped aside and followed Megan back to the living room. When she reached for the phone again, he stopped her.

“What are you doing? I’m calling Sheriff Hanson.”

“No, you’re not.” When she would have ignored him, he stopped her, “Wait just a second, Megan.” She stood staring back at him, with the phone still in her hand, angry with him—with God for giving Emmie the gift. But most of all, angry with herself for still caring about Jack Montgomery.

“Why? Jessie might be in danger.”

“I’ll send someone to keep an eye on her. She’ll be safe, I promise. But you and I have to talk. I want answers, Megan. Does my daughter have the gift or not?”

Megan didn’t trust Jack or his reasons for being here tonight. He still belonged to the Bureau. She couldn’t trust him not to use Emmie’s gift the way the Bureau used her.

“She doesn’t have the gift, okay, Jack?” she told him at last and tried to sound convincing.

“Then what was that all about just now and why are you so worried about your friend?” When Megan didn’t answer he added, “She does, doesn’t she? You told me once that it manifests itself in different ways. Emmie can see into the future. Can’t she? Dammit, answer me, Megan!”

“I don’t know,” Megan said quietly.

“What do you mean you don’t know? You told me you knew you had the gift when you were still a child. Around Emmie’s age, wasn’t it?” He watched her stubbornly ignore his question. “Answer the damn question, Megan.”

“I don’t know! I don’t know, okay and you know what—it doesn’t matter. I don’t care if she does have the gift, she will never know about it.”

“Megan,” Jack took a step closer but she turned away.

“Are you going to help me or do I call Sheriff Hanson?”

Jack took the phone from her and called the local sheriff’s office, identifying himself. He directed the sheriff to sit on Jessica’s house but not to bother the girl unless something happened.

“Call your friend back and tell her everything’s fine.” Megan started to protest when he added, “There’s no use bringing this to her door tonight. It can keep until morning, surely.”

After Megan called Jess back she found Jack in her kitchen making coffee. He looked a little too familiar there for her comfort. Megan forced aside memories of all the times they’d made dinner together, made love with abandon and worked throughout the night at her small apartment in DC.

"It's going to be a long night. You look as if you could use some as well." She took the cup he handed her and sat down at the table.

"Why did you go to the shop today?" she asked quietly.

Jack's gaze slipped over her before answering, "Isn't it obvious? I went looking for you."

Megan nodded without speaking. She could only imagine what went through Jess' head when she saw Jack. Since she'd walked into her life, Jess had constantly tried to uncover Megan's secrets.

"Why her, Megan? Why do you think he would pick this girl?"

"Who are you talking about?" She knew. But she needed him to deny it.

"You know who. The Angel. Eddie. Whoever the hell is doing these killings. Why pick your friend. How did he know about her?"

She wished she could answer that. "I don't know."

"Did you talk to her today or see her?"

"Oh God – she called." Her worried gaze met his. "She called me earlier today."

"Who else have you spoken to today?" he asked quietly, trying not to alarm her.

There had been only one other call. Her grandmother.

"Marie."

"I'll send someone over there as well. Until we know what's going on here, they'll both need to be in protective custody."

Megan nodded without answering. She couldn't believe this was happening again.

"Anyone else?" Megan glanced up and found him watching her. For a moment, she couldn't think clearly. Not with Jack standing so close. Not when she felt this vulnerable.

"I don't know. I don't remember,"

Jack scrolled through the called numbers on the phone. Too late, she remembered her call to the Bureau.

"You called the Bureau? Why?" Another pause and then he asked, "You were calling me, weren't you? Why Megan?"

Reluctantly her eyes meet his but she couldn't answer. She still didn't understand why she'd needed to call him.

"Why now, Megan? After all this time?"

"I don't know. I wanted to...I wanted to tell you how sorry I was about Rebecca." Their eyes locked. She wanted to say so much more but she didn't trust herself or him.

Jack's cell phone chirped and he turned away, breaking the spell. She could breathe again.

Megan sat listening to the voices of the dead calling out to her once more. And above their cries, she heard his voice. Eddie's voice. The Angel's voice taunting her.

"I've asked the Austin police to pick Marie up for me." Jack's voice quietly reassured her over the others.

"Thank you, Jack."

"I'm taking Emmie as well," he added in a tone that discouraged argument.

"No, you're not. You are not taking my daughter from me." Megan got to her feet and faced him once more. "I won't let you."

He stepped closer, a controlled anger in every inch of him.

"She's my daughter as well." When she tried to protest, he silenced her. "I have no intention of walking away from Emmie, now that I know about her, Megan, so you'd better learn to deal with sharing her with me."

"I won't let you take her away from me!"

Jack released his breath slowly, giving in for the moment. "I'm not talking about taking her from you, Megan but she is my child and she needs to know she has a father who cares about her."

When Megan could no longer hold his gaze he asked, "What did you tell her about me?"

Megan didn't know how to confess her sins to him. "She thinks her father is dead."

"For God's sake, Megan, how could you do this to me?" he asked. The heartbreaking reality of how wrong her decision had been was there in his eyes. She'd thought she'd done the right thing for everyone involved. Now Megan wasn't so sure.

"Jack, I thought—"

"What? You thought you could make all the decisions about our child and never expect me to find out?"

"Yes—no, I don't know. I just thought I was doing the best thing for all of us. The right thing."

Jack let out an explosive growl. "You had no right to make that decision for me. Dammit, Megan, I should have been told. I had the right—I earned that right."

"You had no rights," she told him, her anger matching his. "You made your decision."

He came toward her once more but this time Megan backed away.

"Did you know about the baby before you left? Did you? Answer me, dammit." He reached for her, his fingers gripping her arms tightly.

"No! No, I didn't know. But you know what, it wouldn't have mattered because I still would have handled things the same way."

Jack released her as if the touch of her sickened him.

He started to say something but then turned away, unable to look at her.

All the hurt she'd stored up inside came rushing to the surface. "Don't you dare try to pretend you're innocent in this. You tell me you came for Emmie but if that were true why aren't you sending me away with her?"

Jack turned back to her in disbelief. "You think —"

"You need my help. Admit it. That's the only reason you're here now."

"Dammit Megan, how dare you think that of me? I'm here because of Emmie and you. I wanted to —" Before he could finish the phone rang again, leaving Megan with the impression he'd been close to saying something important.

When'd he finished speaking, he appeared calmer. Jack sat down at the table slowly before saying, "Let's just get one thing straight right now, Megan. There is absolutely no way I'm walking away from my daughter — ever. If I have to fight you in court I will but I will be part of Emmie's life. And you and I can either work together to bring up our daughter, or we can fight it out in court. It's your choice. But I think you should realize your odds aren't looking too good right now — not after keeping her birth secret from me for all these years."

Megan's fingers trembled around the cup she gripped tightly in an attempt to hide her fear from him. Always in the back of her mind, she'd known this day would come.

"You'd take her from me, Jack? You'd actually do that?"

His gaze never left hers. "If I have to." He'd seen her fear. Jack still had the ability to read her like a book.

"Megan, look, why don't we call a truce for now," he added gently. "Until whatever's going on here with your friend and Marie is settled, I think it's best that we don't talk about this. We're both too emotional and I can't think about it and not want to wring your neck." He stopped when he spotted her reaction.

"As well as Emmie's safety, the people you care about are in danger here, Megan. I need your cooperation."

He meant he needed her help.

"I told you, I can't help you solve Rebecca's murder. I don't have the gift anymore."

"You're lying, Megan. Now is not the time to reject your gift."

She moved to the window. She needed time to steady her frayed nerves. The waning full moon reflected back the quiet desert. Nothing stirred beyond the window. Not even Bubba, who had moved beneath the kitchen table and lay listening to their conversation and occasionally growling at Jack.

"It's not a gift, Jack. It has never been a gift." She turned back to him, shocked by the tenderness in his eyes. She rejected it as just another ploy to gain her cooperation.

"I know you believe that. But no matter how hard you try to deny it, or run away to the middle of nowhere to escape it, it exists still. Doesn't it?"

"Yes," she admitted at last. He got to his feet and came to her. Just for a moment, she let herself go into his arms, accepting his strength.

For a long time, neither said a word. It felt right somehow. But she'd been on her own far too long to allow herself to lean on anyone for long. Certainly not Jack Montgomery.

* * * * *

Jack had thought about this moment for so long. Through all the countless dreams about her, he'd ached to touch her for real just one more time. But now that he had, it wasn't enough. He wanted more of her. All of her.

Seeing his daughter, his flesh and blood, looking like a miniature version of her mother had shaken him to his core. It made him remember all the things he'd wanted long ago. Things like a family – children, a normal life. Jack thought he'd let that dream slip away.

Megan felt so good in his arms. He wanted to keep right on holding her, touching her forever. God, he wished he could stay here with her and leave the horror of death behind in DC. Believe that maybe it wasn't too late for them after all.

"Megan?" His lips brushed against her soft cheek. He felt her tremble in response. The years had changed her. She'd grown up. Become more confident in her own skin. But here in his arms she was the same woman he'd loved in the past. The same woman he still loved.

She didn't answer but for the moment, it didn't matter. He just wanted to hold her. He could feel his body awakening to hers. And so could she.

She pulled away. Reluctantly he let her go. When her eyes meet his there were tears there. Jack closed his against the raw pain he saw in hers. The past had crept between them again.

"Megan, I'm sorry I hurt you. I know how difficult my going back to Rebecca must have been for you but surely you realize there wasn't anything left between us. Rebecca knew this. It was all for show. To save the Bureau's reputation."

"Reputation?" She moved further away. His arms fell to his sides as he faced her condemnation again. "Dammit Jack, I should have meant more to you than the stupid reputation of the Bureau. You were everything to me! I gave up everything to be with you because I loved you and you couldn't do the same for me."

"I did do the same thing for you. What are you talking about? I told you why I went back to Rebecca. I asked you to wait for me. But you ran away. You didn't tell me where you were going. I assumed you never wanted to see me again. You weren't honest with me either, Megan. You never told me about our child."

"You gave me no choice! I certainly couldn't count on you being there for me. You were married too –"

"It was a sham and you knew it. We were waiting for things to calm down with the press before divorcing."

"I'm talking about the Bureau. You were married to the Bureau, Jack, not Rebecca. You still are. No woman could ever compete with that."

"Is that what you think?" he asked incredulously, taking a step closer.

Megan answered his move with one of her own, stepping away from him.

"It's what I know."

“You know nothing, Megan. I haven’t stopped loving you since the day I met you. I’ll never stop loving you. You’re all I’ve thought about for six years. And nothing can ever replace you in my heart. Nothing – especially not the Bureau.”

Chapter Four

Megan turned and walked out of the room without another word. Before he could see how much his declaration of love unsettled her. She needed time to think clearly and she couldn't while looking into his eyes. Jack could make her do anything he wanted with a single look. But it was too late for them. She couldn't go back to that hurt again.

Emmie must be the only thing that mattered to her. Emmie's safety. She would do whatever it took to stop that monster from hurting her child.

She sat down on the bed and watched Emmie sleep. Her baby girl slept peacefully in bed, unaware of the dark things being discussed close by. Megan prayed that sweet innocence would always remain and that Emmie would never have to know about the gift she possessed.

"Is she okay?" he asked her quietly once Megan returned to the kitchen.

"Yes." She poured more coffee mostly because she needed something to occupy her hands. She could feel him reaching out to her again. It took both hands to steady the cup enough and bring it to her lips. Silently Megan recited the familiar words of an old hymn her grandmother Marie taught her years ago. Always her last defense against the horror.

The words of the hymn silenced his voice.

"There are others aren't there, Jack? Besides Rebecca."

She turned to see him smiling a little sadly at her. God, she used to love that smile. It promised so many things.

"I thought you didn't have the gift anymore?" he said in an attempt to lighten the tension between them.

She ignored it. "How many?"

Jack grew serious once more. For the first time, Megan noticed he'd aged. Still just as attractive and seductive as before but time and his wife's recent death had not been kind. She looked closer and saw that his dark chestnut hair showed hints of gray at the temple. Evidence of the horrors he'd witnessed. Fine worry lines fanned out around his eyes and mouth. The dark circles proof enough of the many sleepless nights.

But to her, he'd never looked more handsome than he did at this moment.

"Two." Jack told her quietly. "Rebecca became his third." Jack sat down across from her. "He's copying the Angel. There will be three more."

Megan didn't know how much to reveal to him. "He's not copying, Jack. He's continuing."

"You still believe Eddie is alive, don't you?" When she didn't answer right away, Jack himself answered the question for her. "He still comes to you."

"Yes."

"You don't believe we got him. You never did."

"I don't know anymore." She met those beautiful gray eyes so like her daughter's. "I don't know, Jack." Megan still resented the personal connection she had with the Angel but she couldn't deny it. In his mind, she belonged to him.

"Maybe it's not the Angel at all."

"It is. It is him, Jack. You know it is. This feeling has been growing stronger over the past few weeks. He's back. I don't know how but he is back."

Jack ran a weary hand over his eyes. "The first murder took place three weeks ago. The anniversary of the first Angel killing. There's been one on each anniversary date since. He's repeating his past history."

"Why now? Where has he been all this time? Serial killers rarely stop killing until they're caught. They thrive on the publicity. He wouldn't just stop killing, would he?"

"I don't know. But I think we have to figure this out before the next anniversary. Because if we don't, he's coming after you, Megan."

She fought back the nausea always there whenever she remembered that night and Melissa, the woman who took her place.

Eddie kidnapped Megan took her to the vacant building and then out of some sadistic game, let her listen while he tortured and killed Melissa Billings.

At the time, Megan hadn't realized she was pregnant. She'd come so close to death that night. At times, she could still taste the fear as if it were only yesterday.

"It doesn't make any sense. Were the other girls from wealthy backgrounds?" Jack confirmed with a single shake of his head what Megan knew in her heart already.

"Then why switch signatures? It's virtually unheard of."

"Megan, I wish I knew but none of this fits the profile. Which is why, I think we have to start at the beginning. We missed something in Eddie's past. Something important. We have to find it, Megan. Before it's too late."

"What do you want to do?" She felt dread and unwillingness well up inside at what lay ahead of them. She knew the answer already but she wasn't sure she had the strength to go through it again.

"Start at the beginning – back before Eddie made the decision to kill his first victim. We need to go back to the beginning, Megan."

* * * * *

Something woke Megan from a sound sleep. She glanced down to see Emmie sleeping next to her.

Quietly, she slipped out of bed without waking her daughter. It was just becoming light outside and she was dressed in only her bra and panties.

Jack. So many unwelcome memories came back to her as she searched around the room looking for her clothes. They were lying neatly folded on Emmie's dresser.

Megan's dressed quickly, shoving aside the memories of Jack's lovemaking. It had always been so intense between them. Why had she expected their reunion to be any different?

In the kitchen, a fresh pot of coffee brewed but Jack didn't appear to be anywhere in sight. She listened to the silence of the house and heard the shower running next to her bedroom.

Megan poured coffee while the pot still dripped through then walked out into a different morning. Everything appeared the same. The desert heat had already reached an unbearable temperature even at six in the morning but everything had changed. Nothing would ever be the same again.

Bubba joined her on the porch, lying next to her feet as she sat in her favorite rocker, the one she'd rocked Emmie to sleep in as a baby each night, while contemplating her future alone.

"What are you thinking about?" The intensity in his voice startled her. It didn't belong here in her quiet sanctuary. She couldn't look at him but the scent of her shampoo, which he'd used reached out to her through the distance separating them.

She should be embarrassed that he had been the one to undress her. But there were no secrets left between them. The final one disappeared last night.

And everything about him seemed familiar again.

"I'm trying to see the future."

Jack sat down next to her. "I thought that wasn't your thing."

Megan reluctantly smiled at that reminder. Sometimes she used to wonder if maybe he didn't possess his own version of the gift. He certainly understood her thoughts well enough.

She looked sideways at him. Seeing him in the faint light of morning, confirmed the truth. Yes, he'd aged. Jack would be thirty-eight by now. But he wore it well, she decided.

The hint of gray at his temples made him look more distinguished. A few more serious lines around those dove-gray eyes and the groove close to his sensuous mouth reminded her of the way he used to sometimes smile when he wasn't being entirely too serious. She sensed that Jack didn't smile all that much anymore.

"I really am sorry about Rebecca, Jack. I can't even begin to imagine your pain."

"Yes. It was hard to get through. I identified her." Megan couldn't keep her compassion from showing.

"Oh, Jack. I'm so sorry."

"We were divorced almost six years ago, Megan. I didn't love her but she was my friend."

For some reason, this surprised her. Maybe because Jack always seemed to be the type of man to stick with things until there was no hope left. She'd been the only exception that she knew of. Maybe Rebecca was as well.

He read her thoughts as clearly as if she'd said them aloud. He didn't like her opinion of him but he changed the subject without challenging it. Things were becoming too personal between them. Best to leave the past where it lay for now.

"Emmie will be going with Marie to a safe place. They'll stay there until this thing is settled. Sheriff Hanson is taking Jessica somewhere safe as well. And that's all you should know for now."

Megan didn't answer. She understood. The less she knew about their location the less she could reveal to the Angel.

"I'll tell Emmie. She'll be thrilled that's she's getting out of school for a while. Our daughter hates school."

Before she could walk away, Jack caught her hand, keeping her there.

"You've done a good job with her, Megan. She's going to be okay. We're going to be okay. We'll figure this out, Meggie. Don't worry so much."

The tenderness in his voice brought tears to her eyes. Megan pulled away before he could spot them. She remembered past times when he'd called her by that familiar name. She couldn't think about those times.

She found Emmie wide-awake and sitting up in bed.

Megan sat down next to her. "Emmie, I have a surprise for you."

"I know. I'm not going to school today, am I? I'm going to stay with Grandma." Megan searched her daughter's innocent expression before answering.

"Yes, that's right."

"It's because of him, isn't it, Mommie." For a second Megan thought Emmie referred to Jack.

"No, no baby."

"Yes it is, Mommie. It's the man I told you about last night. The man from my dreams. The bad man."

By Emmie's age, Megan had known about her gift for several years. Her grandmother insisted on being honest with her about the gift right from the very first manifestation. But there had been many times through the years that Megan wished she hadn't been so open.

"Yes, it is. Baby, have you seen this man before?" Emmie didn't want to think about the dream but reluctantly she confirmed Megan's worst fears.

"How many times? Does he always come to you in your dreams?"

"I dunno. I can't remember," Emmie added growing more upset as she tried to recall.

"Baby, I need to know how he comes to you." Emmie's five-year-old mind struggled to find the right words to describe her very adult gift.

"I dunno! He just does! Sometimes when I am sleeping but mostly when I'm just thinking."

"Can you tell me what he looks like, baby?" She asked then became aware of Jack standing in the doorway. Emmie's gaze went to his for a moment before returning to her mother. Megan had feared this moment for a long time. But Emmie would need to know the truth about her father.

"Emmie, I want to talk to you some more about the man before you leave to be with Grandma but first I need to tell you about our visitor." She turned to Jack for help. She couldn't do this alone. He moved to her side.

"Emmie, this is Jack Montgomery. Emmie, Jack is your father."

Megan held her breath, waiting for her daughter's reaction.

Please don't let her hate me.

Emmie struggled with this information for only a moment.

"I know, Mommie." Her tentative gray eyes met Jack's for a second then she climbed out of bed. Megan stopped her before she could leave the room.

"Emmie, wait. Honey, what do you mean you know? How do you know?"

Emmie took a baby step closer to Jack before looking him square in the eye. As Megan watched father and daughter assess each other, she was amazed at the similarities she'd never noticed before. The personality traits Emmie shared with Jack were all there, including the stubbornness. The way they both looked so intense at times, as if the weight of the world rested on their shoulders alone. Even the way Emmie stood now reminded Megan of Jack. She was her father's daughter.

"I saw you!" Emmie exclaimed, her solemn expression becoming accusing. "You were supposed to come before. I tried to tell you but you didn't listen!" Jack's shocked gaze slipped to Megan's as Emmie ran crying from the room.

"What did she mean by that?" Jack's sounded shaken.

"I-I don't know..."

While Megan and Jack struggled to understand their daughter's words, they could hear Emmie's reluctant footsteps returning to the room, carrying her stuffed dragon, Petie. Marie gave it to her for her third birthday. Megan always thought it an odd gift for a child but Emmie adored it.

"Mommie, I'm hungry. Can we make pancakes for breakfast?"

Jack's stunned expression held Megan's before he chuckled softly at the innocence in Emmie's request. In the middle of utter chaos, after hearing truths that would confuse most adults, Emmie reminded them both that life in its simplicity still existed.

"Sure, baby. Why don't you and Petie go find Bubba? I'll be right there."

Once they were alone again, Jack sank down on the bed next to Megan. She'd never seen him look so at a loss.

"God, Megan, I don't know the first thing about kids. Especially not little girls. Especially not little girls with so much insight. You're going to have to help me with this."

She touched his face gently and smiled. "I will but don't worry, you'll do fine."

"I think we should try to find out more about Emmie's dreams before she leaves, don't you?"

"Absolutely not! Jack, hasn't she been frightened enough already? She doesn't understand what those dreams mean. She can't help you identify him and I won't have her gift exploited by the Bureau."

"You mean the way we exploited you?" he asked unexpectedly. Megan didn't answer.

"All right, believe it or not, I don't want to see her hurt either. But right now I'm just desperate enough to go grasping at anything."

"I know that, Jack," she said quietly.

"Don't worry, I've asked Dan personally to escort Emmie and Marie someplace safe."

"Thank you." She got to her feet then smiled sympathetically down at him. "Come on. I think its time you spent some time with your daughter."

Megan ignored her daughter's silent pleadings and left Emmie and Jack sitting together on the front porch in an uncomfortable silence with Bubba standing guard close by.

Sharing Emmie with someone other than her grandmother might prove to be the hardest thing she'd ever had to do but Megan had made so many mistakes with Emmie already, starting with the first, the biggest one of all. Not telling Jack about his daughter. Whatever happened between them in the past, he deserved to be part of Emmie's life. And Emmie needed her father as well.

While Megan prepared the pancakes, she listened to the silence outside until she couldn't stand it any longer. She was halfway to the front door when Jack made the first move toward trying to win his daughter's favor and his first mistake. He said something unflattering about Petie.

Megan smiled to herself and then returned to the pancakes. Jack would need to sort this out alone. He'd learn in time.

By the time the pancakes were ready, Jack and Emmie had decided to make nice even though they were still far from being friends. But they both were stubborn. There would be many battles ahead for them.

* * * * *

With Emmie gone, the silence between himself and Megan became hard to take. They'd always been able to talk to each other about anything. But then, he couldn't really blame her for this strain. The things he'd seen over the past six years and her absence from his life had made him hard. He knew how to be a detective; he didn't know how to be with her anymore or even if they might have a future together.

"What?" she asked when she spotted him staring at her.

"Nothing, I'm only thinking how different you are from the young girl I knew in DC."

When her eyes meet his again, he fought to release air for his lungs. Something he imagined lost forever passed between them. Desire. Passion. Love. All there. And she felt it too.

Jack stepped closer and watched Megan close her eyes, fighting it. His fingers brushed across her cheek and she trembled. Their bodies were close enough to touch but they weren't touching.

His lips touched the corner of her mouth. She softened against him for a moment then pushed him away.

"No! No, Jack."

"Megan, stop fighting it. You know you feel it too." He touched her arm and felt her pull away.

"You're wrong. That part of our relationship is over, Jack. We can't bring it back. It's too late."

He swore softly beneath his breath but moved away from her. Megan's gaze found his once more. The space between them seemed to shrink along with the air in the room. Everything but the woman before him ceased to matter.

"You know that's not true." He took another deep breath and tried to steady his voice. "You think I don't feel how your body responds whenever I'm close?" She could no longer look at him.

"No. That's not true."

"It is, Megan."

"Well, it doesn't matter. That part is over for me. I'm helping you for Emmie's sake Jack—nothing more. And once this is over, you and I will work out a schedule that's agreeable for us so that you can see Emmie but that's it. There will never be anything more between us again, Jack. That part of our life together is over!" She didn't look at him again as she turned and left him standing alone.

For the first time in his life he didn't know what to do.

Jack sat alone in the living room with the files spread out before him. There were the new cases as well as the files of the Angel's past victims. Without looking up, he knew Megan had joined him again.

"We've missed something. I've missed something," he amended as she handed him another cup of coffee. "I've been over this stuff a thousand times but I can't see it." His glance found her reluctant one. "You've been away from the case for a while. Maybe you can find what I'm missing."

Megan sat down on the floor next to him but not too close. Jack figured he deserved that.

He handed her the oldest case files and studied her silently. The voices—she could hear them. It felt like old times again. This was how they'd worked the original cases. Usually at Megan's small Westminster apartment. They'd always ended up in each other's arms, consumed by the passion they couldn't control. And no matter how much Megan wanted to deny that passion now, she still felt it. Just the way Jack felt it.

The Angel's first victim had been the only one he'd had any known connection with. Eddie's mother worked for Amy Sinclair's parents as their housekeeper. Amy had reportedly spurned his advances leading to what the Bureau profilers believed had been the final straw in the making of a serial killer.

Megan picked up the photo from the crime scene. They'd discovered Amy's nude body in an abandoned warehouse twenty miles away from her family home. Eddie hadn't quite perfected his technique with Amy. He didn't leave his legendary calling card of white lilacs or the biblical scripture. That came later. With Carrie Olson—victim number two.

Jack watched Megan's familiar routine as she touched the photo of Amy. He saw it in her eyes before she shut them tight. She could feel the victim's terror. Even now after all these years, it would be just as real and raw to her as it had been all those years ago. The photo slipped from her fingers. She reached for the pages of documentation instead.

Amy's parents reported her missing after she didn't return home from a date with her boyfriend. Most of the local police who were good friends of the Sinclair family suspected the boyfriend right away, because of the family's dislike of Amy's boyfriend. Unfortunately, all the time wasted in pursuing what turned out to be a dead end also cost them precious time. The locals dismissed obvious clues early on in the investigation, which might have yielded valuable leads. It took longer than it should to connect Amy's death with the other Angel murders.

Jack got to his feet and refilled both their coffee cups without Megan being aware of his absence at all. She'd become lost in the dark shadows of the past.

He watched her pick up the second victim's folder, careful not to touch Carrie's photo. Carrie's abduction and murder happened a short time later. The horror she suffered at the hands of Eddie Stephens would have been indescribable. He'd gone over the top with her.

"Are you okay?" Jack asked when he returned from refilling their coffee cups. Her eyes appeared slightly glazed when they meet his. He could only describe this look as someone emerging from a trance. She took the mug he offered gratefully before shaking her head.

"It doesn't get easier. Even after all these years. Even knowing we did everything we could for them. It's still hard."

"I know they're hard to take. Don't look at the photos, Megan. Just concentrate on the evidence."

Jack shifted through the files and found the first new case. "Here, you start with Amy and I'll start with Amanda, Eddie's first new victim. The DC police found Amanda on the anniversary of Amy's murder at a similar location. An abandoned warehouse."

She looked at him strangely before asking, "Do you realize what you just said?"

He drew a blank. "What? About the DC police finding Amanda's body in an abandoned warehouse?"

"No, you referred to the killer as Eddie. You believe this is Eddie's work as well."

"I don't know. I guess maybe I do," he admitted slowly. "God, Megan, where the hell has he been for six years?"

Megan didn't answer. She turned her attention back to the files, scanning through the information she could almost recite word for word before closing it.

"Jack, I don't know what else to look for here. Maybe you'd better read what you have. What's the first victim's name again?"

"Amanda Shelly." He saw her reaction and added, "Yes, I know. Its like he's duplicating them all over again and yet he's not. Amanda wasn't from a wealthy family. She worked for a high-tech company in Richmond. She'd been working late, catching up on some paperwork the night he took her."

"He took her from her office building? Was there video?"

Jack shook his head. "The machine had been broken for weeks. Probably by Eddie. He would have been watching her for some time. The cleaning crew reported her missing around five-thirty the next morning when they arrived at work. No one remembered seeing anything out of the ordinary happening during the weeks before. No reported problems in her life as far as her parents knew. She had the perfect life. And now she's dead."

"Boyfriends?"

"Well, that's where the similarities with Amy end. Amanda's parents told us she'd decided to take some time off from dating to focus on her career."

"Were they the same age?"

"No, Amy had just turned twenty-one. Amanda was thirty-eight. Different birthdays as well."

“What about friends—acquaintances. Did they know any of the same people? I realize they ran in different social circles and they weren’t the same age but maybe there’s a connection somewhere in the people they knew.”

“I thought of that. We’ve checked them all. They didn’t know any of the same people or even hang out at the same places. There’s no connection there.” He couldn’t tell her that the only connection they’d found between any of the recent victims had been himself.

“What about Rebecca?” Megan finally asked.

“No. There’s no indication that Rebecca knew any of the original Angel’s victims or the latest victims for that matter.”

“None of this makes any sense.” She put the folder down and rubbed her eyes.

“I know...why don’t we try looking at this from a different angle. Suppose for a minute Emmie actually did see into the mind of the killer—for whatever reason,” he added when he saw her reaction. She knew the only reason the Angel would choose Emmie would be because of her connection to Megan. “And he planned on targeting Jessica Ybarra for his next victim.” Megan read his thoughts. She grabbed the file on the Angel’s fourth victim. Jan Yates.

“It fits. Oh. My. God!” she whispered and he glanced at the name of the next Angel victim.

“Megan,” Jack dropped the folder he held and reached for her. For once, she went into his arms without hesitating. “Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“Jack, the next victim was Eleanor Mathis. EM—Emmie Montgomery! Jack, he’s coming after Emmie next!” He would have given just about anything to deny this truth but she needed to know. Just as she needed to know she would be Eddie’s sixth target.

* * * * *

“MB. Melissa Billings.” Megan said almost to herself and then moved out of Jack’s embrace. “Jack, we had no reason to consider the names before now. MB. Megan Beaumont. We’ve always assumed I was to be the Angel’s next victim but maybe that wasn’t what he intended at all. What if his intention wasn’t to kill me back then? Maybe this was what he had planned all along. Maybe he’s just been waiting for this moment. Maybe this was just part of the game.”

Jack studied her expression for a moment. “Megan—”

“Think about it, Jack. It makes sense. The Angel never made a single mistake until me.”

“Megan, this could all just be a coincidence. We don’t know for sure this is the same person. It could be just some new creep copying the Angel’s MO. Until we do know this is Eddie, let’s not panic. We have Jessica and Marie. Emmie’s safe and so are you. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

"You don't believe that anymore than I do. This is the same killer. This is Eddie. We screwed up the last time, Jack." Something didn't add up. He wasn't telling her everything. Megan wanted to ask him what he was hiding but he was too close for her exhausted mind to think clearly.

She looked away as his fingers cupped her face. In a moment, he would kiss her. She couldn't let him touch her and shatter her fragile control. She tried to get to her feet but Jack stopped her.

"No. Jack, don't."

"Megan, you know you feel it too."

"No, Jack, you're wrong. I don't feel anything,"

"You're lying. I can always tell when you're lying. I knew it the moment I saw you again. It's not over for us, Megan, no matter how much you'd like it to be."

She took a deep breath and looked away. "Maybe not but it is finished for me."

"Megan—"

"No, Jack. I can't do this. Not again. I almost didn't survive the last time."

"Meggie, I'll be there with you. I won't let him hurt you."

She forced a bitter smile. The Job. Of course, Jack's only concern would be the job.

"I'm not talking about Eddie, Jack. That was horrible enough—terrifying in fact but it wasn't the worst part of it. Watching you choose the job over me as I'd seen you do so many times in the past that was the worst part. Do you have any idea how hard that became for me to accept?"

"Megan, it wasn't like that. At least that certainly wasn't the way I felt in my heart. But I'm sorry I made you feel that way. I love you, Megan. I've loved you from the beginning."

Six years ago, she would have been thrilled to hear him say those things. Now, all she felt was angry and resentful. She'd waited by the phone for months—years even for him to come after her. But he never came.

"Stop it, Jack." She tried to release her hand from his hold but Jack brought it slowly to his lips, kissing her palm. Megan struggled against her reaction to his touch. "You don't love me. You love the job. It's always been about the job. You thought I helped you solve the most exciting case of your career. Now it's happening again. That's the only reason you're here now. You need my help again."

"Megan, how can you say that after all we had together?"

"Had, Jack? What we had was great sex. The thrill of the hunt made it seem more intense. But that's all that existed between us."

"No. You know that's not true."

"Really? Then why are you here now? Why after six long years do you show up on my doorstep the moment the Angel appears again?"

"I came the moment I discovered I had a child."

"You came because you need my help again!"

"Yes, okay, I won't deny that! I need your help but that doesn't change how I feel about you! I love you, Megan. You're all that's kept me going for a long time. Thinking about you. About the possibility of being with you again."

"Very touching, Jack but I've heard enough. I'll help you with the case because I want this monster put away before he can hurt my daughter. But let's be honest with each other for once. This is work. Nothing more."

She pulled her hand away and got to her feet.

"Megan that's not true. Megan, wait!" He called after her but she didn't listen. She had to get away before the tears she'd been struggling to keep inside came.

Megan closed the door to her room and leaned against it. She still felt his touch on her hand. She pressed her palm against her lips to stop the sobs.

Don't cry. Just let it go.

She stood perfectly still chanting those words over in her head when she felt the calming presence of her daughter. Emmie sensed her mother's pain and reached out to comfort her through the miles of miles of space separating them.

Megan remembered all the other times in the past when her daughter had done this. No matter how much she might deny its existence to Jack, and Marie and the world, and no matter how many different explanations she used to try and make herself feel better, she knew Emmie had inherited the gift as well.

And so, it shouldn't have come as a surprise that Emmie knew Jack was her father. After all, Megan had told her as much in her thoughts of him in the past.

"I'm okay, baby. I'm okay. Don't worry. You just take care of Grandma for me, okay. I'll see you again soon." Megan whispered into the silent room and felt Emmie's presence like a warm hug as she undressed and climbed into bed.

Her pillow smelled of Jack. He'd slept here last night. She held it against her body and breathed in the masculine scent of him. With thoughts of her daughter and the scent of the man she loved close by, Megan finally slept.

Chapter Five

You let him back into your bed. That was your first mistake, Megan. Thinking you can escape me again will be your last.

Megan struggled to wake herself from the dream. She wanted him out of her head.

"No. You're not real. You're dead."

She could hear his laughter, filled with hatred and insanity. He'd slipped further over the edge, becoming viler than before.

You screwed me out of my next victim. Shame on you, Megan. You know how the game goes. But don't worry. I have another in mind. She's even better than that bitch in El Paso. Do you want to hear her pain?

"No! No, this isn't real!" Megan fought against his hold. But she could feel the terror growing inside her. Her terror. His latest victim. He had her. Here in her dreams she became far too real.

She was beautiful. Megan could see her long, straight hair, so like Jess', flowing past her waist. It appeared black almost but everything around her was dark. Megan struggled to see the girl's face when someone shook her hard.

Jack! Jack tried to bring her out of the dream.

"No."

"Megan, wake up," he said in a commanding voice that sounded so familiar. She tried but the girl's fear pulled her back. She was in a dark, cold place. Megan tried to make out the girl's surroundings but it was impossible.

"It's too dark. I can't see."

"Wake up Megan. It's just a dream. Its time to wake up now."

"No, just a minute longer, I can help her. I'm almost there." But she wasn't. Soon the darkness became thicker. The image disappeared entirely. Bright light dispelled the blackness as she opened her eyes.

The comfort of her bedroom replaced the horror of the dark place. She sat up in bed and reached out to Jack, clinging to him, her body soaked with sweat. Tonight the dream felt more real than ever before. She was crying from experiencing the girl's fear.

"It's okay," Jack repeated softly against her ear, stroking back her hair from her damp face. "It's only a dream."

God how she wished she could believe it but she knew the truth. This was only the beginning. He was forcing her back to DC. Back to unfinished business.

Megan pulled a little away from Jack so that she could look into his eyes. "It's not a dream, Jack. It's real. He's real and very much alive. Eddie. The Angel of Death is still alive."

His shocked gaze held hers. He didn't believe it fully just yet but he would in time.

"Dear God, Megan," he whispered, touching her cheek, he wiped the tears away that clung there. "Not again. I won't let this happen to you again," Jack repeated more forcefully.

"There's nothing you can do to stop it. He's even stronger than the first time."

He shook his head. The last of his doubts disappearing.

"Oh God. Oh God, Megan."

For a long time they simply held each other. Megan and Jack had been the first to put the clues together in the past and had met with nothing but resistance and ridicule in the beginning. Would anyone believe them this time?

"We need to go to DC, Megan. We need to talk to the taskforce working the cases and see what they've come up with. I'll have Joy schedule our flight tomorrow. Today." He added after glancing at his watch.

"Yes," She couldn't fight it any longer. This would be her fate. She'd known this moment would come again since she ran away from it six years ago. In spite of the official Bureau line, Megan knew the Angel wasn't dead. The way Eddie's car went into the Potomac that night appeared to be too messy for the Angel. Too staged. Through the years, she'd felt him reaching out to her, pulling her back into the game.

Megan leaned against Jack's chest. She no longer wanted to think about the case. Having him so close reminded her of all the times he'd touched her like this in the past.

"Megan?" He felt it as well. He hesitated for a second, struggling to do the right thing. But she didn't want to do the right thing tonight. She wanted him. Wanted to make love to him until she could wipe away all the horror she'd witnessed through the young woman's eyes tonight.

His lips touched hers. Familiar. Gentle. All that she ever wanted. His touch held more than simple passion for them both. There was history between them. Anger. Love. All there.

"Not like this," he whispered against her mouth. "I want you. God, I want you, Megan. But I don't want the things you said to me earlier standing between us. I don't want the job there either. And I certainly don't want you coming to me because of him. When we make love again, I want it just be about you and me."

He untangled her arms reluctantly, stood and walked to the door. There would never be just the two of them. It was an impossible dream.

"I'll leave word for Joy to make the arrangements. I don't think sleep is going to be possible for me but you should try. I'm going to make some coffee and go over the case files again. Maybe we've missed something."

Long after Jack left her alone, Megan couldn't move. And sleep—she couldn't risk sleep. Not knowing Eddie wanted her to experience the girl's pain again.

Megan showered and dressed, then joined Jack in the kitchen. He acknowledged her presence by handing her yet another cup of coffee. She'd lost track of how much caffeine she'd consumed over the past few days.

"This is the last thing I need right now. More stimulation." Bad choice of words on her part. She saw him smile but he didn't press the matter.

"I've left a message for Joy. She's usually up early, so hopefully we can get out of here before lunch."

"Jack, I don't think we can wait for Joy. He's got his next victim."

"Are you sure?" he asked slowly but knew the answer already.

"Yes. It was her I saw tonight. She's terrified. I couldn't make out where he's holding her. She's still alive, Jack. But not for long. I think Eddie's keeping her alive for us. He's waiting for us to return to DC before killing her." Megan went to the living room and found the file of the fourth victim of the Angel.

"What are you looking for?" Jack followed her, looking over her shoulder.

"Jan Yates was killed on September twenty-third. That's two days from now! We have two days to find this girl. During that time, she was tortured repeatedly. She could bleed out. Die from exposure. God only knows. There isn't much time. We need to leave now."

"I hope you're wrong about this, Megan. Because you know our chances of finding this girl before he kills her are next to impossible. It took weeks to discover Jan Yates' body. He killed her in an abandoned barn, remember."

"I remember," Megan could feel him reaching out to her again, laughing at her weakness. So confident. Even more than before.

"Megan? Are you okay?" She shook her head trying to dispel the image.

"Yes." But his victim was not. She shivered in the cold damp place where he held her and time was quickly running out for her.

"Why don't you go pack and I'll keep trying to reach Joy until we leave for the airport."

It took Megan less than ten minutes. When she returned, Jack had all the folders tucked away in his briefcase.

"Still no answer," he told her.

"Bubba!" In all the rush, Megan had forgotten all about her faithful companion. "I can't leave him here alone. I'll call Frank and have him stop by to keep an eye on him."

Megan had known for a while that Frank wanted more than just friendship from her. She'd been close to considering it until Jack's return. But that wasn't an option anymore. Her heart belonged to Jack whether she went back to him or not.

"Who's Frank?" Jack asked as they drove along the deserted county road. The tension she felt inside him now had nothing to do with the case. He didn't want to hear her answer.

"Frank Juarez. He's a friend. He works at the bank in town. He helped me get the boutique financed."

Jack's hands tightened on the wheel. He didn't say anything but he concentrated on the road ahead a little too intently. He wanted to ask more. He didn't have that right.

The airport appeared deserted except for a smattering of business travelers. They dropped the rental car off and booked their flights to Dulles without any problem. The five a.m. flight was empty. Bored attendants couldn't wait for the flight to get underway.

Megan sat by the window next to Jack, silently going over the Yates case in her mind.

"Jan's body was found at an abandoned barn twenty miles outside of DC, correct?"

"You want to talk about this now?" he asked with a hint of amusement. "You don't want to try and get some sleep?"

"No. Sleep is the last thing I want."

"He still reaches out to you through your dreams, doesn't he? That's how he's kept you involved in this thing through the years. And kept track of you."

"Yes." In the past, she'd had visions of both the victims as well as the killer through the victims' possessions. Clothing. Pictures. Personal items that contained pieces of them. She'd learned to shut out the visions until recently when they'd become far too strong to resist. For six years the Angel had been promising this moment. A few weeks earlier his presence became stronger as he tried reaching her beyond the dreams.

"Jack, I haven't been completely honest. There's something I need to tell you."

For a moment he didn't speak. She could feel the tension increase in him. "Okay," he managed at last. She had his full attention. Something wasn't right. It occurred to her that Jack had his own secrets.

"I kept the scarf." It took a few seconds for him to realize what she meant. And then he closed his eyes in disbelief.

"You did what? Okay, never mind the fact that you took evidence from a case, Megan but why would you want to keep a reminder from such a terrible part of the past?"

"I don't know. I can't explain it, Jack and I know it sounds macabre but I just felt I needed to have it to with me to remember. So that I never forgot what happened." With a single glance, she knew he didn't understand. "I'm not explaining it very well, I know."

"No, you're not. I don't understand why you'd want to have that thing anywhere near you. Does Emmie know you have it?"

“No, of course not!” He hadn’t liked that she’d kept the scarf. In Jack’s eyes, it probably seemed morbid. Maybe it was. “Can we forget about the scarf for now? Let’s concentrate on our latest victim. We still have time to save her life if we try.”

“All right,” he said at last, letting go of his anger with difficulty. “Jan Yates’ body was found in a barn in remote area by accident when a hiker stumbled upon it. Which means his latest victim could be anywhere. Where do we even start?”

“I don’t know. I couldn’t make out anything about her surroundings. I’m sorry, Jack.”

“I’ve called Dan. He’ll have all the local authorities start searching a twenty-mile radius around DC for every vacant barn or shed around,” he told her quietly. “Who knows, maybe we’ll get lucky this time. Maybe he’ll slip up.”

As much as Megan wanted to believe him, she didn’t. Deep down inside, the fear that started weeks earlier had begun to spiral out of control once more. Even now, she could hear his laughter in her head. Familiar. The same as before.

She didn’t understand how but somehow she knew they were running out of time. Two days and his latest victim would be gone. Then Megan believed he would try to come after Emmie again. It all fit.

But something told her, he wouldn’t be satisfied with any other victim but her.

* * * * *

By the time their flight landed at Dulles, the morning commuter traffic had hit bumper-to-bumper going into the city.

Megan called to check on Emmie while the taxi made its way along the congested roadways.

“What’s wrong?” Jack knew right away from the uneasiness in Megan’s voice that their daughter had seen another vision.

“Nothing. She’s just upset.”

He leaned closer to Megan and heard Emmie’s tearful reply, “Mommie, he’s going to hurt you.”

Jack took the phone from Megan’s hand.

“Emmie, it’s me.” He couldn’t bring himself to say the word “father” just yet. “Honey, your mom is fine. She’s here with me and I’m going to protect her.”

“No, Jack—leave her out of this.”

Jack dodged Megan’s attempts at taking the phone away easily enough.

“It’s okay, Emmie. I’m not going to let anything happen to your mom.” Emmie said something that Jack didn’t quite catch but it almost sounded like “thank you, Daddy”. Emotions that he’d never expected to feel before overwhelmed him. Without even knowing his daughter, he knew he loved her.

"Thank you for trusting me, Emmie. I promise I won't let her out of my sight for a minute. And when this is over you and I have some catching up to do."

The taxi slowed to a stop in front of CASMIRC headquarters. Dan Martinez met them on the steps.

"I asked Dan to start reinterviewing all the people connected to the first Angel case. The victims' friends and family. Anyone connected to the crime. You never know – someone might remember something new after all this time," Jack explained as they got out of the taxi.

"Jack, I expected the two of you sometime ago." Dan's glance slid Megan's way. Dan's resentment of Megan went deeper than the usual scoffing at her talent. He'd been the one to pick up the pieces of what was left of Jack after she left DC that final time.

"Just like old times, isn't it?" Dan made an attempt at a peace offering by extending her his hand.

Reluctantly, Megan accepted it. "Yes. Yes, it is. I never thought we'd be doing this again."

"No, me either," Dan told her with a smile.

"Anything new on the search for Eddie?" Jack hoped Dan had better luck at unearthing clues than he and Megan had so far. When he saw Megan's surprise he added, "Dan and I are both in agreement with you. Eddie Stephens has to be alive. It's likely he's been waiting for this moment to resurface. What we need to know is what brought him out now. Something had to trigger the new killings, because I can't believe this was just part of his game."

"So far nothing new has turned up. Sorry, Jack. But I'm going back through every single piece of information we collected the first time on him. Something will turn up. We just need more time."

"Time is the one thing we don't have. Have you talked to Eddie's friends and family?"

"Well, that's the thing. He really didn't have any friends other than Victoria Anders and both she and his uncle refused to speak with me flat-out. I'm hoping that you can talk to them. They seemed to have a connection with you."

The minute they stepped off the elevator something foreboding hit him. He tried to dismiss the feeling but it continued to grow stronger as they neared his office.

"Where's Joy?" Jack asked the secretary sharing Joy's cubicle. She didn't appear thrilled to be handling Joy's workload as well as her own. The young woman handed Jack a stack of messages and added, "I don't know Agent Montgomery. She didn't come in today and she never bothered to call and let me know she wouldn't be coming in."

"Call her at home and find out what's going on. She wasn't feeling well before I left. Maybe she's still sick."

The assistant looked even less pleased with his new orders. "Agent Montgomery, the Director asked to speak with you the second you arrived."

Jack looked to Dan who confirmed the truth. "I had to tell him. You were gone and this case was heating up. I'm sorry. I stalled as long as I could."

"I know you did your best, Dan. Can it wait?" Jack asked but the woman merely shook her head.

He turned to Megan. "I'm sorry. I'll try not to be too long. My office is right in there. Dan can get you set up."

* * * * *

Jack walked away, leaving Megan alone with Dan and the disgruntled assistant who turned aside before someone asked her to do anything further.

Megan followed Dan inside Jack's office.

"I'll be fine here, Dan. You don't have to baby-sit. I know you're busy."

He stood in the doorway debating the right thing to do. Dan was really trying to make amends.

"Are you sure?"

She smiled at the sincerity in his expression. "Yes, I'm sure. Go. Do your thing. I'll be fine."

"Okay. Maybe I'll just go check to see if Joy's turned up yet," he said at last. "It's not like her to be AWOL but Jack's the only one who seems to have talked to her recently."

After waiting for more than an hour for Jack to return, Megan went in search of coffee just as Jack stormed down the corridor. When he spotted her, he stopped and tried to regain his composure.

"What's wrong? What did he say to you?"

"Nothing. It's nothing," He let out a heavy sigh that spoke volumes. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going for coffee. Do you want some?"

He glanced at Joy's empty desk, then at the other assistant who ignored him entirely before nodding.

"Sure. Joy has me spoiled. She normally keeps the coffee coming when I'm in the office. I'll show you where it's kept."

As they walked past his assistant's cubicle, Megan spotted a picture sitting on the desk of a young woman holding a puppy. She had long, dark hair and smiling green eyes.

Joy. Joy. Megan's full attention went to the picture. The young woman appeared beautiful and so full of life. She picked up the photo and instantly another, far darker impression of Joy filled her senses. Megan could feel her pain. All alone, Joy couldn't

move more than a few inches. Her captor had her hands tied. Her legs were broken. Her body mutilated.

"Oh God." The picture slipped from her fingers. Megan wasn't aware of saying anything but the instant Jack turned and spotted her expression he knew something terrible was wrong.

"Megan, what is it?" He saw the picture of Joy lying at her feet. "Oh no—no, not Joy."

Without realizing it, Megan searched Joy's desk. She found what she was looking for right away. A gold nameplate with black lettering announced Joy's full name. Joy Youngblood. JY. Jan Yates. Jessica Ybarra. Joy Youngblood.

"No," She barely recognized Jack's voice. "She's just sick. Joy thought she might be coming down with a bug or something," he said in little more than a whisper, while Megan shook her head. "No."

"I'm sorry, Jack." He started for the elevator, forcing her to scramble to catch up with him.

"She's not there, Jack."

"You don't know that."

"Agent Montgomery the director is holding for you," the assistant announced in an annoyed tone.

Jack didn't bother answering her. He hit the elevator button a couple of times and waited only a moment before heading for the stairwell with Megan following close behind.

When they'd reached the ground level, he turned to her. "Megan, go back inside. I don't want you part of this."

She ignored his attempts at protecting her. "I am part of it, Jack and you know it. I've been part of it from the beginning. I'm coming with you."

He hesitated a second longer then unlocked the passenger door to his car. "Here, take my backup weapon, okay?" Jack reached under the driver's seat and pulled out a Glock, never questioning her skills. He knew she was an expert shooter. He'd taught her himself.

As they worked their way through the congested federal traffic, Jack continually tried reaching Joy by phone. Then he called Dan and told him to step up the search for the latest victim.

"We think Eddie's taken Joy. Get the word out as quickly as possible but make sure her parents don't hear about this just yet."

"Do you know Joy's parents?" Megan asked once they left the busy Capitol area, heading toward a residential neighborhood.

"Yes, they're friends of mine. Joy's father was an assistant district attorney at the time of the original Angel murders. He would have handled the case had it gone to trial."

Once Jack parked the car in front of a small house on a quiet street, Megan began to see a pattern emerge that was frightening. First Rebecca, now Joy. Possibly Emmie. Herself. Jack knew most of the victims. Had he known the first two as well?

"This is it," he told her, looking at her curiously. "What is it?"

"Nothing." Now was not the time. They needed to find Joy first before it was too late.

She waited while Jack retrieved the key from the fake hanging plant on the porch and unlocked the door. As Megan stepped inside the house, one thing became immediately clear. Joy knew her assailant. Nothing appeared out of place. She'd let this person into her life.

"Did she have a boyfriend? Anyone special in her life?"

"No, she dated someone pretty steady for a while but they broke up... Wait, before I left for El Paso, she mentioned someone she'd been seeing for a few weeks. Someone she said she met in one of her Criminal Justice classes at UV. I got the impression he wasn't a student, maybe her professor. She called him Alec. But then..."

"Then what?" Jack suddenly looked uncomfortable. Megan wondered about his relationship with the girl.

"Joy told me she wasn't ready for anything too serious. She just wanted to have a little fun."

Megan nodded then began to walk through each room of the tiny house. Nothing appeared out of place.

"What are you thinking, Megan?"

"Isn't it obvious? She knew her attacker. This wasn't random like the others. Joy knew who took her."

He looked uncomfortable. "What is it, Jack? What aren't you telling me?"

He followed her into the tidy kitchen. "It is like the others, Megan?" he insisted quietly. The look in his eyes frightened her.

Megan forced the question out. "What do you mean?"

"There's evidence that Rebecca may have known her assailant as well." After a moment, he added, "There's more. You remember in El Paso you asked me about the connection between the victims. You thought that maybe they knew the same people. Well, you were right. They did. They all knew me. I'm the connection between the victims."

"Oh my God," Megan whispered into the shocked silence that followed his confession. She saw Jack's mouth twist into a bitter grin.

"Yeah, I thought that would be your reaction. I went to university with one and I dated the other. I was married to Rebecca and then you know I stopped in at your shop and talked to Jessica, so I guess in a way I knew her as well. So, there's your connection. Are you satisfied?"

"Jack, why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Why? Why do you think, Megan? It would have changed your mind about the case and about me, that's why."

"Yes," Megan turned away. "Probably—I don't know." It took everything inside her to let the obvious questions go for the moment. She was here for Emmie and the other victims. Nothing more.

"But the first Angel killings were all picked at random, except for Amy. This is clearly different."

Jack looked relieved that she wasn't walking away just yet.

"Or maybe it's not. Maybe he's just perfecting his MO."

Jack retrieved his cell phone and called Dan. "The place is clean. She's gone. Yes, it appears she knew her attacker. What?"

Something in Jack's voice drew Megan's attention back to him. He sounded frustrated. Once he hung up the phone and turned to her, his expression scaring her again.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. Let's get out of here, okay. I can't think straight in here." He held the door open and waited for her before relocking it and placing the key back inside the plant.

They drove in silence for a time. But Megan couldn't let Jack's connection to all the victims go. If he'd lied about knowing all the victims, what else hadn't he told her about the case?

He brought the car to a stop in front of a sprawling red brick home in the affluent Georgetown neighborhood.

Jack got out of the car and waited for her to do the same. Megan realized that her things were still at the Bureau.

And no one knew where she was.

"Don't worry, Megan. I would never hurt you." She forced aside her fear at those words.

"Where are we?"

"Home. We're home. This is my home."

"Why are we stopping here?" she asked but Jack ignored the question. Unlocking the door, he waited for her. Reluctantly, Megan stepped inside the two-story house, not sure what to expect.

Jack and Rebecca had lived in an older colonial near Glover Park when Megan first met him. He told her later that he spent most of his time at an apartment he rented near work.

Jack closed the door behind her but made no move to step away.

"You didn't answer my question." She tried to keep her voice steady. She couldn't let him see she'd become frightened of him.

"No, I didn't," he said with a heavy sigh before stepping past her into the living room. "I expected more from you, Megan. I never expected you to turn on me."

She followed him slowly, waiting for him to say more. When he didn't she asked, "So why are we here, Jack? We should be out working the case." When he ignored her entirely she added, "Jack, we're running out of time!"

"Dan's got it covered for now. He promised to let me know the moment he hears anything. Look, I just needed to think for a minute, okay. Clear my head. Explain what's happening to you in private," he added quietly.

Megan stood before him trying to control her anger and frustration. None of this made any sense. Jack had been determined to find Joy just a short time earlier.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked at last.

He walked over to the bar and poured a drink, downing it in a single gulp. "My director—you remember Peter Kensington, right—well he wants me to distance myself from the case for a while. 'Let Dan take the lead', he told me. At least to the public eye," he told her quietly. When his eyes met hers, the fear left her. This was Jack. This was the man she loved. But Jack was hurting.

Megan remembered Peter only too well. She and Peter had butted heads from day one. "Why? I mean didn't you tell Peter about your connection to the victims in the beginning?" Then she added slowly, "Is it because of me?"

He smiled once more mockingly then poured another drink. "You were just the final straw. No, they want me away from the case for the same reason you're starting to suspect me. Because I might have personal knowledge of the killer."

"Because of your relationship with the victims?"

Jack took another sip of the whiskey before answering. "The first victim, Amanda, well I hate to admit it but I forgot about her. We hadn't kept in touch. And Camille, well it happened years ago, before Rebecca and I married and it was one night. We'd both had too much to drink. It meant nothing. So much so that I forgot about her until someone pointed it out to me."

"Oh, Jack."

"Megan, I know how this is beginning to look but for God's sake I need you of all people to believe in me. Please."

"I do," she told him and meant it. Megan moved to his side and took the glass from his hand. His fingers shook. "Jack, I do believe in you but there's something going on here that you can't deny. Somehow the Angel has decided to make this personal for you. Do you have any idea why? I mean you and I haven't spoken in years. It can't all be because of me."

He ran a shaky hand through his hair. "I thought of that after Rebecca's death. I've gone over all of my cases with a fine-tooth comb but there's nothing."

The pain in his eyes was hard to face. Slowly, Megan took him in her arms and held him close. "It's okay. We'll get through this together. We'll figure it out together, Jack."

You're not alone in this, okay. But I need you to help me. Emmie needs you – you can't give up, Jack."

For a long time, he didn't answer and then she felt him grow restless in her arms.

"I'm not giving up, Megan. I want this guy as much as you do. And I won't let him hurt Emmie, I promise."

When he looked down at her, all the old feelings resurfaced. Her body ached for him. She responded without hesitation to the open need in his eyes. Megan leaned against him and felt his hands tighten around her waist. Lifting her fingers, she cupped his face. The moment their lips touched, the years melted away. It never felt more right. This was what she'd wanted for so long. Even when she tried hating him, she still craved his touch.

"I want to make love to you, Megan. Dear God, I've thought of making love to you again for so long."

Her eyes searched his for a long time. It would be so easy to give in. After all she wanted the same thing but it was too late for them. Too many things stood in the way. And the pain of Jack's betrayal cut too deeply.

Slowly, she untangled herself from his arms. "I can't do this." The look in his eyes was hard to take. Jack Montgomery had never looked so vulnerable. "I'm sorry, Jack but it's too late for us."

Chapter Six

Letting Megan go was impossible to do but he did it. With her absence from his arms the world and its troubles crowded in again.

His conversation with Peter Kensington had come as the biggest shock in a week full of them. That his commanding officer, the man he'd worked with for almost ten years could think he in some way might be involved in these deaths was hard to accept.

"Where are you going?" Megan asked when Jack reached for his keys and headed for the door.

"Peter suggested it might be in my best interest to back off these cases and let Dan take the lead. I won't accept that, Megan. Not now with Joy involved. I owe it to her and to her parents to figure out what's happened to her."

He opened the door and turned back to her. "And I don't want you involved in this. I was wrong to bring you here in the first place. I'm going to send you to Emmie and Marie."

He wasn't surprised that she'd followed him, or that she was ready to argue her cause. "No, you're not. I'm not going anywhere, Jack. I'm here and I can help. I want to. I need to for Emmie's sake. She needs both of her parents, Jack. So you can just forget sending me away. I'm not going anywhere."

"Megan." Jack closed the door and touched her face. "I can't let anything happen to you. I almost lost you the last time. I did lose you in a way. I don't want that to happen again."

"Jack, we're both involved in this. We both need to settle the Angel case once and for all otherwise it will always haunt us. We'll never be able to move on with our lives."

He didn't want to move on. For Megan, moving on meant letting go. He couldn't let her go.

Jack closed his eyes before finally giving in. "All right, I guess I don't really have a choice in the matter, do I? I know how stubborn you are. I'm going back to the office and talk to Peter. If you want, I'll drop you off with the task force and you can start going over the evidence with them."

"No. I'm coming with you to talk to Peter. It's the least I can do. Whatever Peter has to say to you, he can just say it with me there as well."

Peter Kensington was not happy to see Megan again. When she'd worked with the Bureau before Peter had been her biggest skeptic. In the end, after the kidnapping and the scandal that followed, he'd been only too happy to see Megan leave.

"Megan, it's been a long time." He waited until she took a seat before closing the door.

"Jack, before you say it, you know I don't believe any of this but we can't afford another scandal like the last one. We need to be above reproach on this one." His eyes slid to Megan briefly.

"Peter, I understand what you're saying but Joy is my friend. I need to be part of this. Hell, I am part of this."

"Do you have any idea what the press will do when they get wind of your connection to all the victims?" Jack wondered what Peter was more concerned about. His connection to the victims or his relationship to Megan.

"Is there anything new on Joy?" Peter asked at last when Jack didn't answer.

"No, nothing yet. Her car is still in the garage. But we believe she knew her kidnapper," Jack told him.

"Great—just great. That's exactly why I need you to stay out of the spotlight on this one, Jack. The press will eat you alive when they find out you've known all the victims. I don't want you to go through that. It's not good for the Bureau or you if—"

"Are you ordering me off the case entirely, Peter?" Jack demanded before Peter could finish.

Peter stared hard at Jack for a long moment before slowly releasing his breath. "Would you do it if I asked?"

"No. Peter, Joy has only a short time to left if the killer is staying true to form with his first victims. Dammit, Peter, Joy is like family to me. I've practically watched her grow up. I'm not backing off this."

"All right," Peter answered at last, clearly not pleased with Jack's response. "But I'm warning you, Jack, stay out of the limelight. And if this thing comes to the attention of my superiors, I won't have a choice but to pull you off the case and suspend you. Understood?"

"Yes." Jack got to his feet ready to leave before Peter changed his mind.

"And keep her out of this. We can solve it without the help of a medium this time."

"With all due respect Peter, we can't. Megan's been the only one to give us any break in this case so far. We need her." He turned to Megan and added, "I need her."

* * * * *

Peter's parting words irked Megan. She'd been a major part of pulling all the clues together on the first Angel case and yet he still considered her gift little more than a parlor trick.

They left Peter still fuming over Jack's words.

"He doesn't know that you suspect Eddie of these new murders?" She knew the answer as well as Jack's reasons behind keeping Peter in the dark even before he confirmed it.

"No and until we have some solid evidence pointing that way, he's not going to." They took the elevator down one level to the floor housing the taskforce working the latest murders. Megan recognized several of the agents from the original Angel case but there were a few new faces as well.

"Most of you know Megan Beaumont from the original case," Jack announced to the team. "I've asked her to help us out on this one."

Once he'd introduced her to the new members, Jack asked Dan to brief them on the latest on Joy's case.

"So far, we haven't turned up anything but we've got both state and local police involved in the search. We're covering every possible square inch of countryside but Jack, I'm thinking it's time to bring the press in on this thing."

Jack's gaze slid to Megan. "No, no press."

"Jack, we're getting nothing here. Someone out there might have seen something important to the case that will help us find Joy," Dan added clearly frustrated by Jack's reluctance. "We need to reach out to the public for help now. We can't wait any longer."

"I said no press." Megan could still hear Peter's warnings but neither Dan nor taskforce knew what Jack had faced in there. She glanced at each person seated around the table. Some were beginning to grow suspicious of their leader.

"We'll solve this on our own, okay?"

Dan slowly nodded then added, "I was hoping that maybe we—you and I could take Megan to some of the places that look promising." Dan gave Megan an encouraging smile. "Maybe you can see something we've missed. You feel up to it?"

"Sure." She understood Dan was willing to try anything at this point. "Just tell me where."

"We've got several possibilities. If this guy is running true to form, he's gone to great lengths to follow his—Eddie's—old MO. So," Dan went to the map covering one wall, revealing most of DC and the surrounding area. "We'd concluded that these are the most likely places he would have taken Joy. We'll keep searching other areas but so far, I'm concentrating on these primarily. That's where I'm hoping Megan will be beneficial."

"Ready?" Jack asked her quietly. She knew what he really was asking is if she was ready to go through this again.

"Sure, I think so. It's worth trying. Let me just get my suitcase from your office and then I'm ready."

The dry countryside outside of DC literally swarmed with agents from every branch of law enforcement. They were met right away by the agent in charge of the search, who told them nothing had turned up yet.

"God I hate this," Jack told her once he'd finished briefing them. "I can't believe this is happening again."

He took her hand for a second and held her back from the others. "Stay close, okay. I don't have a good feeling about this."

"I will. Don't worry, I'm okay."

"Jack, I think we should start with the barn, don't you?" Dan fell into step next to them. "I mean, you never know..."

When they reached the building, Megan stepped inside and stopped. She couldn't feel Joy but she did sense something.

"What is it, Megan?" Jack asked.

She shook her head. "I'm not sure —"

Look around you, Megan. I'm here with you. I'm right here with you now.

"Megan?" When Jack stepped away for a moment to examine something one of the agents found, Dan appeared at her side.

"I'm sorry —"

"I thought you said something."

"No, nothing."

Dan continued to watch her carefully. "Are you sure you're okay?"

You think you are so smart, don't you Megan? But I slip through your world without you knowing it. You'll never catch me, Megan.

Mommie, Mommie, he's there with you! Mommie be careful! Suddenly Emmie's presence overpowered the killer's. Megan knew Emmie was afraid for her.

In Megan's mind she could feel her daughter's fear.

She's next, Megan. She's my next victim. I can't wait.

"No."

I'm okay, baby, don't worry. I'm okay, Megan tried to reassure her frightened child. *Daddy's here with me. He won't let anything happen to me, okay.*

"Megan? What is it?" Dan asked in concern as Jack suddenly became aware that something was wrong with her.

He stopped talking to the agent and came to her side. "What do you see?"

"He's here, Jack." Megan was shaking from fear.

"Where? Can you see him?"

"No. He's too strong. He's taunting me. Jack, he's says Emmie is next." Megan tried to keep the panic from her voice. She didn't want Emmie to read these thoughts.

"That's not going to happen, Megan. I'll never let that son-of-a-bitch hurt Emmie or you."

"Jack, we may have something." Dan motioned to the agent coming toward them holding something in his hand.

The agent handed Jack a diamond earring.

"Where did you find this?" Jack asked stunned. Megan could tell he recognized the earring.

"Over by the stall, Agent Montgomery. We're still searching the area."

"Recognize this?" Dan asked quietly.

"Yes." He met Dan's gaze. "Joy's parents gave her those for her eighteenth birthday. Joy never took those earrings off. She wore them all the time."

"May I?" Megan asked and he handed her the earring. She closed her eyes. She could only feel Joy's happiness. She'd been so happy the night she received the earrings. Megan didn't feel Joy's presence here.

"She's not here, Jack. She's never been here. He's playing with us. He planted that earring here to steer us off course. She's not here."

"Are you sure?" Dan asked, obviously disappointed in her answer. "Megan this has been our best clue so far."

"Yes, I'm sure. I'm sorry, Dan." Megan turned to Jack. "She's not here. She's never been here."

Jack nodded slowly before speaking to Dan. "Keep your people looking for clues. We need to go back to headquarters and start over."

"Jack, with all due respect to Megan, we can't dismiss the fact that maybe she's wrong about this."

"She's never been wrong before, Dan. She's not wrong this time either."

"Are you willing to place Joy's life on that? And your career?" he added quietly.

"Yes, I am. Keep the team looking. You come with us."

The tense silence stayed with them throughout most of the drive back into the city. Once again, Megan felt as if she'd come between their friendship.

"Dan, Joy was your friend as well. When you talked to her last, did she mention anyone special in her personal life?" Jack asked more to fill the empty space.

"Not really. She told me once that wasn't really looking for anything serious after her last relationship ended. But you know she had a crush on you the size of Texas." Dan gave Megan an apologetic grin.

Jack chose to ignore this remark. "When did you speak to her last?"

He thought for a moment. "Not since the morning you left for El Paso. As I recall, Joy left early that day and I had that commitment in New York. When I got your call, I caught the first flight out to Texas to escort Marie and Emmie to a safe place. I just got back in the office a little before you and Megan arrived."

"Have someone check with her friends. See if there's anyone they might know of worth checking out. Also, let's check with her old boyfriend. Find out what he's been up to, oh and before I left for El Paso, she mentioned someone she'd been seeing for a few weeks. Someone she said she met in one of her Criminal Justice classes at UV. I got

the impression he's not a student. He might be her professor. She called him Alec. Maybe one of her friends will know him. And Dan, do it discreetly. Without alarming her parents."

Once they reached the command center, Dan called in Jack's orders to his partner, then went back to the map. "Okay, where else should we be looking, Megan?" Dan shook his head. The lack of sleep was finally catching up with him. "Because frankly, I'm out of ideas."

Megan stepped over to the map, her fingers tracing along the places marked by the team. Something drew her in another direction entirely. South of the city, past Alexandria, there were miles and miles of farmland. She felt the pull of one spot in particular. She realized she was still holding Joy's earring.

She closed her eyes again and she could feel Joy's fear.

"Here! She's here."

Dan looked at Jack. "We checked that entire area already. That was the first place we looked. She wasn't there."

"We'll look again. He could have moved her there. Obviously, he enjoys playing games with us. Let's go."

"Do you want me to call the others in?" Dan asked as they headed for the door.

"Not yet. Let's just do this thing ourselves. Megan, you said that you felt him there at the last sight. Do you think he's pretending to be one of our men or maybe even is one of the agents on our team?"

"Maybe—I don't know. But he was definitely there."

"You said he planted the evidence. Maybe you were just sensing his presence because he'd been there."

"No. It was too strong. He was there."

"Dan, have someone quietly check out all the personnel working that area. See if maybe someone is there who doesn't belong. These creeps love attention of any kind. He's probably enjoying making us look like fools."

Dan did as Jack asked but Megan could tell he wasn't nearly as convinced.

They drove in silence to the small farm outside of the city where Megan believed they would find Joy.

"Is she still alive?" Jack forced the words out.

"I don't know. I think so."

They reached the site just as the last light of day disappeared.

"We'll never find her alone. Jack let me call for help. We might be able to save her if we have enough people combing the area."

"You're right, we can't do this alone. Okay, call it in," Dan returned to the car while Jack and Megan headed toward the barn some fifty feet away.

"Megan, I hope to God you're sure about this."

"She's here, Jack. I can feel her here."

He took Megan's hand as they made their way inside the dark barn. From the beam of Jack's flashlight, the shadows of the barn stretched out around them. The place was covered in years of dust and abandonment.

"Do you feel anything?"

Megan clutched the earring and moved instinctively toward the place where she felt Joy's presence the strongest. Her fear and pain continued to grow. Joy was terrified.

"God, he's here with her, Jack. Eddie's here!" Megan whispered urgently and watched as Jack drew his weapon. She did the same.

The voice of the killer and victim warred with each other. Joy tried to scream but he was there preventing her. "He's laughing. God, he's laughing at her pain."

"Where is she, Megan? Can you tell me where she is?"

"This way!" She moved to the side entrance of the barn and Joy's fear became more pronounced. Megan tried to focus on the girl alone but suddenly she went silent. She could still hear his laughter though.

Outside, a short distance from the house, the previous owners had built a small root cellar.

"The door's open." Megan pointed to the entrance where a weathered door stood ajar.

"Someone had the damn thing locked. Look," Jack's light hit the lock that lay open on the ground.

"Jack!" They could hear Dan calling to them from inside the barn.

"We're out here, Dan! We've found something! Dan's hurried footsteps rounded the corner of the building then stopped when he spotted them.

"Jeez..." Fresh blood covered the doorpost of the place.

"Megan, stay here." Jack led the way down the stairs with Dan following. But Megan couldn't stand by and wait. She followed them inside. At the bottom of the stairs, the light caught something. Joy. Joy's warm body lay positioned in the Angel of Death's standard pose. Her hands secured with the white scarf. The bunch of white lilacs clutched within them. The Bible quote lay haphazardly, placed near the body as if the killer had run out of time. Gotten sloppy.

"Dammit," Jack knelt close to her searching for a pulse. Her throat had been slashed. He'd taken his time with her. She'd been tortured for days. "Call an ambulance!" Jack yelled out to Dan.

"Jack, she's dead," Megan told him quietly.

"Do it, dammit!" She knelt next to him as he began to perform CPR. The blood pulsed from Joy's body with each compression.

"Jack. She's gone. You can't help her now." Megan somehow managed to pull him away from Joy's body.

Within a matter of minutes, the small room filled with agents. They descended on the crime scene and began analyzing everything, asking dozens of questions. It seemed like hours before the team finished examining Joy's body and released her to the coroner.

Jack and Megan stood a little ways away from the bustle watching.

"I need to tell her parents. Dear God, I don't know how to tell them this."

"Let someone else do it, Jack."

"No, I owe it to Joy to be the one."

"Then I'm coming with you." He turned to Megan and smiled wearily.

"Thank you. I need you, Megan. I need you with me. I'm so glad you're here."

The drive to the Youngbloods' house felt as if it took forever. Just getting out of the crime scene clogged with emergency vehicles seemed endless.

"Have they been told she's missing?" Megan asked as they stopped in front of the house and someone obviously watching through the window, stepped outside.

"Yes, they were told. I told them. Dear God, Megan, how am I going to tell them their only child is dead?"

In the end, no words were necessary. The minute Mrs. Youngblood saw Jack's expression she knew. She screamed and collapsed onto her knees. Her husband caught her in his arms and managed with Jack's help to get her back inside.

Everything slipped into slow motion. Mrs. Youngblood's doctor arrived soon after her husband called. Once sedated, the doctor sat with her while Jack asked his friend some difficult questions, starting with the last time he spoken to Joy.

"We talked to her Sunday evening when she had dinner here. It wasn't unusual for us not to hear from her during the week. Joy kept busy with work and friends and school. We understood that."

"Has anything unusual been happening in her life? Anyone new that you know of?"

"No, not as far as we knew. She seemed happy with her life the way it was. Said she wanted to pursue her law degree. She had started taking classes again, as you know." He stopped for a second and then asked.

"Jack, did that son-of-a-bitch rape her? Tell me what happened to my baby."

"Mark, don't go there. This won't help you or Nancy. Just let me take care of this."

"I swear I'll kill him if I ever find out who did this to her. You tell him that, Jack. You tell him I'll kill him."

Outside the Youngblood's house, Jack told Megan he needed to go back to the command center.

"Megan, you should go back to my place and get some sleep. I can't. I can't even think about sleep right now. I want to stay and help. There's going to be lot of evidence to process. This could take hours."

“No, I’ll stay with you, Jack. Maybe I can help.”

He lowered his head accepting her answer. Jack started the car and then asked, “Have you talked to Emmie lately?” Megan knew he wanted to be sure Emmie was safe without giving her location away.

She hadn’t told him about Emmie earlier because she didn’t want to worry him. “She’s okay.” When he looked at her questioningly she added, “She’s fine, Jack.”

“Thank God for that. I can’t imagine going through what Mark is going through right now. I don’t think I could bear it if anything happened to either of you.”

The evidence from Joy’s crime scene began to arrive shortly after their return. Dozens of evidence envelopes had been collected at the scene. The taskforce spent the rest of the evening and well into the morning, sifting through their contents to no avail.

“It’s like he’s getting better with each new victim. There’s no footprints, no fingerprints. No hair samples. No semen,” Dan said once all the evidence had been processed.

“She was raped?” Jack asked. Megan could tell he knew the answer already.

“Yes. Looks like repeatedly. This is one sick bastard,” Dan told them both.

“He’s a monster but he’s also human. Sooner or later he’s going to screw up.”

“I hope you’re right, Jack. But so far, with four bodies behind us, he hasn’t shown any signs of screwing up.”

Jack flinched at Dan’s choice of words. “They’re more than bodies, Dan. These are women I knew personally. And you were close to both Rebecca and Joy.”

“I’m sorry, Jack, I know that. I only meant that he’s perfecting his MO and expanding upon it. I think we have to face some facts here.”

Jack sat down on the edge of the table, covering his eyes for a moment. “What are you getting at, Dan?”

“Well, think about it, Jack. During the original case, we saw some evidence that seemed to indicate Eddie might not have acted alone. Maybe there are two killers. Maybe we should be looking for someone close—”

“To us? Someone working the case, Dan? Why not just say it? You’re starting to believe all the stories about me now as well. Do you really think I’m capable of doing such horrendous things to anyone, much less the people I know?”

“No! For Christ’s sake, Jack, that’s not what I’m saying at all. Of course not! But you have to admit this is starting to look less like Eddie acted alone, even on the old cases. I’m thinking someone connected to the Angel case maybe leaked evidence without even realizing it. What I’m saying is, I think we need to tighten the circle of people who have access to this case to only those we know we can trust. Like it or not, someone is exposing information that could prove crucial to solving the case. We can’t afford another scandal like the last one, Jack. You know this, as well as I do.”

"You're right," Jack said wearily. "I'm sorry, Dan. I'm just upset about Joy. I've let this get too personal."

"Jack it is personal. You knew all these women. Maybe..."

"Maybe what?" Jack met his gaze unflinchingly.

"Maybe nothing. Maybe we're all tired."

"Dan, I want to find out who's behind this more than anyone. I have a huge stake in this as well. But you're right. Go over the files of the people involved in the past cases as well as this one and let me know what you find. Oh and Dan, do it quickly. I want to let Joy's parents know something soon."

"Of course, I'll get right on it. Why don't you go and try to sleep. You look terrible. I'll call you when we know something."

"I'm fine. Just get me some answers soon. Where are you on reinterviewing the people connected to the first murders?"

"We've gone through just about everything in the files. There's nothing new. I talked to a few of Eddie's acquaintances from the past but no one has a clue where he might be. Most still believe he's dead."

"I know it's difficult, Dan and I appreciate all your hard work but still he's out there. We both know it. And we're running out of time."

Jack turned to Megan. "You feel up to a little ride?"

"Sure. Where do you want to go?"

"Let's go back to that cellar again. It's almost daylight. I'm thinking maybe we overlooked something. Something critical."

"Jack, we went over every inch of that place," Dan told him. "We didn't miss anything."

"Maybe but I'm hoping we missed something important that can't be seen through normal eyes."

Chapter Seven

"He was only trying to help, Jack," Megan told him quietly once they were heading back to the crime scene.

God, he dreaded going back there again but knew they had little choice. They'd missed something. He hoped Megan could find it.

"I know." He glanced her way then finally smiled. "I know I'm being super sensitive about this but dammit, Megan, I knew this girl. Hell, I knew them all. I was married to Rachel. This creep—Eddie—has made this personal for me. It feels as if he's turning everyone I care about against me."

"He hasn't turned me against you. And he never will. And Dan still believes in you. He's just frustrated. Like Peter. We're all frustrated. I just wish I could see his face for once."

"Me too, love." He stroked his thumb along her cheek. His eyes held hers. "Right now I wish for nothing more than this to be over. I want out, Megan. I need out. Once we've solved this case, I'm done. I can't do this again." He could tell his confession surprised her. Megan believed Jack bled Bureau blood.

"I don't blame you for not believing me but the Angel case destroyed so much. It cost me you, Megan. I would have given anything—I still would—if I could just go back and do things differently between us. I never wanted you to leave. I thought you knew how I felt. Now I realize I couldn't have been more unclear and I'm sorry for that, Megan. I'm so sorry I hurt you. That I wasn't there for you when you needed me."

He was stunned to see tears in her eyes. Jack pulled into a parking lot and took her in his arms. "Please don't cry, Megan. Please don't. I love you so much. I want to be with you. I want to marry you."

When she tried to move away, he held her tighter.

"No, don't. Please. Just let me hold you for a moment." He felt her slowly relax against his chest.

"When this is over, I want you and Emmie to be with me. I want us to be a family." She still didn't trust him not to hurt her again. He hated that she couldn't believe him.

"I can't do this, Jack," she whispered desperately. When his lips met hers, her protest died away. Just for a moment, she gave herself to him completely. She tasted like forever. He wanted to hold her this close and keep right on kissing her, believing that her sweetness could somehow drive away the bitterness of the past.

He felt her withdrawing from him in stages. She pushed against his chest and reluctantly he let her go. "I can't think about this now. I can't, Jack! I need to finish this thing first before I can think about the future."

Jack understood what she meant but that didn't stop the pain. Or the fear in knowing there might be a chance one of them wouldn't survive this case again. When she looked into his eyes, he knew she would see the tears in his as well.

"Yes, you're right. This is a nightmare. But it's one that has to be solved if you and I are ever going to be able to put this thing in the past once and for all."

For a long time neither said a word. They were still close. And for the time being it is enough.

"I think we both could use some strong coffee." Jack nodded toward the restaurant close by.

"Yes. Right now that sounds like heaven."

From the restaurant, they called Emmie together. She still appeared shy with him even though he believed she now trusted him. It was hard to accept that he didn't really know his own daughter.

"I'm sorry." She'd read this thoughts so easily. "Jack, I should have told you about Emmie. But I wasn't trying to hurt you. I need you to believe that. I just thought..."

He squeezed her hand. "I know. I guess we both made mistakes. You have no idea how many times I wanted to come after you. And I know you don't believe me now but I'm serious about leaving the Bureau. I'm done. I want a normal life. I want you."

She laughed at this. "Sorry, Jack but I'm not anything close to normal. And it's looking like your daughter isn't either."

"Maybe not but you're everything I've ever wanted, Megan. You and Emmie. You're all I want."

* * * * *

In the light of day outwardly the barn and cellar appeared innocent enough. But the evidence of the brutality of the murder that had taken place there was everywhere.

From the road leading to the property, Megan could feel Joy's terror again.

"She wasn't here long," she said and saw Jack's surprise. "He brought her here the day he killed her."

The closer they got to the cellar, the harder it became to shut out the terror Joy Youngblood experienced. Megan could see her, the white scarf around her eyes, naked, cold and shivering. He'd brought her here in the trunk of his car.

Megan got out of the car and stood with her eyes shut tight. The image of Joy being dragged from the car into the damp cellar appeared. She'd tried to scream but he had something in her mouth. Megan couldn't make it out.

Her body was covered in blood. He'd taken his time with her, enjoying every minute of her pain. It excited him. After each attack, he'd raped her, heightening his pleasure.

Inside the cellar Megan knelt where Joy's body had lain.

"The last few minutes before her life ended happened quickly. Thank God for that. In the last minutes here before death, Joy didn't suffer much. That's something to tell her parents."

He glanced at Megan and then looked away from the evidence there.

"Yes. But I don't think that will ease their pain, do you? It certainly doesn't help mine."

"No, I know. I'm sorry."

"Megan, you said she wasn't here long. Do you see anything that might help us figure out where he kept her before? We need to figure out where he had her. Maybe he left something behind there."

Once again, Megan closed her eyes and concentrated on the emotions that filling her head. Fear. Pain. Cold. She could see Joy's body lying there shivering and broken.

Her hands folded neatly around the lilacs as she died.

Then suddenly, Joy's final moments disappeared but not before she captured a fragmented plea. In the moments before her death, Joy had tried to connect to Megan! Joy had known Megan would come for her.

How? Had he told her?

She hadn't noticed this before because there were too many other distractions in her thoughts. Emmie. Jack. Eddie. She hadn't heard Joy's cry for help. Megan tried to focus more closely on what Joy had tried to tell her.

"I'm sorry, Joy. But I'm listening to you now. Tell me what you need me to know." She touched the cold earth where Joy breathed her last breath.

"What?" Megan barely registered Jack's question. He grew silent when he saw her expression. He'd seen it a million times in the past.

The cellar became quiet again. Slowly Joy reached out to her once more with one single clear thought.

"She'd trusted him. He would be someone who she felt comfortable talking to about her problems. Someone she considered a friend. No, wait. There's something else. This is someone she had a crush on. Someone she pursued. Someone she slept with." When Megan opened her eyes again she saw Jack shake his head in frustration.

"Megan, I have no idea. I thought she told me everything about her life but now I realize there were so many things about Joy's life that I didn't know even though we were friends." He stopped the second the words were out. "Oh no. No, this isn't happening. She trusted me, Megan. She had a crush on me. The profile you just gave with the exception of sleeping together could fit me. Joy herself used to tease me about—"

"About what?" Megan prompted finally when he didn't finish.

"About being hung up on you still. She said I couldn't see a good thing when it stared me in the face. I ignored her usually, dismissed it as just a crush. But I knew she would have taken in further if I'd only given the word."

"Who else knew how she felt about you?" Megan forced herself to ask the question. It was hard hearing that another woman had loved him. But Megan could feel Joy's love for Jack even now.

"You mean besides everyone at the office? I'm sorry, Megan, I know how this must hurt to hear." He looked at her for a moment, before answering.

"I don't know. She wouldn't have told her parents—her friends, maybe. She still kept in touch with most of the kids she hung out with during high school. Everyone loved Joy. Dan might know. He and Joy had become close. They used to go to university football games together. Dan went to UV as well. I think he helped convince her to go back and pursue her degree."

"We need to talk to her friends, Jack." Megan wondered if Joy ever had anything to do with the Angel case. She wasn't around when Megan had been in DC but maybe she had something to do with the filing, or reporting of the case. Or maybe just a morbid curiosity. The case drew all kinds. Maybe she'd unknowingly been the leak.

"Do you think Joy knew anything about the Angel case? I'm wondering if there's any connection between her and Eddie. Something that might tie all the loose ends together."

"No, at least as far as I know she never handled anything connected with the case. It would have been in storage by the time she came onboard. And Joy wasn't the kind of girl to think about such things. She hated hearing the details of some of the cases we worked."

"None of this is making any sense now. I think we need something to clear our heads. Let's get some fresh air, maybe take a walk around the property."

They stepped out into the early fall morning. The beauty surrounding them was very different from the horror that took place there the night before.

Densely grown Norwood Maples and White Mulberry filled the woods ahead of them. The further into the woods they went, the darker the trail became.

"The agents searched out here?" she asked knowing the answer already.

"Yes, they'll be back again today. I don't think they missed anything though. They're the best."

Jack brought out a small flashlight from his pocket and shone it on the trail in front of them. Nothing seemed out of place.

"He didn't come this way," she said at last.

"Then how did he get past us? He was there just minutes before. This is the only way out of here without running right into us."

Megan closed her eyes and tried to feel him here but she couldn't.

"I don't know but he didn't come this way."

The woods emptied out into an open field. After an extensive search produced nothing, they returned to the car.

"It's useless. We'll leave it to the experts but there's nothing here. How can he not leave even single piece of evidence behind? No footprints, no tire tracks unaccounted for. It's impossible."

"It doesn't make sense," Megan's gaze met his. She knew he was thinking the same thing.

"Where has he been all these years? It's almost like Eddie Stephens has been orchestrating this whole thing for years. Even when you and I were apart. It's like he knew this day was coming." Before he looked away, Megan saw the fear and helplessness Jack hadn't been able to disguise.

* * * * *

Eddie Stephens grew up in an affluent section of Virginia. Until the age of twelve, his family had been one of the wealthiest around. And then the summer of his twelfth birthday changed everything.

His father divorced his mother and married another woman soon after. He left Eddie's mother with a young son and little else, forcing Marilyn Stephens to go to work for the same people with whom she'd once socialized.

According to the mother, who passed away shortly after Eddie's presumed death, she first noticed a change in her son around this time. Eddie became very shy, made few friends. He seemed to retreat within himself.

"Let's go someplace where we're not surrounded by the current killings." Jack told her. He glanced at his watch. Almost midday. They'd been at it nonstop for more than twenty-four hours.

"Let's go home for a little bit. I for one could use a shower."

He spread the case files out on the coffee table of his living room and sat on the floor reading them while waiting for Megan. He could hear the shower running. All of the old need returned to remind him it had been six years since he'd touched her. He'd buried that part of his life when she left him. Now, every nerve in his body felt as if it was coiled tightly, ready to spring to life whenever she was close. His body craved her to the point of desperation but he didn't want to screw things up again. He needed her to trust him. To give herself to him willingly.

"Anything?" she asked as she joined him on the floor. Megan wore faded jeans, a worn, gray tee and she'd never looked more beautiful or more tempting. He wanted her more than he needed his next breath.

"Hum? Oh, no, nothing yet." With difficulty he forced himself to meet her gaze. For an eternity, time ceased to exist. He became aware of something changing within her. She drew in a labored breath, shutting her eyes against the raw desire in his. When she looked at him again it was all there. All of the same emotions that he knew were mirrored in him.

He waited for her to come to him. She couldn't. Jack took her hands and brought them up against his chest so that she could feel his reaction to her nearness.

"It's your move now," he said softly. "It has to be your decision."

Breathe. He forced out a shaky breath. Only a whisper separated them but it took everything for her to close the space. His arms circled around her bringing her the rest of way to him. He lifted her and sat her in his lap and then waited.

Her fingers brushed across his jaw. Her touch promising the world and yet creating unbearable tension within him. And then slowly, exquisitely, her lips found his. Her touch at first tentative, exploring. Soft as a whisper. His arms tightened around her body in response. She tasted like no other woman he'd ever known. Like forever wrapped up in a single kiss. He wanted to believe that was possible. At last he let go of the control he still held on to and showered her with kisses, revealing all the emotion that lay hidden in his heart. His lips parted hers, gentle but demanding. A soft little cry escaped against his mouth the moment his tongue dipped inside her to taste her for the first time. After only a moment's hesitation, Megan met him kiss for kiss. Stroke for stroke. When kissing her wasn't enough, his lips left hers, moving across her cheek and down to the pulse point at the base of her throat. Her head rolled back to allow him access to her. His lips ravaged her throat. She moved closer, her body pressing against his.

"No!" The word intruded unwelcome between them. For a moment he thought he'd only imagined it. Then through the pounding of his heart he felt her push softly against his chest. With willpower he didn't know he possessed, Jack released her.

Megan scrambled to her feet and away from him, her breathing coming in ragged gasps, matching his.

"Sweetheart, what is it?" Jack went after her but she moved further out of his reach. "Did I hurt you?" he asked and prayed that wasn't the case.

"No. No, you didn't hurt me," she said at last. "You didn't hurt me but... I'm sorry, I thought— I can't do this, Jack. I'm sorry but I can't." She ran past him without another word.

Jack closed his eyes. How many times in the past had he experienced this same rejection in his dreams?

He felt as if he were walking in a daze. Slowly he moved back to the spot he'd left and sank down to the floor once more. He picked up the folder he hadn't been reading before. The words blurring before his eyes. His mind unable to focus. His thoughts were all for her.

Had he truly lost her? God help him, he'd never felt more helpless than he did at this moment.

Jack wasn't even aware of her joining him again until she took the folder from him. He picked up another file and forced himself to concentrate on the words in front of him.

For a long time they worked in silence.

"I've been thinking," Megan said at last, her voice far from steady. "We know Eddie killed the first Angel victim at age twenty-four. But do you think Amy was his first victim?"

Jack put down the case file and considered this for a moment.

"It seems very unlikely but we don't know for sure. There aren't any other unsolved cases that can be linked to him."

"Isn't that strange? Most serial killers have attempted at least one killing in the past before they take their first victim right?"

"Yes, according to the experts it's very unlikely that he didn't practice his skills before Amy Sinclair."

"What about pets or other animals around the neighborhood? Did Eddie experiment on them first?"

"No, there are no reports of any animals being tortured anywhere close to where Eddie lived at any time. He had a dog but he was crazy about that dog according to his mother."

Jack recalled everything about the family. The mother died refusing to believe her son capable of such brutality. He'd talked to the uncle several times through the years.

"I think it's time to pay Eddie's uncle a visit."

The neighborhood in which Eddie Stephens lived before the killings began had been old six years ago. Now it showed significant signs of neglect.

"It wasn't this bad a few years back. I came here to talk to the family before the mother passed away." He saw Megan's questioning look. "I don't know. I just felt sorry for them. In a way, they were Eddie's victims as well. They didn't ask for this to happen to them. It certainly wasn't because of anything they did. Eddie destroyed their lives just as he did the lives of his victims' families."

Jack parked in front of a rundown, two story house. "This is it. At least this used to be where Herman lived before..."

"It doesn't look as if anyone lives here now." Megan took a hesitant step up onto the rickety porch.

"No, maybe he's moved on. I can't blame him for wanting to put this nightmare behind him." Jack looked her way. "Well, as much as humanly possible. I guess you never fully put this in the past, do you?"

Jack pushed the doorbell and when it didn't appear to be working he knocked on the door. Someone had spray painted the paned window black.

They were just about ready to give up when the faint sound of footsteps could be heard from somewhere inside.

The man who opened the door still bore a faint resemblance to Eddie Stephens.

Herman recognized Jack right away. "I've been expecting you, Agent Montgomery." He stepped aside. "You might as well come in. The press has already been snooping around here. I thought maybe you were more of them."

In the tiny living room, Jack introduced Megan. "Herman, this is Megan Beaumont. She worked on your nephew's case with me."

Herman Pittman shook her hand. "I remember. You're the medium." Megan didn't bother correcting him. She'd once told Jack how much she hated being referred to as a medium all of her life. She said it made her sound like a freak.

"Yes, that's correct. I guess you know why we're here, Mr. Pittman"

"It's Herman and yes, the killings have started again. I've read the papers. They say they're similar to The Angel's." He took a seat and indicated Megan and Jack should do the same.

"Has anyone shown any special interest in the case lately, Herman?" Jack asked refusing the man's offer of coffee.

"You're kidding right? Every single anniversary someone comes around asking questions. Usually the press but not always. There are a lot of sick people out there, Agent Montgomery." Jack nodded silently aware of Megan glancing around the room. He wondered what she saw here.

"Herman, I'm not sure how to say this but we have reason to believe that Eddie might not have died after all six years ago when his car went into the—" Jack barely got the words out before Herman's explosive reaction became apparent.

"What kind of crap is this? Are you out of your mind, Agent Montgomery? Of course he died that night. You people made sure of it. You never gave him the chance to defend himself. You were judge, jury and executioner in spite of what everyone who ever knew him better than your so-called experts was telling you—"

"Herman, I understand you're angry but all of our evidence pointed toward Eddie as being the killer and—"

"And what? You want to pin these new killings on him as well? That'd wrap things up nicely for you, wouldn't it? What, you think he rose from the dead or something and I'm hiding him out somewhere? Your people killed him, Agent Montgomery. An innocent man. He's dead. Eddie's dead. You'll have to learn to live with that. Let him rest in peace, for God's sake."

"Herman, has Eddie been in touch with you?" Jack ignored the old man's anger and studied his expression carefully. It was easy to see the truth.

"No. Even if he was still alive and even if he did call me, you think I'd tell you sons-of-bitches!"

"When did you speak to him?" Jack pressed harder.

"I didn't say I had!"

"Herman, I need the truth. When did he call you?" Jack could feel Megan's tension growing. Even though she was the only one to doubt Eddie's death originally, he knew she still she was hoping to be proven wrong.

"Someone called a couple of months back," Herman said at last.

"But you don't believe it was Eddie?"

"It wasn't him!" Herman didn't even hesitate. "If that boy was still alive he would have reached out to me a long time ago. Whoever called was just another nut in a long line of them."

"What did he say?"

"Can't say really. I don't remember." Herman couldn't quite meet Jack's gaze.

"Herman, please. I know how hard this is."

"You don't know shit! And I can't tell you what he said because I stopped listening the second he told me he was Eddie."

"I see. Did anything about the call stand out in your mind as unusual?" Jack hid his disappointment with difficulty. He'd noticed Herman watching Megan closely throughout the interview as if trying to remember something.

"Only that it wasn't him. And it sounded like he was talking on one of those cell phones. It kept cutting out. You're the one who was kidnapped, aren't you? I remember now. You were there when that other girl died. They said Eddie would have killed you as well if Agent Montgomery hadn't pulled you from that burning building."

"Yes." Jack could see her mentally shutting down. He knew how much she hated talking about that time.

"They said he was hiding a dark side. But if he was, I never saw it and I lived here with him and his mother every single day before that time. I never saw any dark side."

"Mr. Pittman, these types of personalities are hard to detect. They're capable of hiding it from even the people they love. I'm not surprised you never saw that side of Eddie."

"Ms. Beaumont with all due respect, my nephew was not 'one of those types'. I don't believe he did the things they accused him of doing and I never will. You've wasted your time coming here expecting me to help you try my nephew again. Agent Montgomery, you were always kind to my sister and me and I appreciate that but I can't help you and I would like it if you and your agents wouldn't come back here again."

Jack got to his feet and indicated Megan should do the same. "You're right. I'm sorry to have to rehash this again, Herman but I am truly sorry for your losses."

Herman Pittman begrudgingly accepted Jack's apology, before showing them to the door. "Have you talked to Victoria Anders, Agent Montgomery?"

"Not recently. Why?"

"Victoria would have been the only one from Eddie's past that he'd keep in touch with. They were good friends, as you know. She never stopped believing Eddie's innocence either. If he was truly still alive, he'd be in touch with her as well."

Megan waited until they were inside the car again before asking Jack what Herman meant by that.

"Victoria and Eddie's family were close once—before the breakup of his parents' marriage. But Victoria and Eddie stayed friends throughout the years. As Herman said,

she never believed Eddie was responsible for the killings. I interviewed her shortly after Eddie's death. She knew the first victim as well as Eddie. She told us none of those things reported about Eddie asking Amy out were true. In fact, Victoria said that Eddie hadn't seen Amy in years. Not since his family moved away from the old neighborhood."

"So someone lied. What are you thinking?"

"I'm not sure yet. But I think we definitely need to talk to Victoria again."

Chapter Eight

Victoria Anders' home seemed light years away from the rundown houses of Eddie's former neighborhood. She lived in a townhouse in an upper-class neighborhood in Coral Hills.

Jack called ahead to ask her if she would be willing to speak with him again. From their one-sided conversation, Megan could tell the girl wasn't looking forward to revisiting the past.

Once Jack parked the car, he turned to Megan.

"She'll talk to us but I don't know if she'll tell us anything new. I'm beginning to think this is a waste of time. We're chasing the past while Eddie is out there trolling for his next victim."

"And Emmie might just be it," Megan whispered.

"That's not going to happen. Emmie is well protected. She'll be safe." He hesitated for a second and then added, "Megan, I really wish you would reconsider going with her."

"No."

"You know the way this thing ends. You're next in line."

"And I'm not leaving, Jack. We can figure this out together, before that happens."

"Megan, I can't let you do it. What if I can't prevent it this time? What if he succeeds? I can't risk losing you, Megan."

Before she could argue the point, Jack got out of the car and waited. Always a very determined man when he'd made up his mind about something, Megan knew it would be pointless to argue with him at the moment.

Victoria Anders was surprisingly polite considering she categorically distrusted the FBI and earnestly still believed in Eddie's innocence.

"Come inside, Agent Montgomery, Ms. Beaumont. I guess I'm not really surprised that you're here. It's terrible about those women. But doesn't this prove anything to you people? Clearly, Eddie wasn't the Angel of Death if it's happening again. You didn't get the right person."

"Victoria, I know you loved your friend but we still have no proof to lead us to believe that Eddie wasn't involved in those first cases."

"How can you say that when it's happening again! Eddie was a sweet, caring man. He wouldn't hurt a fly. You're wrong, Agent Montgomery. And if you still believe Eddie did these things, then why are you here now?"

"Because there are some similarities between the two cases we're going back through the files and contacting all of the people connected to Eddie's past."

"I can't tell you anything new." But Megan sensed she was keeping something back.

"Victoria, has something happened?" Her question caught Victoria off guard.

"How did you..."

"If it's something you think will help clear Eddie's name then tell us." For a moment, Megan didn't believe she would.

"A few weeks ago, someone called me claiming to be Eddie." She shuddered then glanced from Jack to Megan. "God help me, it sounded just like him. For a minute...well, I actually let myself believe it was Eddie."

"Are you sure it wasn't? Victoria, we now have reason to believe Eddie might still be alive." Jack answered her unspoken question.

For a long time, she struggled with the news. "You're wrong," she said at last. "Eddie is dead. That was just some kook."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because if he were still alive, Eddie would have moved heaven or hell to clear his name."

Megan found herself wondering how there could be two such polar opposite insights into Eddie Stephens' personality. The monster she knew was nothing like the sweet, innocent man those closest to Eddie remembered.

"There's something else. But I don't know if it will help Eddie or not." She walked over to the fireplace mantle and took something from a small case. "I'm not even sure what it is." She handed a tiny key to Jack.

"After Eddie's funeral, I went back to the place that he and I used to hang out together as teenagers. There's an old tree on my parents' ranch outside town. It's dead—my dad believed lightning struck it years ago. Eddie and I used to hang out there a lot. He told me that's where he went when he needed to think."

"This is the place out past Donovans Corner, correct?" Jack confirmed.

"That's right. Anyway, I went there after the funeral because I needed to remember Eddie the way I knew him, not the way the press depicted him. They were everywhere taking pictures at the funeral. It was horrible! So I went there and I found this in an envelope stuffed inside the trunk of the tree. Eddie and I used to leave each other messages that same way when we were kids."

"Was there anything else? A note maybe?" Jack asked turning the key over in his hand.

"No, just that. I don't know what it fits. I'm sorry, I know I probably should have turned it over to you before but I didn't think it would serve any purpose at the time. And Eddie was as good as convicted of those crimes. I tried to figure it out on my own but I didn't have any luck. Do you think it's important?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Thank you for your candor, Victoria and for sharing this with us."

"Will you promise me you'll try and find out what this means? And if you find out that Eddie is... If you find out he didn't have anything to do with the killings, will you make sure that information gets to the press? Eddie's mom died trying to prove her son's innocence but she didn't have the money. She even went to Eddie's father for help but he just wanted to be left alone. He never cared about Eddie or her."

"I promise I'll do my best. And whatever I find, I'll let you know."

"Do you think it's him?" Megan asked once they were outside. "I mean, out of the blue, two people from his past get calls from someone claiming to be Eddie and now the killings have started again? It can't be just a coincidence, can it, Jack?"

"I don't know," he said at last.

"Do you think the key's important?"

"Maybe. Right now I think everything is important. And it is our only real lead."

"What do you think it belongs to?"

"I'm not sure. It looks like a small safety deposit box."

"Did Eddie have a safety deposit box?"

"None that we found and we checked every angle. He had very little money in his bank account. It might be to a storage place but after six years who knows what's happened to whatever he stored. Besides, we would have heard about it by now. After the case broke, everyone who ever knew Eddie before came forward looking for publicity. I'm thinking this may be something he kept hidden somewhere special. Maybe we should take a drive out to the Anders ranch and have a look at that tree."

"I agree." Megan nodded. She actually felt a small amount of relief at their discovery.

"But first I want to check in with the team and see what's new. Do you mind?"

As they drew closer to CASMIRC headquarters, traffic became more congested. Swarms of media vans were parked everywhere. Press cameras had been set up on the steps of the building and reporters raced to and fro, ambushing people coming and going from the building.

"This isn't good. Something's happened. We'd better use the garage entrance." The minute they stepped off the elevator, Dan spotted them.

"What is it?" Jack asked when he saw Dan's grim expression.

"Peter's asked to see you right away. I've been trying to reach you."

"Sorry, I had the phone switched off. What's happened?"

"Let's talk in your office."

Jack's gaze slid to Megan's. He looked worried. When they reached the office, Dan closed the door.

"Someone leaked the names of the latest victims to the press. The switchboard's been going ballistic. Peter hit the roof. He's been screaming for me to get you in here." Dan looked at Megan. "I'm sorry about this."

She nodded silently. What could she say? This was their worst nightmare come to fruition.

"None of the information on this case has been logged into the database." Jack said at last running a frustrated hand across his eyes. "So how did they find out the names? You checked out all the personnel working the crime scenes right?"

"Yes. Nothing. They all check out, yet obviously we have a leak somewhere," Dan told Jack. "But it's not all bad news. There's been a breakthrough. Well, at least I think it's a breakthrough."

A small amount of hope relaxed some of the worry from Jack's expression. "Thank God. I could use a little good news before facing Peter."

"I thought so too." Dan smiled sympathetically at his friend. "I had Agent Kellogg talk to Joy's friends as well as the people she attended classes with at UV. From all accounts her former boyfriend is a dead end. He left the area after they broke up and has since married but the man that she mentioned by the name of Alec looks promising."

Jack sank down to his chair. "What did you find out about him?"

"You were right. He was her professor at UV. He teaches Joy's Criminal Behavior class. According to Molly Brighton, Joy's best friend, she dated the guy a few times. In fact she had a crush on him as well. Apparently, you weren't the only one. Molly said Joy had a thing for older men...sorry, Jack. Anyway, Molly told Stan Joy was the one to pursue the relationship in the beginning. But she said after a few dates, Joy found his behavior a little disturbing."

"In what way?" Jack asked.

"She said he was getting too possessive. So Joy broke it off romantically and decided they should be friends instead. From little things Joy told her, Molly had the impression that the professor didn't agree with that decision. According to Molly, he'd made some threatening comments but Joy insisted it was just his way and nothing she couldn't handle."

"Wow!" Jack blew out a long breath. "This is big. We need to bring the guy in for questioning."

"Yeah, well, that's the problem," Dan added.

"What do you mean?"

"He's disappeared. According to the university, he called in the day Joy disappeared claiming to have a family emergency. But Jack, the guy has no family. At least, no close relatives. His parents lived in Buckner Ridge—that's outside Richmond but they're both deceased. I'm sending Stan over to check their house, which Alec still owns. Maybe he's hiding out there."

"It makes sense. He could have found out the names of the victims easily enough from Joy. But what doesn't fit is his connection to Eddie." Jack pointed out then studied Dan's expression closer. "There's something else, isn't there?"

"Oh yeah. And you're gong to love this part. Professor Alec Harrison's fingerprints are in our database. He's been a guest lecturer at the Academy."

"You're kidding!" Jack asked in astonishment.

"No. I'm checking to see if maybe he lectured there around the same time Eddie attended."

Jack got to his feet. "That would certainly fit the missing pieces together nicely. Jeez, I hope you're right because we could certainly use a break like this. Good work, Dan. Have you told Peter any of this yet?"

"Nope. I wanted to share it with you first. You look like you could use a little good news," Dan told him with a wry grin.

"You're right, I could." He headed for the door. "We'd better go. Megan, will you wait for me here?"

Megan's heart lifted for the first time in days. Jack looked exhausted beyond what any human being should have to withstand. He waited for her to nod, gave her a weary smile then followed Dan out of the office.

Left alone, Megan glanced around, noticing for the first time that there weren't any personal items of any note here. But then, Jack and Rebecca had been divorced for years and he didn't know about Emmie's existence. Still, the office offered no personal insight into the man who occupied it.

The minute Jack walked back into his office Megan knew his meeting with Peter hadn't gone well.

"What happened?" He didn't answer right away but grabbed his laptop and briefcase and turned to her.

"I'm being asked to excuse myself from the case entirely," he told her quietly.

"What? Why? Surely Peter doesn't still think—"

"No but he's feeling pressured from his superiors after what's happened today. Come on. Let's get out of there."

Jack didn't stop until they reached the parking garage. "God, Megan I can't believe this is happening. This damn case! It's like a curse! It seems determined to keep us apart!"

"Tell me what he said, Jack," she asked, watching him lean against the car tiredly.

Instead, he handed her a copy of *The Post*. The front page headline screamed, "CASMIRC head had intimate relationships with four of the Angel's latest victims".

"Oh my God."

"There's more. There are some things I haven't told you about the case, Megan." In her heart, Megan had always known Jack held something back.

"What things?"

"After the first case broke, the forensics came back on the scarf used. Some of the blood found there didn't match the victim's." He turned to look at her.

"The killer?" But she knew this wasn't the case.

"It matched Amy Sinclair, the first Angel victim. He's using the same scarves from the original killings."

"But how —"

"The evidence was put into storage after the case officially closed. Someone got to it. The only thing missing were the scarves connected to the Angel case. Each scarf used corresponds to the original victim."

"How did someone manage to get evidence from that case?"

"How do you think?" he asked at last, his gaze holding hers.

"Someone who works for the Bureau, who worked on the original case took the scarves."

"Yes. And if this gets leaked to the press, can you imagine the fallout? They'll crucify me," he added bitterly.

"But what about the new lead. Joy's professor. It could easily have been him, right? What did Peter say about that?"

Jack released a ragged breath. "He's hopeful but that didn't sway his decision. What we really need right now is a miracle."

"Jack, Peter knows you aren't involved in this. He's just trying to protect his own skin."

"Maybe. I can't say that I blame him. But there's something else you should be aware of, Megan. Everyone around the office believed that Joy and I were having an affair. The day I flew to El Paso to come to you, Joy left the office with me. I took her straight home so she could get some rest but I was the last person to see her alive."

Megan remembered something Dan had said about Joy's disappearance.

"Dan said she went missing later that night?"

"He was just trying to protect me. He wouldn't know when she went missing. He was on a plane to New York. But if she did go missing sometime that day then the timeline matches the fourth Angel victim perfectly and that makes me the last person to see her alive, except for the killer."

"So because people chose to believe office gossip and because you were the last person to see her, Peter wants you off the case?"

"Yes. Hell, Megan if this wasn't happening to me, I'd believe I was involved as well."

"It's just too convenient, Jack. Eddie's playing with you the same way he's been playing with me. The only question is what do we do about it?"

"Dan is still on my side, thank God. He'll be heading up the case officially from here on out. He'll keep us updated and hopefully we'll find this professor and he'll provide us with some answers but I can't just sit around and wait for the next victim to go missing."

"Then we have to keep trying."

"No, Megan," Jack reached for her hand. "No, it's too risky for you. I told you, I want you to go to Emmie until this is all over."

"We've been through this already. I'm not going anywhere."

"Megan, do you understand how serious this is? Eddie isn't going to stop this time. Not until he has you and probably our daughter. I don't want you to be involved in this again."

"I've been involved since the beginning! I'm just as much a part of this thing as you. I'm involved, okay! He's kept me in the game for six years. I'm not leaving now!"

"Dammit, Megan, why do you have to be so stubborn?" he asked with only a hint of a smile. He looked exhausted and helpless.

"All right. But you're not leaving my side until he's caught and if things get out of hand like before, if there's even a hint that he's getting close to you, then I'm calling the whole thing off."

"Jack, he is coming for me. We both know that. But that puts us ahead of the game, don't you think? We know what his next move will be."

"Which puts you squarely in the path of a serial killer again. And what about Emmie?"

"I've been here before. I can take care of myself. But Emmie hasn't and you're right, he'll try to get to her. We have to be careful to keep her out of his line of sight."

He ran a hand across his eyes in what was becoming an all-too-familiar gesture. "It's so hard to think clearly right now. So much has happened. Seeing you again, knowing I have a daughter as well, it makes me feel defenseless. Dear God I hope I don't disappoint you both."

"You won't." She lifted his hand to her lips and kissed his knuckles, her eyes never leaving his, showing him all the love she felt for him. The love she once thought she'd lost. "We'll get him. I know it doesn't seem like it now but someday this will end. And when it does..." Megan stopped for a moment, taking a deep breath. Jack watched her as if the weight of the world hinged upon her next words. "When it does, I want us to be together as a family," she said with confidence.

"You really mean that?" he asked in amazement. He sounded so uncertain and so vulnerable.

"Yes. Yes, I do. Jack, I love you. And I know that you love me. I'm tired of fighting it. I don't want to. I don't want to live without you in my life a moment longer. I love you and I want to try—" With a desperate sound, he pulled her into his arms, his lips

claiming hers once more, capturing the rest of her words with his kiss. For the moment, Megan gave herself up to the tender passion she found there in his arms.

Jack at last ended the kiss, leaning his forehead against hers. "I love you too, sweetheart. It's good to have you back on my side again, Megan. I'm sorry that you have to become part of this again. I'm sorry I'm under investigation. I'm sorry that our entire relationship will be put in the spotlight once more. But thank you for standing beside me. It's more than I deserve."

There was so much love in his eyes that Megan found it difficult to breathe properly. She just wanted to be alone with him but more than that, she wanted this nightmare to be behind them so that she could spend the rest of her life with him.

* * * * *

"Call me crazy but I still I can't help but believe this key of Eddie's is important to the case. We should focus on that." Jack told her once they got into the car. He wanted to remain positive for her but it was becoming impossible when each new piece of evidence seemingly linked him to the killer.

"Yes, that's probably a good idea."

He started the engine and smiled at her, a little more of his confidence returning. It helped knowing that she would be beside him through it all. Not matter what happened.

"I may no longer be part of the official investigation but there's nothing keeping me from performing one of my own, now is there?"

The Anders ranch was a sprawling, hundred-acre piece of prime real estate outside of Donovans Corner.

It had been an equestrian ranch at one time but over the years, the Anders sold off most of their stock.

"Victoria told me Eddie loved coming here to ride when he was a kid."

Megan turned in her seat, watching him as he drove along the blacktop leading to the property.

"You did a good thing, Jack—keeping in touch with Eddie's friends and family. You made them feel important in all of this. No one else did that for them."

"Honestly, I felt bad for them. They were victims as well. The press pretty much butchered them, saying they should have seen this coming but how could they? Eddie didn't show any of the normal signs of a killer."

Jack had called ahead to let Victoria know they would be stopping by. She made sure the staff knew to expect them since her parents were out of the country.

"According to Victoria, the tree where she found the key should be on the southeast side of the ranch. We'll have to walk. You up to it?"

“Don’t worry about me. Usually when I’m home I jog five miles every day. I’ll keep up.”

They found the tree in question easily enough thanks to Victoria’s description. She said it leaned to one side and had an enormous split running halfway down the tree.

Jack watched as Megan stood close and tried to connect to Eddie.

“Anything?” he asked finally and saw her shake her head.

“Sorry but it’s hard to imagine the same person I feel here as being the one who did so much brutality. This man was sweet.”

Jack moved closer to the tree to examine its crevices.

“Nothing.” He took the key from his pocket and handed it to Megan. “Here, try this. Maybe something will come to you from it.”

But nothing did. Eddie Stephens was becoming nothing but a series of contradictions. The sweet person Victoria spoke about didn’t fit with the super intelligent person capable of such random acts of cold-blooded murder.

“Jack, none of this adds up.” She handed him back the key.

“I know.” He walked around the tree looking for any sign that the earth might have been disturbed. But after so many years, there would be nothing left if it had.

“The files we have on Eddie all say his intelligence was off the charts. But the person I’m feeling here is just an average young man. Did you ever talk to his mother and Victoria about this?”

“Yes, it came up several times and they were both shocked. His mother wasn’t aware of Eddie having an unusually high IQ but then she worked a lot, so chances are she wouldn’t have known everything happening in her son’s life. But Victoria actually laughed at me when I told her about it. She remembered him as sweet like you indicated but she said he struggled with his grades. His school records seemed to back her up on this. Eddie was an average student at best.”

“So how does an average student become a genius overnight? And how do we even know what his IQ tested out to be?”

“Because we have proof, Megan. Eddie tried to join the Bureau remember? They do IQ testing on all applicants.”

“I’d forgotten. But I don’t see it. I just can’t picture Eddie as a genius.”

“Well, according to the records he was.” Jack stopped in front of her. She had that stubborn look in her eye that she got when she challenged something he said.

“Do we know who administered the test?”

“Megan, let it go. It’s legit. There’s no way he could have faked the test. You’re going down a dead end.”

“Maybe.” She still didn’t believe him. “I don’t know. I’m just trying to find the mistake. There’s one here somewhere, Jack. Something got overlooked.”

She was fighting so hard to prove him innocent. Jack took her in his arms and held her close.

"It's okay. I know you're trying. We'll find it. It's there, I know it is, Megan. We'll find it. But for now, I think we both need to get some rest. And I for one want to talk to my daughter."

* * * * *

"We can't go back to the house. The press will be all over it by now." He answered her unspoken question as they headed in the opposite direction from his quiet neighborhood.

When he turned onto the familiar street that she'd once called home in the Westminster area, she looked at him in surprise.

"What are we doing here?" He stopped the car in front of her former apartment building. "We're going inside." He smiled at her confusion but didn't say anything further. Jack got out of the car and opened the door for her but Megan didn't budge.

"Please, Megan. Just trust me."

She took his hand and stepped out of the car. Painful memories of all the times they'd spent together in her tiny apartment crowded in. She couldn't speak. She waited quietly beside him as he unlocked the door and held it open for her.

Everything about the apartment remained the same as the day she'd left it that last time. She walked through each room of her former home while Jack stood silently waiting for her by the door.

"Why?" She somehow managed to get the word out over the painful lump that formed in her throat.

His expression said it all. For the first time she truly understood how difficult her leaving had been for Jack.

"Oh Jack, I'm so sorry." She ran into his open arms. "I'm so sorry."

He held her as if he believed she might leave him again. "I know. It's not your fault."

"It is!" She realized she was crying. "I didn't listen to what you were trying to tell me. All I heard was you were going back to Rebecca." She pulled back a little so that she could see his expression. At the sight of her tears, Jack's face crumbled.

"Don't. Please don't cry, Megan. Please."

She brushed away the tears and tried to tell him the things she needed him to understand. "I'm okay. I'm okay, Jack. Please, just listen."

"I'm listening." And he was. He was hanging on every one of her words.

"I never stopped loving you. No matter what happened. No matter how hard I tried. Through the years. I never stopped loving you. And no matter what happens this time, I need you to know that I'll never stop believing in you, or loving you until the

day I die." His lips claimed hers once more. At first, gently but then with each new touch, each whispered word of comfort, the passion they'd both buried deep within their hearts ignited into a need that could no longer be denied.

"Make love to me, Jack." As she watched, he drew in shaky breath. His eyes darkened to the color of the sea after a storm. She pushed her fingers into his hair, bringing his mouth to hers once more. She couldn't get close enough to him. Six years she'd waited for his touch. Longed for it. She would never be close enough. Her lips urged his apart. He still tasted the same. Her fingers slid to his chest. They shook as she found each button on his shirt. When the last button came free, she pushed it away from his body. Her lips broke free of his long enough to look at him. His body was beautiful. Lean. Hard. The same as she remembered in all of her dreams...

* * * * *

When he looked into her eyes, Jack saw the truth. Suddenly kissing wasn't nearly enough for either of them. With unsteady hands, he reached for her again. His fingers tightening around her waist for a moment and then slipping beneath her top to touch bare flesh. Jack pushed the shirt away, his thumbs stroking across her breasts. Her body responded to him instantly, shuddering against his touch.

Slowly he lifted the top over her head. For a second they were both overwhelmed with desire. She stood before him wearing only a lacy bra. She'd never looked beautiful. The first time he touched her she'd still been a girl in many ways. He'd been her first lover. Her body and her responses had matured. She wasn't the shy young girl he'd first loved.

"Come here," Jack reached for her once more, no longer content with merely tasting her lips. He wanted all of her, starting with the familiar curve of her cheek, the graceful arch of her throat, the swell of her breast.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered against her silken skin and her body shook in answer to his kisses.

In the past, every time he thought about her, he'd wondered what her reaction would be when he told her he still burned for her. He expected her to tell him to go to hell. But she simply stared up at him with the storm raging within her eyes.

Jack let go of his breath, audibly breaking the silence between them. She'd become accustomed to being alone. Not letting herself feel. Megan's surrender came slowly but it came just the same.

He tried to force rational thought out of his head. This was the worst possible thing they should be doing right now. But Jack couldn't let himself think about what the consequences of their actions might be, or the horror that waited for them just beyond the walls of this apartment.

He felt weak with need, trying to force air into his lungs.

Jack lifted her into his arms and carried her inside the familiar bedroom where they'd spent so many hours together in each other's arms.

Everything looked just as he'd left it the last time he'd spent the night here and yet everything had changed.

He sat her down in front of him, close to the bed.

The blinds remained closed against the midday sun. Filtered gray light reflected his raw arousal, along with her uncertainty. Part of her still didn't trust him fully. The thought hurt to consider but it didn't kill the craving. Or the curiosity.

"Are you okay?" he asked over the thudding sound of his heart pounding in his ears.

"Megan, are you okay?" he repeated again when she didn't answer.

"Yes," She sounded even more uncertain. She tried to steady her voice. "Yes, I'm okay. Jack, please...don't stop."

Still he hesitated for a moment longer and then Megan took the decision out of his hands. She removed the last of her clothing and stood before him naked and vulnerable.

His gaze slid over her slowly, his body growing hard. Then he got to his feet and unbuttoned his pants stepping out of them. Tension soon became the only barrier left between them.

"You're so sexy. So damn sexy." Her arms circled his waist. She lay her head against his chest for a moment. "You feel so good. It's been so long." She lifted her head to look at him. "There's never been anyone but you. Not in all these years. It's always been you, Megan," he whispered against her face before his mouth claimed hers once again. His lips devoured hers filling him with a hunger he'd denied for so long. One that only she could quench.

"God, I want you but I want you to be sure. I don't want to hurt you again."

Megan trembled with each stroke, each kiss. Each word. "I'm sure." Her hands drifted over his bare chest, her lips touching his body for the first time.

The last of Jack's control slipped away into a long, low moan.

He lifted her into his arms again and carried her to the bed. In a moment, their bodies were joined together with a single thrust, robbing them of their breath.

Jack wanted to take his time, to allow them both to become reacquainted with each other. To make this time they had together special. But touching her again made all those things impossible.

"Don't stop, Jack. Please, don't stop," she said into his mouth, pressing her hips closer to him.

His body lunged within her, her kisses and her soft murmurings becoming an intoxicating drug, stealing all rational thought from him. And yet it wasn't enough. He couldn't get close enough.

The fear and uncertainty melted away with each thrust, each kiss. And the world around them was reduced to just the space of one bed, two people. One moment.

"God, you feel so good," he whispered once more against her ear, his teeth grazing along the pulse point at the base of her throat. Jack's hands clutched her thighs, shifting her further beneath his weight, allowing him to plunge deeper within her warmth.

Each thrust gave more pleasure and brought him closer to losing his fragile control. He could feel her body tightening and releasing around his. Watching her pleasure, the pressure within him spiraled out of control. A thousand different convulsions rocketed through his body. Megan's broken whimper mingled with his groan of satisfaction. His hands framed her face. His mouth captured her cries of surrender into a kiss.

She said something so softly that he didn't catch the words. He rolled over onto his back taking her with him. Gathering her close, he waited for the world around them to stop spinning once more.

It wouldn't matter how many times he made love to her it would never be enough. Six years was a long time to need someone.

"Tell me about your life in Texas," Jack asked much later as they lay exhausted in each other's arms while the afternoon shadows lengthened.

"What do you really want to know?" Megan smiled against his chest.

"You know."

"There's no one else. Only you."

"God I hate that I'm thrilled by that but I am. Do you have any idea how crazy it made me thinking about you with someone else? Married to someone else. Starting a family."

"Jack, I fell in love with you in DC and I haven't been able to think about being with another man since. When I came back to Texas and discovered I was pregnant, I was so afraid. I wanted to tell you..."

"I know," he said quietly.

"I don't think I accepted it fully until I moved to El Paso. I tried living in Austin again but I never felt safe there."

"And you did in El Paso?" he asked in disbelief and she laughed.

"It's true. The people there accepted me for who I was. They didn't ask any questions and they didn't know anything about my past. To them, I wasn't a freak."

"You always hated the gift, haven't you?"

Jack was the only person she'd let get close her and yet still he didn't understand why she hated it so much.

"Yes. It's hard to fit into normal society. It's hard to explain but I don't want that for Emmie."

"I know that, love. But it is a gift. And if you didn't have it then you and I would never have met, we would never have fallen in love and we would never have made that beautiful child."

"Yes, those are the only good things to come from it though. It scares me to think about how fragile the events of our life really are. It's all a game of chance."

"Maybe not. Maybe this is who we are meant to be? And maybe you and I are supposed to be together. Maybe this case was meant to be ours to solve."

"I so wanted to believe we solved it the last time but I guess, deep down, I've always known it wasn't finished."

"So, what do you do to make yourself happy in the middle of a reservation in the middle of a desert?" he said, trying to lighten to mood.

"I have Emmie. She's my life – was my life. I tried to hate you, Jack but I couldn't. I'm so glad you came for me."

"Yes, I am too. I'm glad Dan paid you that visit. Against my wishes I might add."

"Jack, why did you keep the apartment?" She lifted her head so that she could look into his eyes. It was a long time before he could answer.

"When you left, well, in the beginning I thought I might just go out of my mind." His mouth twisted into a bitter smile. "God, Megan, you have no idea how much I missed you. Only Dan knew how bad it got. And Rebecca. Dan kept me going. By that time, Rebecca and I were just pretending. I ended up spending most of my time here. It helped. Being here where you and I spent so much time together. I felt close to you. Even after I bought the house, I couldn't give the apartment up."

"I'm so sorry. So sorry. I never realized you loved me too, Jack. I knew you cared about me, that you wanted me physically but I never knew you loved me." He stroked the hair from her face and kissed her mouth.

"Shh... It's okay... I should have told you. I wanted to," he whispered softly and then Jack stopped trying to comfort her with words. His lips touched her body in all the familiar places once more. Just for one second she hesitated and then she too was struggling to touch him as well.

And for the first time, Jack actually believed this time would be different. He felt it in her touch. This time they might just have more than just a few stolen moments.

This time he actually believed they could have a future together.

Chapter Nine

Sometime just before dawn, Megan finally slept. And as always, he came to her. His presence in her life had become more frequent and powerful than ever.

But tonight, there were no victims standing between them. Just Megan and the Angel.

She struggled to wake from the dream but couldn't break his spell. With each kill, he'd grown stronger.

You see me and yet you don't know me. I'm close to you and yet you have no idea who I am. Who is the one with the gift now, Megan? I've grown stronger while you ignore your talents until they become atrophic. You aren't much of a match for me anymore. You're not making it a game, Megan.

What do you want? Why are you doing this?

I want to become the greatest of them all. After all, I am superior to all others, including your precious Jack Montgomery. No one can challenge my power, not even you, Megan. You'll never stop me. Until I'm ready for this to end, it will keep on going, victim after victim. Rebecca, Joy, Emmie, Jack...you.

"No!"

"Megan?" She could feel Jack trying to shake her from the dream but he wouldn't let her go.

He's your greatest weakness, Megan. And you will be his ultimate downfall. Once you're both gone, I'll make sure the girl pays for your crimes. You can rest assured once you're out of the way, the child – your child – will become mine. I will bring her to death very slowly and you and he, wherever you are, will experience every single part of her pain.

"Megan! Megan, wake up!" The authority in Jack's voice finally freed her from Eddie's hold. She sat up in bed, shivering from fear and dread.

This dream had been clearer than ever before and far stronger than all the others. It had proven there would be no avoiding this final showdown no matter how unprepared she was for it.

"What happened? You were screaming. I couldn't wake you. God, Megan, I've never been so scared."

She shook her head. She didn't want to talk about him.

"Megan?" Jack held her close. She felt safe in his arms. Safe enough to talk about him. For a long time she clung to Jack's strength and prayed when the time came, she could remain strong for him. For Emmie.

"It was him. Jack, he wants Emmie."

"Shh...I'm not going to let that happen, Megan. Don't worry. I won't let him hurt her or you ever again."

"Jack, how are you going to stop it from happening? Whether Eddie is working alone or with this Alec person, he's effectively taken you out of the game."

"Yes." She knew she'd hurt him. Jack seemed to withdraw further from her. But Emmie's safety must be the most important thing to both of them.

"Jack, he knows Emmie is your daughter. He told me she would be next."

"Sweetheart, I promise I'm not going to let anything happen to Emmie."

"We don't even know where to look for him! Jack, it's almost time for him to take his next victim."

"Emmie is safe, Megan. There's only one person at the Bureau who knows where she is. You don't even know her whereabouts."

"I think we need to move her and Marie again. We can't afford to be too careful now." She got out of bed and reached for her clothes.

"Megan," Jack reasoned quietly. "She's with my father. Dad will take good care of Emmie and Marie."

"Don't tell me any of the details. Just do this for me, okay. Please, Jack. For my peace of mind move her and Marie now before it's too late."

He sat watching her for a long time before giving in. "All right. I'll call Dad right now and have him move them both."

"Thank you." She came back to bed and sat down next to him while Jack reached for the phone and then stopped suddenly.

"I don't want to take any chances. This line could be bugged. I'm going to use the payphone down the street. Stay here."

"Not a chance. I'm coming with you! Emmie is my daughter too. If anything happens to her, it will just be as much my fault as yours."

* * * * *

After he'd showered, Jack dressed in the change of clothing he kept at the apartment then waited while she did the same.

Jack drove to the corner store where the clerk directed them to the payphone located around the back of the building. He stood close to Megan as the clouds that threatened during the day gave way to predicted thunderstorms. He waited for his father to pick up phone.

"That's odd. Dad has to be home."

"Oh God," Megan closed her eyes and turned away.

"What is it?" he asked frantically.

"He's close to her. I can feel her fear..."

"Where Megan? Can you see where she is?" Jack tried to keep the panic from his voice.

"There are street vendors everywhere. She's in an open market. Does that make any sense?"

Jack nodded, reaching for the phone again. This time he dialed the number for the Raleigh Police Department. While Megan listened, Jack identified himself and then asked to speak to a detective he trusted.

"Wait! She's safe now, Jack. She's upset but she's with Marie and your father. She's okay!"

Jack brought her close and whispered, "Thank God." When the detective picked up, Jack quickly explained what had happened and then gave directions to where the patrol car would find them. As soon as he hung up, Jack tried his father's cell phone again.

"Dad, what happened?" Jack could hear Emmie crying in the background.

"She's okay, son. They're both okay. That's one smart little girl you've got there."

"Yes, I know. She takes after her mother."

"Jack, the police are here, hang on."

Jack listened as his father explained what had happened before returning to the phone.

"The officers are talking to witnesses now but Jack," he lowered his voice before adding, "no one can identify the man who took her. They want us to go to the station with them. They're hoping Emmie will remember something important."

"Dad, let me talk to the officer in charge for a second."

Jack once again identified himself and then held the phone so that Megan could listen in.

"According to your father and Ms. Beaumont they only took their eyes off the little girl for a second. I guess whoever did this was watching her. She didn't even have the chance to scream."

"No one saw anything?" Jack asked in amazement.

"Sorry, Agent Montgomery but no, whoever did this is good. If you like, I'll have an officer sit at your father's house and keep an eye on everything. And of course we'll continue investigating the case but without anything to go on, I don't have to tell you how impossible this is going to be to solve."

"Thanks for your help Officer but no, let me handle it from here. If you find anything, you'll let me know?"

"Of course, Agent Montgomery."

"Can I talk to my father for a second?"

Jack waited as the officer handed the phone back to his father.

"I'm so sorry, Son. I let you and Megan down."

"Dad, it's not your fault. I should have seen this coming. Look, Dad, I need you to do something for me but you can't tell anyone, not even the officers with you. Don't say anything – just listen for a second."

"Okay, Son."

"Once you leave the station, get out of there. Don't go back to the house, not even to pack your clothes. Just leave. Make sure you're not being followed and get Emmie and Marie out of there."

"Where do you want us to go?"

"Don't tell me, Dad. I can't know anything about where you're taking them, okay? Just use your cop's instinct and get them somewhere safe. Then stay there, don't tell anyone where you are and don't use the phone. I'll be in touch when things are safe again. Do you understand?"

"I do, Son. Don't worry. I'll take good care of them for you."

* * * * *

"Thank you, Jack," Megan told him once they'd returned to the apartment.

"Don't thank me, Megan. You were right all along. I should have seen this coming as well."

"You thought you were doing what was right. We just didn't have any idea what we were up against."

"No. And I'm beginning to think we still don't have a clue. I'm going to check in with Dan. Maybe he knows something new by now."

"We should try to eat. I'll make us something while you talk to Dan."

Jack called Dan's cell repeatedly but it went straight to voicemail each time. He tried the office number but when the assistant picked up, he hung up without leaving a message.

"He's not answering," he told Megan when he joined her in the kitchen. "I'm hoping that's a good thing. Maybe they've tracked the professor down." He sat down at the table and rubbed his hand across his eyes. "God, I wish I knew what to do next?"

Megan knelt in front of him and took his hand in hers.

"I know it's frustrating."

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. "Yes but I'm so glad you're here with me. I don't think I could make it through this again without you, Megan."

"Jack, don't give up. We're going to find him."

"I'm trying, Megan. I'm really trying." Neither of them had much of an appetite but they tried to eat. They'd been working off adrenalin and coffee for so long that it was hard to think clearly anymore.

As much as Jack wanted to forget about the case for a little while, he knew that would be impossible. Eddie had been bold enough to try and take Emmie as his next victim. While Emmie might be safe now, the Angel's next victim was not.

"It's time for him to take his next victim, isn't it?" She read his thoughts clearly. "EM. Do you know anyone with those initials?"

Jack got to his feet and began pacing around the room. Moving around helped him to concentrate.

"I've been thinking about that for hours now, Megan but I can't come up with anyone!"

"What about an acquaintance. Someone from your past. Someone you may not know personally. It could be someone you worked with in the past?"

"Nothing. I'm drawing a blank. I'm going to try Dan again. Maybe something's popped there."

Megan cleared away their plates then joined Jack in the great room.

"Dan, thank God, I've been trying to reach you for a while." When Dan didn't say anything, he asked, "Has something happened?"

Dan Martinez had never once refused to discuss evidence with him. Jack could tell something was wrong.

"What is it Dan?"

"Nothing. Not now..."

"For God's sake, Dan, tell me. Whatever it is, I can take it."

"I can't. I have to go. I'll call you later." Before Jack could ask anything further, Dan hung up.

"Anything?" Megan asked.

"No, at least nothing he could tell me. But he knows something. I could feel it. He sounded agitated and he never used my name. Something's up." He felt so helpless. He didn't know how to handle being the Bureau's number one suspect in the very crimes he'd once worked so hard to solve.

"Jack, something you mentioned earlier has been bothering me. You said Eddie took the entrance exam to join the Bureau. So what happened when he failed?"

Jack considered this for a moment. "Well, that's just it. He didn't fail. He met all the qualifications. In fact, he even attended the academy for a short time. He was there for almost a week and then he just disappeared. This was shortly before we found the first victim's body."

"Did anything unusual happen to him while he was there?" she asked.

"Not as far as anyone remembers. In fact, most of his instructors said he showed promise. They all believed he had what it took to make an excellent agent. He was a model student. We're at a dead end until we find out if Harrison actually instructed there at the same time as Eddie."

"Did he become friends with anyone in particular? I'm wondering if maybe someone might remember something new about him."

"We checked out everyone who attended the academy at the same time as Eddie. Just about everyone who came in contact with Eddie's life during that time was interviewed."

He stopped for a moment, remembering something he'd almost forgotten.

"What is it?"

"I was just thinking about something Victoria told me. She said the last time she saw Eddie was right around the time he started at the academy." Jack's gaze fixed on Megan's expression. "I think we should talk to her again."

It was dark when we reached Victoria Anders' townhouse. She invited them inside and then waited for them to sit.

"Can I get you something? Coffee?"

Jack smiled but shook his head, "No, I think we've had way too much of that already. Victoria, I wanted to talk to you again about the time Eddie was at the academy. Do you remember anything in particular about that time?"

"No, not really. Why? Is it important, Agent Montgomery?"

"I think so," he told her slowly. "Can you tell me what you and Eddie might have talked about during that time?"

"I only saw him a couple of times while he was there, Agent Montgomery, so I don't know how much help I'll be. I remember how excited he felt about joining the Bureau though. It was his dream to become an agent."

"Did he mention anyone in particular? I'm wondering if he made a friend there that we don't know about."

"He never mentioned anyone, I'm sorry."

Jack tried to keep the helplessness growing inside from showing. He wanted to be strong for Megan but with each passing moment, a little more of his hope disappeared.

"Oh, wait—there was something strange that happened, I almost forgot. It was right before he dropped out and before he disappeared for a while. I remember he became very withdrawn. You'd have to know Eddie to understand how odd that was. Eddie was always so sweet, always so positive about life. He was a good person." When she saw his skepticism, she added, "I know you don't believe that but it's true. This was completely out of character for Eddie." She paused for a moment and then added, "There's something else..."

"Whatever it is, just tell me, Victoria." Jack tried to remain patient but time was running out for the Angel's next victim.

"I saw Eddie a few weeks before his death."

Jack and Megan glanced at each other in surprise.

"You did what?" he asked incredulously. "Why didn't you mention this before?"

"I told you it didn't seem important. It wouldn't have changed anything. And, I guess I thought it might make you think he did those terrible things after all," she added at last.

"What happened, Victoria?"

"Eddie called me out of the blue. I hadn't spoken to him in a while. I thought he was still at the academy."

"And?"

"He asked me to meet him at my parents' place, by the old tree, after dark. I thought that was strange but the person who met me there wasn't anything like the man I knew. God help me, for a while after the news of Eddie's suspected involvement in those murders broke, well, for a while I wondered if maybe he really might have been the Angel of Death."

"What made you think that?" Jack asked, trying not to get ahead of her in his thoughts. He needed all the details.

"When I got there, Eddie appeared very agitated. He couldn't stand still. He kept pacing around the tree and saying, he's watching me, he's going to kill me. He knows I'm weak. It was creepy."

"Did he give you any indication what he meant by that?"

"No, he just kept looking around as if he expected someone might have followed him there. I asked what he was talking about but he simply laughed. Agent Montgomery, I've never heard anything like that laugh before and I hope I never do. It sounded...deranged. That's the only way I can describe it. I thought that maybe he was on something.

"It scared the hell out of me and so did Eddie. I tried to talk to him. To reason with him but he wasn't making any sense. So I left. I ran away from my friend. Eddie needed me and I deserted him."

Something or someone had pushed Eddie over the edge. Maybe his partner in murder? Could Alec Harrison be the true mastermind behind the Angel of Death?

"Anything else stand out in your mind as odd?" Jack hoped she might remember something further. Maybe something that didn't appear important at the time.

"No, as I've said, I left. I was scared out of my mind. I remember the whole way back to my car I kept looking over my shoulder. Eddie's paranoia really freaked me out. I expected someone to come after me as well."

"Did you see anything or anyone suspicious?"

"No... Wait. Now that you mention it...I didn't see anyone on the property but when I left there was a car parked along the road."

"Could it have been Eddie's?" Jack wondered if it belonged to Eddie's partner.

"No, Eddie walked. I know that sounds strange but Eddie loved to hike and he was very good at it too. He walked to my parents' place."

"Do you remember anything in particular about the car?"

"Not really. It was dark, nondescript. I'm sorry. Is it important?"

"It may be."

"I'm sorry, Agent Montgomery. But I didn't see anyone in there. When my headlights swept over it there wasn't anyone inside."

"Its okay, Victoria," Jack told her getting to his feet. "You've been a tremendous help. It's something to consider and I'll check it out."

"You'll let me know, won't you?"

"Of course. I promise I will."

"What do you think it means, Jack?" Megan asked once they'd left Victoria's townhouse and stood outside in the clear fall evening. The storms from earlier in the day were all gone now. But there was still one more storm gathering that threatened to be the most destructive of them all.

"It means Eddie was scared of someone. Probably the real deviant mind behind the Angel of Death. If it's Alec Harrison, then he's the one calling the shots. We need to find this guy, Megan and soon."

"Try reaching Dan again."

"I was just thinking the same thing." Jack waited until he'd put the car into motion before dialing his friend.

"You must be reading my mind," Dan told him after picking up on the first ring. Jack hit the speaker button so that Megan could listen in. "I'm sorry that I couldn't really talk earlier and I saw that you'd called but I wanted to wait until I had something for you."

"You've found out something about Harrison?"

"Yes, well, sort of... I'm sorry. I'm not trying to be evasive. The truth is, I don't really know much yet but the details are unfolding even as we speak. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to find anything to indicate Harrison taught at the academy around the same time Eddie was there."

"Dammit. Are you positive, Dan? I would have bet money he was there."

"Me too and I'm not ready to rule it out entirely just yet."

"Why is that?"

"There are a couple of substitute instructors who taught around the time that we can't locate just yet. One in particular only taught there once. A man by the name of James Young. But oddly enough, no one remembers anything about him."

"That's strange." The academy was extremely strict when it came to selecting its instructors. They only picked the best of the best. And their record-keeping was impeccable. "Something doesn't add up there, Dan. You'd better take a closer look."

"Yep, that's exactly what I thought as well. I'll let you know the minute I have anything, oh and Jack, Stan found something interesting after searching Harrison's parents' place near Buckner Ridge."

"Please tell me it's good news."

Dan laughed shortly. "Not good news but certainly promising. Stan's team searched the place thoroughly. It was empty but they found evidence that someone had been there recently. Stan believes more than one person might have been hiding out there."

"Eddie and Harrison. Dammit we just missed them."

"It appears that way. But they haven't been gone long. Stan's combing the area looking for any witnesses. They can't have gone far. I think this may just be are biggest break yet."

Jack blew out a long breath. "I hope you're right, Dan. We need this. Let me know the minute you hear anything."

He hung up the phone and turned to Megan. She was smiling.

"This is good news, Jack. Finally, we have something tangible to go on." She reached for his hand and squeezed it. "Is there anyone at the academy that you trust? I'm thinking maybe we can help speed things up in Dan's search for this missing instructor."

"Not at the academy but there is someone I trust," Jack told her. He thought about the man who had changed his life all those years ago. "My old instructor. I'd trust him with my life. And you're right. Dan needs our help. I think we should talk to Rocky right away."

Rocky St. Clair retired after being the director of the Bureau's academy in Quantico for more than twenty years. He lived with his wife in a sprawling colonial outside Richmond.

"Jack? Jack Montgomery—come on in here, man!" Rocky was clearly surprised to have them show up at his doorstep unannounced.

"Rocky how are you? This is Megan Beaumont. She's helping me out with a case." Rocky took Megan's hand then showed them through to the living room.

"Sit. Sit. It's been years, hasn't it? I guess the last time I saw you was at my retirement party three years earlier. How've you been? The Bureau keeping you busy?"

"Yes...actually Rocky, that's why I'm here. Bureau business." Jack hesitated, wondering where exactly to begin.

"I kind of figured as much. I heard about Rebecca. I'm sorry, Jack. What can I do to help?"

"Where's Louise?" While he trusted both Rocky and Louise empathically, the fewer people involved with the case, the less likely another slip-up would occur which might allow the killers to get away again.

"She's visiting her parents in Vermont. Since I retired, she tells me she sees way too much of me." Jack's attempted laughter didn't fool Rocky.

"What's wrong, Jack? Is this about the copycat case?"

Jack hesitated. How much of the reality of the case should he reveal to Rocky? "Yes, in a way. We, Megan and I are investigating the case's possible connection to Eddie Stephens."

"Now that's a name I'd just as soon never hear again. He sure had us all fooled, didn't he?"

In the end, Jack decided Rocky needed to know the truth. "Rocky, there's some question now as to whether or not Eddie might actually still be alive and if in fact he acted alone on those original murders or in the latest ones."

Rocky didn't say a word for a long time. "Damn, Jack. If you didn't get him, then where's he been?" Jack wished he could answer that question. He felt inept in simply shaking his head.

"You know, I never did quite believe that kid could be responsible for those killings."

"What do you mean?" Jack watched as Rocky considered the question for a moment.

"Well, I know you had the evidence and all but the kid just didn't seem capable of such violence. In fact, I often wondered if maybe he'd had some medical problem or something that no one knew about. Because the kid I spoke with, well, he was a good kid, Jack."

"Everyone who knew Eddie felt the same way. They've insisted upon his innocence from the beginning. But we have evidence now to believe that maybe Eddie wasn't the mastermind."

"Which means, we've got ten Angel victims now?"

"Yes and they're probably targeting their next one even as we speak. So time is of the essence here, Rocky."

"I see." Rocky look intently at him before adding, "What can I do to help? What do you need me to do, Jack?"

"I appreciate your offer but I think you need to know, I've been removed from the case. Megan and I are conducting our own investigation and right now I could really use your help."

"If Peter Kensington is foolish enough to think you'd be involved in anything like this then he's not the man I believed him to be. Tell me what you need. Anything. You name it."

"I need you to do some checking on the instructors that worked under you at the time Eddie was there."

"What are you thinking here, Jack?"

"We're got a suspect that we think may be connected to Eddie's time there. A man who teaches at UV by the name of Alec Harrison. He's been a guest lecturer at the academy recently. Ever heard of him?"

"Alec Harrison," Rocky repeated the name but Jack could tell the name didn't sound familiar. "Do you have a photo of the guy?"

"No but I can get one sent over. Dan's been checking the connection and so far he hasn't found any record of an Alec Harrison working at the academy until recently but, here's the catch. There are a couple of instructors that filled in around the same time Eddie was there. Dan can't locate one in particular by the name of James Young and no one he's interviewed remembers the man."

"I see. So you're thinking this could be Harrison using an assumed name?"

"Maybe. I know it's a long shot but it's all we've got. I'll have a photo of Harrison sent over along with all the information we have on the instructor in question."

It was a long time before Rocky answered. "You know, something about the way Peter rushed to close that case always bothered me. I mean, why not be certain. After all, this was the biggest case in the unit's history and you aren't going to wait for the killer's body to show up before closing it?"

Jack couldn't help but agree with Rocky. After the third victim's death someone leaked detailed pieces of the crime scene—pieces that could have helped solve the murders sooner—to every paper around town as well as the national media. Before long, the Bureau drew fire from all around and pressure to solve the murders became overwhelming to those in charge.

DC was a community paralyzed by fear. After Eddie's assumed death, an outcry from various government leaders forced an investigation of the unit. Peter ordered Jack to get his personal life in order and go back to his wife until the pressure was off.

Peter had been thrilled when Megan left DC, because it took away any hint of their affair from the public's eye.

Unfortunately, even after a thorough investigation, the name of person responsible for leaking the information went unknown.

At the time, the Bureau assumed it had been a subordinate looking for publicity or possibly a plush book deal. There certainly were enough of those to follow. Now, in light of the new information about Harrison's possible connection to Eddie, it seemed like too much of a coincidence.

"Rocky, if there is anything you can come up with that might help us, even if it doesn't seem important, I'd appreciate it."

"Can you give me a little time?" he said thoughtfully. "I'd like to ask some questions but obviously, I'll need to do it quietly. I don't want to draw attention to myself and you certainly don't need any more."

"Sure but I don't have much time to give you pal. Any idea how long it will take?"

"I still have friends there. People I can trust. Let me check it out today—in the morning, that is," he said when he spotted the time. "I'll give you a call as soon as I know anything."

"Thank you, Rocky. I hate getting you involved in this but right now, I'm desperate and I don't know where else to turn."

"Jack, you were the best cadet I ever had. You turned out to be a great leader. You deserve better. It pisses me off to think Peter and the Bureau aren't backing you up on this. I want to help." He patted Jack on the back before adding, "Why don't you try to get some sleep, pal. You and your lady friend here look exhausted."

Chapter Ten

They left Rocky with the assurance he would call before noon no matter what. It was something to hold on to at least.

"So what do you want to do now?" Megan asked Jack as they drove along the congested streets of the DC.

"I don't know, Megan. I'm all out of ideas."

"Maybe you should try and get some sleep,"

"No. God no. There's no time." He glanced at his watch. "He will have taken his next victim by now. We have got to figure this thing out before he kills her."

She placed her hand over his. He looked so lost. She wished she could think of something else they might have missed.

"We're getting closer, Jack. I can feel it."

He smiled but he didn't believe her. "I feel as if the noose is closing in on me. Eddie and whoever his accomplice is have outsmarted us at just about every turn."

"Jack, don't give up. I need you not to give up."

"I'm trying. But I have to be honest with you—I don't know what else to do." He pulled into an all-night Denny's and turned to her. "I wish these sons-of-bitches would just come after me straight-out. I could handle that. What I can't handle is feeling this helpless."

"I know. Look, let's take a minute. Get something to eat and clear our heads. It's not going to do either of us any good if we keep going nonstop like this."

They found a vacant booth and sat staring at food that neither had any appetite for.

"At least we know they won't hurt Emmie. She's safe now, Megan. As bad as it sounds, at least we know the threat to her has passed."

They would have selected another fitting victim by now. Someone with the initials EM. Megan closed her eyes for a moment and tried reaching out to her but without any physical connection to the victim, it was impossible.

"Maybe we should drive around to some of the areas that match up to the first crime scene," Jack said, wearily grasping at straws.

"Sure, it's worth a try."

"It's a long shot, I know but you're right, it's worth a try and we have to do something."

They'd found the last victim before Melissa Billings, in a shed in West Potomac Park. That left a lot of waterfront to be searched where the killers could be holding their next victim.

"Jack, why do you think they moved Joy? I mean that wasn't part of the usual pattern."

"Isn't it obvious? They wanted us—me—to find her so that more suspicion would fall on me. They've stepped it up a notch with Joy—intensified the game. With Rebecca, it was too obvious. My coworkers would think it highly unlikely I would be so obvious. They slipped up. Joy was a more subtle victim."

Their first stop was to Lady Bird Johnson Memorial Park.

"What that means, is that they're not infallible. They've made one mistake, which means they're capable of making more."

"Let's hope you're right, Megan. You still have the gun I gave you?" Jack asked. Megan held it up for him to see before tucking it back behind her jacket. He popped the glove box and retrieved a couple of flashlights.

"Good, keep it close." He led the way down to the water's edge. "Stay close to me, Megan. You're still one of their targets. Don't ever forget that."

While Jack searched, Megan tried to reach out to the latest victim once more. She felt many conflicting stories here. There had been other deaths close by. She could feel them all reaching out to her but the Angel killers would not have chosen this place for their victim.

"She's not here, Jack. This place is too popular. They wouldn't want that."

"You're right. But we have to check them all out."

"There's still some gardeners' sheds out near Edgewater Beach, right?" Megan remembered that she and Jack had once gone there to get away from the gruesome details of the case toward the end. They'd rented a boat and spent the afternoon drifting along the peaceful water, making love.

"Yes," She could tell that he too remembered that day. The last they'd spent together so intimately.

"You know, those days and that one in particular, was one of the best times for me. Not the case," he added unnecessarily, "but the time you and I spent together. You have no idea how many times I've relived those moments with you. When Rebecca died, it brought it all back. If I hadn't become a suspect already, I would have turned in my badge and come to you. Just thinking about you made those days bearable."

"I wish that you had. I wish things had turned out different for us back then. But maybe we wouldn't have truly appreciated what we have now, if those times hadn't been so difficult." Megan had to believe things happened in life for a reason. The good. The bad. Even the Angel of Death.

* * * * *

Edgewater Beach never looked more uninviting than it did that night. At three a.m. the waters were restless.

Even before they reached the beach, Jack knew Megan sensed something.

She stopped a few feet behind him and closed her eyes.

"Jack, she's here. She's still alive."

He glanced around, confronted by pitch darkness. The clouds had returned obscuring the moon. There weren't any street lights out here. Jack left the car's engine running and turned the headlights on high beam.

"There's at least a dozen sheds, Megan. Can you make out one in particular?"

"No, we'll have to split up." For a moment, Jack hesitated. He didn't want to let her out of his sight.

"It's okay, I can take care of myself. Jack, we don't have a choice." When he still didn't say anything, she added, "Jack, we're running out of time. She's hurt."

"All right but for God's sake, Megan, please be careful."

The first three sheds proved to be a dead end. They held nothing out of the ordinary, just a few gardening tools. But of course, they wouldn't have chosen them. They were close to the road. Too obvious.

Jack and Megan split up, fanning out in different directions but he made sure he could see her flashlight at all times. The last shed appeared to be the largest of all. His light caught the glint of something metal attached to the door.

A lock.

"Megan, over here! I think I have something," Jack called out as he stepped closer. The lock looked similar to the one used on the cellar door at Joy's murder scene.

"She's in there. She's still alive. I can feel her."

Jack took his flashlight and busted the lock free before shoving the door open. Inside, they could hear a faint whimpering sound. Behind a small table set up in the middle of the room, Jack's flashlight beam found her. She was gagged, naked, blindfolded and bloody. He'd raped and tortured her but she was alive.

Megan knelt next to the girl as Jack loosened her restraints. For a moment, she fought him. She was scared to death.

"It's okay. It's okay. We're here to help you. You're going to be okay. We're going to get you out of here. Just hold on," Megan whispered soothingly to the girl.

Jack took off his jacket and placed it over her. "I'm going to call for an ambulance and backup. Stay with her, Megan. I'll be right outside." His attention focused on the girl again.

"You're going to be okay, Miss. He won't hurt you anymore."

Her body was literally broken and covered with blood but she would live.

"Megan, be careful not to disturb the crime scene," Jack reminded her before he stepped out into the night and dialed Dan's cell number first followed by 9-1-1.

Within minutes, the place filled with emergency workers and agents. This was the biggest break they'd had so far. A live victim of the Angel. Someone who could hopefully identify her attackers.

While the paramedics worked on the girl, who couldn't even remember her name, Jack and Megan were questioned separately.

Dan pulled Jack aside. It took only a matter of seconds before his questions turned to the inevitable.

"So, how did you happen upon the exact location of the victim, Jack?"

"Just blind luck and good detective work."

"You said that you and Megan split up. How long were you out of her line of sight? How long were you alone with the girl?"

"What are you getting at Dan? You think I'm part of this?"

"No, of course not, Jack. But I have to ask and frankly I'm in the minority here. Everyone else at the taskforce has already convicted you."

"Those people are supposed to be my friends. God knows I've stood by them through some rough times."

"Jack, they are your friends but you have to admit, the evidence is starting to mount against you."

"Don't you think that in itself is a little too convenient?"

"Dammit, Jack, I'm your friend, remember? I'm just trying to do my job here." Dan lowered his voice when their exchange caught the attention of several agents standing close by. "Look, Jack, I know these questions are unpleasant but I have to ask them and you know it. Now, how long were you alone with the victim?"

Jack closed his eyes and shook his head. It was hard to concentrate. It felt as if everything he'd counted on for so long was slowly crumbling at his feet.

"I wasn't alone with her, Dan. The shed was locked. When Megan appeared, I broke the lock and we entered the building together."

Dan watched him closely for another minute before adding, "Don't worry, I'm sure this will all be cleared up once the girl is able to talk. Hopefully she can tell us something about her attacker."

After Dan walked away, Jack knew that wouldn't be the case. The Angel killers were too good. They would never give themselves away so easily. Eluding the Bureau was part of the game. Revealing something as easy as their physical appearance to a victim and allowing her to live would be a show of weakness. They were anything but weak. No, this was just part of their plan.

Once the agent interrogating Megan finished, Jack joined her. He could see how difficult it had been for her to answer those questions.

"I feel like I'm at a witch hunt," he told her quietly. "The girl won't be able to shed any light on things. She didn't see her attackers."

"Jack, you don't know that. Maybe they did something or said something to her that she will remember. Don't give up. This is good news. At least we saved her life."

He pulled her close. "You're right. I've been so worried about saving my own hide that I almost forgot we saved her. That's worth a few uncomfortable questions, isn't it?"

Unfortunately, the questions had just begun. The minute Peter arrived on the scene he took Megan and Jack aside.

"What do you think you're doing conducting your own investigation in this case? I told you to leave this with us. You've only complicated things here. You've put yourself square in the middle of another crime scene, for God's sake!"

"Peter, you know as well as I do that I'm not involved in this thing. Don't you think if I were, I'd make sure not to leave any witnesses around who could identify me? That we found the victim alive is big. Hopefully, she can tell us something about the killers."

"Killer. We don't have any evidence to prove there's more than one killer involved in this. And whether or not I believe you're involved doesn't matter. I told you, you were off the case. Now, you're not only off, you're suspended."

"Dammit, Peter, are you out of your mind? You can't do this to me."

"I just did," Peter told him quietly. "Now go home."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"You are, or you're going to be arrested."

Jack stared at him in disbelief. "Peter, there are two killers out there and you know it. We don't have the time or manpower to spare here."

"I'm well aware of what's out there, Jack. But right now, you just happen to be my number one suspect." Peter released a harsh breath into the tense space between them. "Go home, Jack. Stay out of it. We'll take care of this. All you're doing now is further incriminating yourself. Don't make me arrest you, Jack. Please don't make me do that. Go home."

Jack's eyes locked with Peter's in disbelief, before finally accepting the truth. He and Megan were in this alone right now. It would be up to them to prove his innocence.

"All right," Jack said at last. He'd never felt so defeated. "Come on, Megan."

"No. She's not going anywhere but into protective custody."

"What?" Jack and Megan said at the same time.

"I'm staying with Jack, Peter."

"No, you're not." Peter spoke directly to Megan for the first time. "Megan, there's someone out there trolling for you. You're his next victim. There's no doubt in my mind about that now. I have to put you into protective custody for your own safety. There's no other choice."

"Megan, he's right," Jack told her quietly. As much as he needed her with him for emotional support, he couldn't risk her life because of it. She would be the Angel's next intended target. Keeping her safe meant everything to him.

"You'll be safer in custody. God only knows what might take place next. The girl looks like a lost cause. She won't be able to tell us anything they don't want her to

reveal and I'm a mess right now. Go with Peter. He'll take care of you better than I could right now." Jack turned to Peter searching for reassurances that he wouldn't let him down.

"You have my word, Jack. She'll be fine." Peter's gaze met his again. Something else was there. Peter was trying to tell him something. And then suddenly it all became clear. He understood. This – their public exchange was part of something bigger.

"Can you give us a second, Peter?" Jack took Megan's hand, his eyes never leaving hers as Peter nodded then stepped away.

"Megan, I know this is hard –"

"Jack, I don't want to leave you."

"I know you don't, sweetheart but Peter's right. These guys are after me as well and they know how important you are to me. We can't make this easy for them. If we're together, we're both vulnerable. Let Peter protect you."

"And you? What about you? Who's going to protect you?"

"Me," Jack said with a twist of his lips. "I can take care of myself, you know?"

"Jack, you're exhausted and you've hardly slept in days."

"I'll be fine. Don't worry."

"Are you ready, Megan," Peter asked close by, not giving either of them time to think about it. Jack could only hope that whatever Peter had planned worked this time.

He shook his head and turned to Megan one more time. Drawing her into his arms he kissed her. There were no more reservations between them. No more hiding their feelings for each other. No more secrets.

"Take care of yourself. Please, don't let anything happen to you. Not now. Not after we've found each other again." Jack smiled down at her for a moment, brushing back a strand of her hair before kissing her gently for the last time.

"I'll be fine, Jack. You take care of yourself."

"Jack, I need your weapon," Peter told him quietly.

Jack released Megan and faced Peter. "You're taking away my only means of protecting myself?"

"I don't have a choice. I need your issued firearm and badge." For a second, Jack could only stare at Peter blankly and then it became clear. Of course, Peter would know he had more than one weapon.

Jack handed him over the gun and badge and embraced Megan one more time, whispering against her ear, "I need the backup piece I gave you."

She slipped him the weapon and Jack stuffed it inside his jacket pocket.

"Everything will be okay, Megan. Go with Peter. Let him get you settled in." He stood looking into her eyes for a long time, hating that he had to let her go. He wanted to remember everything about her, in case this thing worked out the way the feeling

inside the pit of his stomach all but warned him it would. Because at this point, both of their lives were in jeopardy.

* * * * *

Megan forced herself to release Jack's hand but it took all of her strength to let him go. For the life of her, it felt as if history were repeating itself. Only this time she might be forced to let him go forever.

She followed Peter to his car but stood watching as Jack headed for his own vehicle. Their eyes met and clung to each other, as he drove away.

"He'll be okay, Megan. Jack can take care of himself. He'll get through this."

"I hope you're right," she whispered to herself.

Dear God, she hoped he was right.

Peter didn't press the issue. Once they were inside the car and away from the scene, Megan confronted the man who was supposed to be Jack's friend.

"How could you do that to him, Peter? Especially in front of all his subordinates and the people who he considers to be his friends? You all but accused him of being guilty."

Peter glanced her way for a moment and then checked the rear view mirror. Megan found herself looking uneasily over her shoulder. There was nothing there.

"Why do you think I chose to confront Jack in public like that? Megan do you really think I believe Jack is capable of being involved in that type of brutality?"

It took a moment before the truth became clear. "You staged this whole thing to make it seem as if you believed the evidence against him for the killer's sake. Do you think they were there watching somehow?"

"I don't know," he said without hesitating. "I hope so. I just wish we could find this Harrison fellow and prove Eddie Stephens is alive or dead once and for all."

"Me too. Did Jack know you were doing this?"

"No but he's too smart not to have figured it out by now. I taught him well, Megan. And he knows me well enough. He knows what's going on."

Slowly she looked away. "I feel so helpless right now. I can't help myself. I can't help Jack. I hate going through this again – waiting for the inevitable."

"That's not going to happen. I made a promise to Jack to protect you and I damn well plan on keeping that promise no matter what."

"What about Jack? Who's protecting him?"

"Jack and of course Dan. Dan would do anything in the world for Jack."

A sudden uneasiness swept over her. She knew Dan would do whatever he could, even if it meant laying down his own life to protect Jack but what if it wasn't enough?

"Where are you taking me, Peter?"

"There's a hotel outside town. I'm putting you up there. I'll have a couple of female officers outside our precinct that will be staying there with you."

"I don't want this, Peter. You know I don't work that way."

"Let's get one thing straight right now, Megan. You're not working. You're off this case. As far as I'm concerned, you weren't ever part of it. I don't want the same freak show as we had the last time. Your presence here will only stir up the media frenzy of before. You're not part of this thing. You understand?"

"You still don't believe in it, do you Peter? You never did. You resented having me part of the team right from the beginning, didn't you?"

"Of course. I see no reason to deny it now," he told her without hesitating. "Oh, I don't doubt your abilities. How could I? You've proven them to me. But as far as I'm concerned, an investigation should be about the physical evidence. Not what you do."

Megan didn't argue. After all, she'd been fighting this type of prejudice in the law enforcement field from day one. And she couldn't care less about helping solve these types of cases anymore. Once this was over and done, she was finished looking into the dark side of a killer's mind. She'd never let another one inside her head.

The hotel sat close to the Pennsylvania state line. Two police officers in plain clothes met her and Peter there. Megan wondered how they got lucky enough to end up with this type of duty.

But they seemed genuinely nice enough.

The officers had reserved a suite under an alias. Not that it mattered. He'd know where to find her. He was reading her thoughts even now, growing stronger as Megan's powers became weaker with the sleepless hours and the emotional roller coaster ride of the past twenty-four hours of this case.

The fear inside her continued to spiral out of control with Jack's absence, all but guaranteeing a bad ending.

The officers led the way to the back entrance with Megan and Peter following.

"I'll have someone bring you a change of clothes later," Peter told her following her into one of the two bedrooms of the suite. "Megan, don't leave here. This is serious. We have twenty-four hours to figure this out before they come for you. Do what the officers tell you to do and don't contact Jack."

Megan never felt more exhausted than she did at that moment, standing alone in a strange hotel room. She stripped away her clothing which was covered in the young woman's blood. How did this girl connect to Jack? Jack didn't recognize her and yet somehow their paths had crossed to seal her fate.

She stayed under the warm shower until the water turned cold before wrapping the hotel's gift robe tightly around her body. Then she lay down on the bed and focused on Emmie.

Tonight she needed Emmie's sweet innocence more than ever. Emmie no longer faced danger, Megan and Jack did.

Take care of Daddy for me, Mommie. He needs you now.

"I will, baby," Megan whispered into the darkened room. "I promise I won't let anything happen to him." Protecting Jack became her last coherent thought before sleep took over and she faced the shadowy person she'd always believed to be Eddie Stephens. Could it have been Alec Harrison all along?

For once, she was the one hunting him.

One thought became clear right away. He was avoiding her. The girl's discovery threw him off his game.

It wasn't deliberate. He'd made his first real mistake. The hunter had gone on the defensive. Megan pressed harder.

Who is she? How did you connect her to Jack?

Her question startled him. Before he could hide the truth, his thoughts become clear. Megan saw the girl. She wore a uniform with a nametag pinned to it. Her name was Elizabeth Martin.

She worked at the same convenience store where Megan and Jack had stopped to call his father, just around the corner from Megan's old apartment. The killers were taunting them, reminding them they could take anyone at anytime and the Bureau was powerless to stop them. Megan tried to find a crack in his confidence.

You're scared. You know your time is almost up, don't you? This time it will end.

He tried to shut her out but she pushed on, not allowing him time to regroup.

You thought the truth about your relationship to Eddie would never be known, didn't you? Megan tried harder to focus on him. While she couldn't make out his features, she sensed his fear very clearly. It drove her on. He hadn't realized they'd discovered the truth about Eddie.

You wanted Jack to take the blame. You screwed up.

"Ms. Beaumont?"

He struggled to break her spell. In another minute, he was gone. Megan awakened before she could discover the truth. She sat up in bed disoriented for a moment. Someone knocked hard against her door. Officer Geneva Soloman opened the door and asked, "Are you okay in there Ms. Beaumont?"

"Yes," Megan forced the word out, annoyed by the interruption. She'd been so close.

"I've ordered room service. I thought you might be hungry by now." Megan swung her legs off the bed and closed her eyes once more, trying to reach him but he was gone. She got out of bed and followed the officer into the living area.

"Where's your partner?" Megan asked when the officer handed her a sandwich. Didn't cops eat anything but donuts and sandwiches?

"Officer Blake went out to get you something to wear. We figured you could use a change of clothing since yours were covered in blood."

Megan nodded without answering. The simple ham and cheese sandwich tasted delicious. She hadn't realized how hungry she was until now. A little more of her strength returned with the nourishment.

Geneva Soloman sat down on the sofa across from Megan and took a bite of her sandwich. Megan knew all the questions that were coming by heart.

"You're that physic, aren't you?" she asked, swallowing. Megan's gaze went to hers. She was surprised by the officer's recognition.

"I remember the Angel of Death murders as if it were yesterday," Geneva told her. "I recalled seeing your picture. You're involved in these copycat killings as well, aren't you. I mean, why else would the head of the Bureau escort you here personally."

"Yes, well, I'm not actually involved in the current investigation but I did participate in the last one."

"I was just starting out at that time. I don't mind telling you, that creep scared me to death." She took another bite and chewed it thoughtfully. "What a mess."

"What do you mean?" Megan asked cautiously. She knew what the officer meant.

"The Bureau screwup. You know about the leak?"

"Oh...yes, you're right. It cost us valuable time as well."

"I can imagine. So, can I ask you a question?" Geneva finished the last of her sandwich and wiped her hands thoughtfully. Megan knew what was coming but she merely shook her head.

"How did you come upon this gift? I mean I've heard a person is either born with it or sometimes it manifests after a trauma. Some case studies seem to indicate we all have a certain amount of physic ability within us. So I'm curious, when did you first realize you had it?"

For a second, Megan hesitated. She hated talking about the gift but Officer Soloman seemed genuinely interested in her answer and not out of a morbid sense of curiosity.

"Believe it or not, it runs in my family."

"No kidding? So you've had it for as long as you can remember?" She wiped a crumb from her shirt. "I'm taking some courses at the university. I want to join the Bureau some day," she added by way of explanation.

"I see. Yes, I've had it for as long as I can remember and I've hated it just as long."

"Really?"

Megan could see she didn't understand this.

"I know that sounds ungrateful but trust me, I don't see this as a gift. It's a terrible responsibility, seeing such unbelievable evil and watching lives torn apart by it."

"Yeah, I can only imagine," Geneva added quietly. "Do you see it before it happens?"

"Sometimes," Megan answered reluctantly. "Sometimes I see the aftermath. And sometimes I see into the mind of the killer."

"Wow. That must be creepy. I've read some of the serial killer case files. Those guys are some twisted people."

"Yes, they are."

"What was your first case, if you don't mind me asking?"

She did. She hated talking about any of this.

"It was a child's death," Megan admitted reluctantly. "I'd always had the ability to see things, like where something had gone missing, or when the next test in a certain class would take place. Just little things like that. But the first real image of murder happened while I was still at the university. I can remember it just as if it happened today. I'd been studying at the campus library when I saw it. He was taken from the street, molested and then murdered."

"Oh wow. What'd you do?"

"At first nothing. I thought, well I don't know what I thought," Megan said remembering those first terrible images. "I left the library and went home to my grandmother's place. As soon as I walked in the door the news came on about a missing boy."

"The kid you saw," Geneva supplied.

Megan nodded. "I told my grandmother about it. She took me to see the police right away. Of course, they laughed it off. Then another boy went missing which I'd witnessed and I knew where he kept the boy. The killer took his time with him. He wasn't in any hurry to kill him. He enjoyed the game too much."

"So what did you do?"

"I went back the police told them what I saw, told them where I thought the boy could be found and they all but accused me of being responsible."

"Yeah," Geneva said with an apologetic grin. "We don't fully understand your type."

"I certainly know that. Anyway, I directed the police to the boy. We were lucky enough to find him alive although he'd been horribly abused. But the killer left evidence. They caught him soon after and my career was sealed whether I wanted it to be or not."

"I can understand your reluctance to get involved." Geneva said. "I mean, I see some of the things people do to each other after the fact and it's a terrible thing to witness. I can't even imagine having access to that type of evil."

"Before I knew it, I was getting called in to consult on various cases around the state. From there, I became well-known. Then I saw the first image from the Angel of Death. I told the Austin police, they contacted the FBI and the Bureau called me in after they weren't able to develop any solid leads. I guess they were desperate enough to try anything at that point."

Geneva rolled her eyes. "That must have set well with the feds."

“Not exactly. I was met with ridicule, doubt and every attempt possible to sabotage my efforts to help.” Megan smiled wryly remembering how young and defenseless she’d felt at the time.

And then she’d met Jack.

“But eventually I was accepted. Mostly because they were desperate.”

Officer Judy Blake returned a short time later with a change of clothes from the local Wal-Mart. “Sorry, we’re on a budget,” she apologized.

Megan smiled at the simple jeans, tee shirt and plain white bra and panties. “No problem. These are great. Thanks.”

“If you need anything else just let us know. I realize this is almost like being in jail but at least you’re safe here,” Judy said with a warm smile.

“Thanks, I think I’m just going to lie down for a while.”

Megan left the two women watching TV and went to her room. She could feel the walls closing in around her. Time seemed to have come to a standstill and yet it sped toward the inevitable moment of reckoning awaiting her.

In less than a day, they would come for her. As much as Megan trusted the two officers guarding her, she didn’t believe anything or anyone could stop this moment from happening.

Chapter Eleven

The windows of the car were all down. The night breeze helped to take the edge off Jack's anger. But nothing could wipe away the urgency he felt. Time was running out for him. For Megan. If he didn't figure something out soon, he would not be in a position to save her again. Hell, he might even be in jail.

He should go home. By now the press would have moved on to the latest victim's family. Dan had told him to wait by the phone for news but Jack couldn't stand the thought of doing nothing.

And so he drove around the city, finding himself in old familiar places. Places the Angel killers haunted. He could almost feel them now. He'd become so in tune to their pattern of killing.

The city, poised on the brink of the next killing, appeared quiet tonight. But already the fear had spread. He could see it in the eyes of those who ventured out. He still remembered the paranoia of the past.

Dear God, not again.

His thoughts went back over the information he and Megan had uncovered about Eddie.

Jack pulled off the deserted farm road close to the place where they'd found Joy and closed his eyes. He could feel Megan. She was worried about him.

In his gut, Jack believed the key Victoria uncovered would prove to be the missing piece of evidence to reveal the killer's whereabouts. Solving the case would come down to one thing. What had Eddie felt was so important that he'd hidden it away all these years?

The car's clock revealed a new day. Megan went missing the first time on this date. History had begun repeating itself.

The father...

The image of Martin Stephens appeared before him. Instinctively he knew Megan was trying to tell him something. He needed to talk to Eddie's father. But the man had been silent for years. All throughout the first case, he refused to cooperate. What chance did Jack have of changing his mind now?

Simple. He had to try. He'd exhausted all other possible leads. And he was desperate enough to try anything.

Martin Stephens lived in an affluent section of Richmond. He'd moved here with his new wife shortly after divorcing Eddie's mother.

Jack stopped the car in front of the house. At four in the morning, the place appeared dark. Of course, they would be sleeping. He couldn't go banging on their

door at four in the morning demanding answers. He'd have to wait at least another hour.

Jack ticked off the facts he knew about the man. Martin and his current wife had three teenage girls of their own.

He glanced up at the house. Apparently, someone wasn't sleeping. He hadn't noticed the tiny light made by something resembling a flashlight until now. Someone was awake. He was betting on it being one of the girls.

Jack picked up a small pebble and tossed it up to the window. Nothing. After several more attempts, a young girl opened the window and peered down at him.

"Who are you?" she called out trying to keep her voice as quiet as possible.

"Agent Montgomery from the FBI. I need to speak to your parents."

"They're sleeping!" she whispered glancing at the window closest to hers. Probably her parents' bedroom.

"I realize that but this is important."

"Is this about my brother?"

It took him a few seconds to realize she meant Eddie.

"Yes, Eddie Stephens."

"They won't help you."

"Will you?" He saw her hesitate.

She glanced back over her shoulder and whispered, "Hold on."

A few minutes later, the girl appeared around the corner of the house.

"My parents will kill me if they know I'm talking to the police about this."

"They don't have to know. Is there something you can tell me about your brother?"

"No. Why would I know anything about him? He wasn't part of our family. Dad said he was sick. He won't let us talk about him. Ever."

"Is that what you think? That Eddie was sick?" Jack could see it wasn't.

"No," she admitted reluctantly.

"You met him before his death, didn't you?" He saw the truth before she could hide it.

"No!" Clearly, she was lying. Jack tried to think of something he could say to win her trust.

"What's your name?"

"Sally. Sally Stephens."

"Sally, I don't believe your brother did those things of his own accord."

"You don't?" He had her full attention. She glanced back at the house once more. "Why don't you think he did those things?"

"Because I don't think Eddie was a monster. And I don't think you do either."

"I met him once," she said slowly. "Mom and Dad don't know. You can't tell them!"

"I won't," he assured her. "When did you meet him?"

"Back then. Before the bad stuff started happening."

She meant before the first murder. "I see. How did you find out about him?"

"I found some letters he wrote in my father's desk drawer. Eddie left a number. I called it."

"Your father didn't destroy the letters?"

"I know what you're thinking. But my dad really wanted to see him and then everything started to happen and he freaked out I guess."

"I can understand that. Sally, did you read the letters?" he asked and watched her glance once more back over her shoulder.

"My parents are going to kill me if they catch me talking to you. I'm in enough trouble already. I'm grounded," she admitted reluctantly.

Jack managed to keep from smiling at her innocent confession. She was a headstrong girl. He thought about Emmie.

"That's tough. I got grounded by my father more times than I can remember growing up."

"What'd you do?"

"You name it and I did it. But mostly I was the son of a cop. That was hard to live up to."

"Your dad's a cop too?"

"Yeah. I followed in his footsteps."

"That's neat." She stubbed her sneaker against the gravel drive and then said, "Eddie didn't do any of those things."

"Okay. Why do you think he's innocent?"

"I read every single one of those letters he wrote. I took them from my father's desk. He never missed them though. I think maybe he'd forgotten they were there. They were sweet. Eddie was sweet."

"So you called him and asked him to meet you?" Jack tried to be as patient as possible but it was hard. He believed Sally might know something critical to the case.

"Yes. He met me at the Sonic after school one day. That's where the kids hang out."

"I see. And what did you talk about?"

"Lots of stuff. He asked me about my sisters. He wanted pictures of them. I gave him one of the three of us. It made him sad though. I think he missed my dad."

"I'm sure he did. What else did he say, Sally?"

"Not much. He promised to come see me again. I told him I would try to talk to Dad about him. I've always wanted to have a big brother, you see. But I never saw him again."

"Do you still have the letters, Sally?"

"Yes."

"Do you think I could take a look at them?"

"Are you going to keep them?" she asked, worried.

"No, no, I promise I'll give them back. I just want to take a look at them."

"Okay but you have to promise. They're all I have left of my brother."

"I promise, Sally."

Jack waited for her to return with a bundle of letters held neatly together by a rubber band. She handed them over reluctantly.

"Sally, do you know anything about a lock box your brother might have owned?"

"No. I told you, I only met him once." Jack knew she was lying again.

"I see. Well maybe you could think about it and let me know if you remember anything else. Maybe something he said to you about a lock box. It's very important. It might be the thing that clears your brother's name."

"Okay, I'll try."

Jack reached inside his wallet and handed her a card that had his cell number written on it. "It's very important, Sally. Please call me if you remember anything at all."

* * * * *

He was with her again, entering her thoughts in an all too familiar way. But this time he'd prepared for her.

It's time, Megan. Are you ready for me? I'll be coming soon.

She forced aside her first frightened reaction. She didn't want him to read her fear.

Not this time. Never again.

Her attempt at bravery met with laughter.

Oh, yes! We have unfinished business, you and I. There are things to be settled between us. And I'm going to enjoy taking you almost as much as knowing no one will ever stop me this time.

"Ms. Beaumont?" Megan could hear one of the officers calling out to her but she felt detached from the things happening around her, aware of only him. "Are you okay in there?"

She tried to answer but he held her mind captive.

"Ms. Beaumont!" In another minute, Megan knew Officer Soloman and her partner would enter her room. She had to make one last attempt at discovering his identity.

Why do you hide yourself from me? Why not show your face? You know me. Let me know you.

Nice try, Megan. Just enough desperation to make me want you all the more. But you'll know who I am soon enough. I can't wait!

No! Wait! But the dream had already begun to fade with the sound of the door being forced open.

Megan sat up in bed as the two officers entered the room.

"Are you okay?" Officer Soloman asked while her partner searched the room in vain.

"Yes, yes I'm fine," she managed to get out as the two women holstered their weapons at last.

"Bad dream?" Soloman asked.

If only you knew.

"Yes. I'm sorry. I didn't realize I was dreaming. Certainly not that I was talking in my sleep." She stopped for a moment to gather her breath. "I'm fine now."

"You want some company?" Officer Blake asked. She glanced at the clock next to the bed. Five in the morning on October second. A day she would never forget as long as she lived. As long as he lived.

"How often do you have those dreams?" Geneva asked. With the present danger eliminated, the officer's curiosity returned.

"A lot. They're happening more frequently as it gets closer."

"Closer to what?" Judy asked, confused. It seemed strange to Megan that although she'd only known the two officers for a few hours she trusted them completely. But then, she had to. Her life was in their hands.

She could almost picture Peter's displeasure when he discovered she'd talked to subordinates about what would soon become the biggest case under his command.

"The anniversary of Eddie Stephens' supposed death."

"You're talking about the Angel of Death case, aren't you?" Judy clearly didn't realize Megan's connection.

"Yes." Megan glanced at Geneva, surprised to find the officer hadn't discussed the details with her partner.

"Wow. So you're working on the copycat case with the feds?"

Megan considered how much to disclose to them. In the end, she decided she no longer had any allegiance to the Bureau. They'd cost both her and Jack dearly.

"That was the original thought but now we're starting to believe that Eddie might still be out there alive somewhere. And that he isn't acting alone."

"You're serious? The Angel is still out there? Which means the feds screwed up the first case. That must chap their butts," Judy said with a wink to her partner. "You still

want to be part of that circus act?" Geneva ignored her partner's reference to her aspirations.

"You were taken hostage by Eddie weren't you? You were part of that first case." Judy continued with her line of questioning. "I though you looked familiar. So why do you believe he wasn't killed then?"

"We've discovered some facts about Eddie that we didn't know existed before. And some new information has come to light about a possible accomplice."

"So he's coming for you again, isn't he, Megan. That's why you're in protective custody," Geneva said at last.

"Yes, he's coming for me." She met both women's curious gazes and waited. She couldn't blame them if they wanted to walk away.

"Well, Angel of Death or not and I don't care how many of them there are, they're not taking you without a fight," Judy said with confidence.

Megan couldn't help but smile. Dear God she hoped Judy was right.

* * * * *

The sound of a phone ringing woke Jack from the dead sleep he'd fallen into after making it through only half of Eddie's letters.

"Hello?" He glanced at the clock only to see it was almost noon. He'd been sleeping for hours.

"Shit!" Megan!

"Agent Montgomery?"

It took him a long time to realize the small voice on the other end of the line belonged to Sally Stephens. This realization had him sitting up in the chair he'd fallen asleep in.

"Sally?"

"Yes."

"Sally, are you okay?" he asked while secretly praying she had some answers for him.

"Yes, I'm fine. Agent Montgomery?" she repeated in a wobbly voice that told him she was crying and had been for quite some time.

"Yes Sally?"

"Agent Montgomery, I lied," she whispered into the receiver.

"I know. But you're about to fix that now, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Tell me what you know."

"I can't right now. I'm at school. I called you on my lunch break because I couldn't call from the house. My parents are suspicious. Dad dropped me off at school and told me that I had to go straight home. And that I couldn't leave campus at lunch."

"They're just worried about you, Sally. Let me come to you."

"No! I can't talk now. I have to go, Detective. Can you meet me at my house after school?"

It was hard to control his disappointment. Time was so critical now but he couldn't risk frightening the girl. Not with her so close to trusting him with what could be the one piece of evidence that would crack this case wide open.

Don't let it come too late, he prayed.

"Okay. But what about your parents?"

"I ride the bus home. They both work. They won't be home for a while. My sisters either. They're busy in after-school activities."

"Okay, I'll meet you there at..." Jack realized he didn't have a clue what time school turned out anymore. "What time, Sally?"

"Four. Meet me there at four. Don't be late."

"I won't, I promise. Don't worry."

Sally hung up the phone without answering and Jack sat listening to silence surrounding him. The letters were scattered across his coffee table, filled with pleas from a young man who desperately wanted to matter to his father. How Martin Stephens could reject his son, Jack couldn't begin to understand.

He'd give just about anything to be able to call Megan. Instead, he checked in with Dan.

"I was wondering when I'd hear from you. She's fine. Don't worry. We have her well protected. No one is going to get anywhere near her."

"Thanks, Dan. I don't really know what I would do without you there for me."

"No problem, buddy. I know you'd do the same for me. So what have you found out?" Dan asked, changing the subject. "I know you haven't just been sitting around doing nothing."

"No. I think I may have something that will break this case, Dan. But I won't know for a while."

"Jack, let me just stop you right there. Whatever you're thinking about doing, don't. Give me the information and I'll take care of it. Don't risk your life."

"I can't. Not this time, Dan."

"Why not?" When he didn't answer, Dan added, "For crying out loud, don't try doing this alone."

"I'm sorry, Dan, I have no other choice. But I am checking out another angle as well. Maybe you can help me with it."

"Sure, anything. What is it?" Jack hated the frustration in his friend's voice.

"Remember Rocky St. Clair from the Academy?"

"Yeah, sure. I haven't seen him in years though. He retired right?"

"Yes, a few years back."

"What's Rocky got to do with anything?"

"I asked him to help me check out the connection between Harrison and the missing instructor James Young. Can you get a photo of Harrison sent over to Rocky right away?"

"Jack, I've got that covered. We'll find the guy in time."

"With all due respect, time is something we don't have right now. Rocky was there. He may remember Harrison as being James Young. If anyone can identify this guy, it's Rocky."

Chapter Twelve

The silence following this admission had Jack wondering if maybe he'd hurt Dan's feelings in some way by bringing in Rocky.

"Look, Dan, we have to exhaust every single lead now. We can't afford to let our egos get in the way of—"

"Is that what you think I'm doing? Dammit, Jack, I've done everything possible to solve this case and that includes standing beside you, defending your honor, when according to just about everyone on the force, you're involved in this up to your neck." The disappointment in Dan's voice was hard to take.

"Does that include you?" he asked bitterly.

Dan let out a heavy sigh. "No, of course not. How can you even think that?"

"I'm sorry, Dan. I don't mean to take this out on you. It's just that I'm starting to feel as if I'm running out of friends."

"You've got me. And Megan." Something else surfaced in Dan's voice. Envy maybe? Jack never considered Dan might be envious of his relationship with Megan.

"Dan?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm here." It was gone again forcing Jack to doubt it had ever really been there. Maybe he'd only imagined it. Maybe this case was screwing with his head more than he thought.

"Are we okay?"

Dan gave a halfhearted laugh, attempting to lighten the tension between them. "Yeah, we're okay. We'll always be okay. I'll call Rocky right away."

"Thanks. Just tell him I asked you to follow up. Tell him I have something I need to check on but let him know I'll be in touch later today."

"I'll get right on it."

"Oh and Dan, maybe we'd better keep this quiet for now. I don't want to get you involved in my troubles."

"Sure. Anything else?"

"Yes, can you check on Megan for me? You know what day this is, right?"

"Oh yes. How could I forget."

* * * * *

The hours passed in an endless succession of minutes, ticking by. Megan could literally hear each tick of her watch reminding her that time was almost out.

She felt restless and angry that she was unable to do anything to save Jack. He was a sitting duck. She had protection but Jack was out there alone and all but being accused of participating in these terrible crimes.

Unable to reach out to him emotionally, she needed to hear his voice to know he was okay.

Megan pulled Geneva aside and told her what she was planning.

"Megan, that's not a good idea. You know if what you think is true, then chances are his phones are tapped."

"If what I'm thinking is true, he knows exactly where I am already. Geneva, I have to do this."

"All right but make it quick. Your boss will have my job if he finds out about this." She slipped her cell phone into Megan's hand the second Judy was distracted. "Here, use this."

Megan excused herself and went to her room. Closing the door, she took Geneva's phone into the bathroom and dialed Jack's cell.

"Montgomery,"

"Jack, it's me."

"Megan! You shouldn't be calling me. But God it's good to hear your voice though. Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Are you?"

"I'm okay. I miss you."

"Me too. Be careful, Jack. I feel it—something's happening."

"Sweetheart, I know. But it's okay. This is all going to be over with soon. I have some leads. Trust me, okay?"

"Yes, always. But be careful. Take care of yourself. I don't think—"

"Don't worry. That's not going to happen. I'll be with you soon and forever."

Megan hung up the phone and started to cry. She felt so helpless. She couldn't bear the thought of losing him again.

A gentle knock sounded on the bathroom door. Geneva and Judy came in. "I told her," Geneva confessed. "She's cool with it. Is everything okay with him?"

"For now. But it won't be long. Something is getting ready to happen."

"You think they'll go after him first?"

"I know they will."

"Well, I can't say that I believe all that physic stuff," Judy ventured when the silence following Megan's statement grew unbearable. "I mean, no offense, Megan but to me that's just a bunch of hocus-pocus. But there is one thing I do know and that's the feds. I may not like them very much and in my opinion, most of them are asses but they do know how to look after themselves for the most part. I think he'll be okay."

"Judy, jeez!"

"It's okay. Thank you, Judy. But don't forget one of those asses is probably also the Angel of Death."

"Yeah, well if he shows up here he's going to get to meet the angel of death personally."

Megan stared at her for a long moment, then all three women burst out laughing. Judy's no-nonsense approach to life was refreshing. Judy didn't care if the killers had outsmarted most of the Bureau's finest to date. She would give them a run for their money through simple police tactics.

"Thanks. I feel safer here already. Just let him try something."

"Absolutely." Judy grinned back at her. "Come on, it's going to be a long day. Let's see if we can't find something to do to make it pass a little faster."

* * * * *

Megan. Hearing her voice helped him focus. He'd been foundering. Now he knew he would do whatever it took to protect her and his child. Their safety was his only concern now. He'd gladly give up his life to protect them.

One glance at his watch told him he still had three hours to wait before meeting Sally. Time seemed to have slowed down to a standstill. He tried to focus on the letters again but they proved little more than another dead end.

Eddie stopped writing shortly after his eighteenth birthday. The last letter gave some insight into his mindset at that time. Eddie had finally given up on reaching his father. He told Martin this would be the last letter he'd send if he didn't answer.

It was the last letter sent.

Jack reached for the phone to call Rocky and then let it go. Dan would be in touch there. If there were anything promising, Dan could figure it out.

Instead, he opened the case files of the last Angel killing. The gruesome photos spread out before him in a jumbled mess. He'd been at this too long. The names and faces mingled together, mixed up with the cases from six years earlier. Nothing made sense anymore.

"God—think!" Jack paced around his living room and tried to clear his thoughts then glanced at his watch again. He needed a shower.

The cold water washed over him, clearing away some of the fog. He thought about eating but opted for a walk instead.

His neighborhood seemed strangely quiet today. Too quiet. There wasn't a single person around as he walked the area he'd called home since he and Rebecca divorced. But then this was the middle of the day and most of his neighbors were working professionals.

Still, Jack couldn't shake the feeling that someone watched his every move. He stopped and looked behind him. No one. Not even a car out of place. He trained eye

searched each of the nearby houses but found nothing. He'd begun to lose focus again, doubting his ability to think clearly. He was entering dangerous ground here.

The paranoia only increased as he continued walking. In the end, he abandoned the fresh air entirely. Returning to the house, he slid all the locks in place before glancing out the window.

It was the case. He'd let himself get too close to it. It had become too personal. Too much was at stake now.

With two hours still to spare, Jack accepted that he couldn't stay there and do nothing any longer. He left the house and drove away leaving the case files behind.

Once again, he found himself back at the last victim's location. CSI had cleared the place, taking all evidence with them. There was nothing left of the building. They'd dismantled it and taken it back to the lab.

Jack stood where it had once been and tried to feel some connection to the killers.

Megan once told him that everyone possessed a certain amount of psychic ability. Most people never learned how to channel it to their benefit. He closed his eyes and tried for a moment to think or feel something. Suddenly, his eyes opened searching the grounds around him. He could almost swear he'd heard the sound of laughter. But the place was empty.

Jack closed his eyes once more. This time, there was no mistaking the sound.

You're too late, Jack.

The words slipped into his thoughts. Did he actually hear them or simply imagine them?

Too late. You're no match for Megan or me.

He turned and looked around, expecting the person to be standing right behind him, whispering in his ear. But he was alone.

Jack stood there for a long time but the Angel was silent. He'd only been taunting him.

When he returned to the car, he realized he'd been there for more than an hour.

The traffic heading out to Richmond seemed unusually heavy. Jack forced the car to a crawl, his nerves reminding him how precious time was right now. There would be so little of it left before...

He reached Sally's family home late. She was there waiting for him on the porch. He saw right away that she'd become anxious.

"Sally, I'm sorry. I got caught in traffic."

"Mom will be here any minute!" she accused.

"I'm sorry but look, let's not waste any more time, okay? You told me you'd lied. Can you tell about what?"

Every nerve in his body screamed for him to force her to give up the information. But Jack knew he'd have to take it slowly with her no matter how painful. Sally still wasn't sure she was doing the right thing.

"I don't know if I should. I'm breaking the promise I made to Eddie!"

"I see. He gave you something."

"Yes. He gave me something and told me to give it to my dad. I didn't though. I tried but Dad wouldn't listen. So—"

"Sally, look, I know you want to do what's best for Eddie. So do I. Will you trust me? I need see what you have."

She looked unconvinced. Jack took a deep breath, "Sally, I want to clear your brother's name if he wasn't involved in the Angel crimes. But I need your help to do that. I need you to give me what Eddie left you."

Clear brown eyes met his. They seemed remarkably mature. "Only if you promise if there's anything bad in there you won't use it against him."

Jack watched her for a moment. She still wasn't sure her brother had been completely innocent.

"I promise I'll keep it out of the news, okay. If what's in there would convict him of the crimes, I'll keep it quiet."

"And if not? You'll make sure Eddie is cleared of this?"

"Absolutely, you have my word. Sally hurry, please. Someone very dear to me is in danger of being hurt by the killers. Please. There's very little time left."

She turned and went back inside the house. Jack stood waiting for her to return and realized his hands were trembling.

She carried a small gray fireproof box, the type you could buy at any office supply store. She clutched against her chest.

"I'm still not sure this is the right thing to do," she told him hesitantly.

"Sally, I understand you only want to help your brother but you're going to have to trust me on this. You are helping Eddie by doing this. I promise."

Slowly she handed the box over to Jack. It felt heavy in his hands.

"Hurry up. You have to leave. I hear my mom's car coming. Hurry! She can't catch you here."

Jack took her small hand in his and squeezed it.

"I'll call you as soon as I know anything." Jack left Sally standing in the driveway and drove away. In his rearview mirror, he saw her rush inside the house. As he left the drive and headed down the street, he passed a silver Jaguar a quarter of a mile down. A blonde woman who resembled Sally drove the vehicle. Sally had good hearing.

"Shit." Suddenly, Jack realized he'd left the key to the box at his house. He reached inside the glove compartment searching for something to use to pry the lock open. The

sound of his cell phone beeping startled him. He'd left it in the car while talking to Sally. There were three missed calls and one voicemail. All from Rocky.

"Jack, call me as soon as you get this. I have something important to tell you."

Jack dialed Rocky's number and listened. The call went to voicemail. He disconnected without leaving a message and was getting ready to redial when his phone chirped again.

"Rocky?"

"No, Jack, it's Dan. Why? What's up?"

"Dan jeez, sorry I thought you might be Rocky."

"No but I have talked to him."

"Really? I just tried his number and he's not picking up."

"Yeah, he mentioned something about going to see his wife. He was a little rattled, Jack."

"That's not like him. He's been trying to reach me for the past half-hour. He left me an urgent message to call as soon as I got it. I don't understand why he would leave before talking to me."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing, only that he had something for me."

"Yeah, I think I know what that is. As I said, I talked to him."

"What did he find out?"

"We need to talk about that in private. But first, I have some information on Eddie and this Harrison fellow that will blow this case wide open. Can you meet me?"

"Dan, just tell me what you know."

"Not on the phone. Listen, I'm checking a lead over at the old abandoned apartment building off East Capitol Street. How long will it take you to get there?"

Dan knew something that he didn't feel comfortable discussing over the phone, which meant he didn't trust the phones not to be monitored. Which meant someone close to them could be involved.

"Over an hour in this damn traffic. You'd better call for backup."

Static drowned out most of what Dan said. "I'll see you there, okay."

"Dan, wait for backup to get there. Whatever this is about, don't do anything foolish."

"I'll meet you on the second floor apartment, okay?" Dan answered clearly not hearing what Jack had said.

"Dan, wait for backup." But Dan was gone, without hearing Jack's urgent advice.

Jack slammed his phone shut in irritation then tried redialing, getting Dan's voicemail each time.

The East Capitol Street area was dangerous in broad daylight. But it would be growing dark soon.

Jack shoved the box under the front passenger seat and floored the gas peddle. He tried Peter's cell phone without any answer.

"Shit." At this point, he didn't trust anyone else. He hoped Dan had actually heard enough of the call to ask for backup before going in.

Traffic leading back into the city was bumper to bumper. There were several political events taking place tonight. DC would be crawling with people.

But on East Capitol Street where the forgotten hung out and the drug dealers made their fortunes, it was business as usual.

Chapter Thirteen

Maneuvering through heavy traffic took longer than the predicted hour. Jack reached the apartment building Dan indicated only to find silence. There were no police, no other Bureau personnel and nothing but darkness from inside the empty building. Jack prayed that he would find Dan alive.

He took out his weapon from its hiding place beneath the seat and shoved it inside the waist of his pants beneath his jacket. For reasons he couldn't explain, Jack popped the trunk and grabbed the Kevlar vest he rarely used. It felt bulky and easy to spot underneath his jacket.

He took his flashlight out, put the cell phone on vibrate and shoved it into his jacket pocket.

The second he stepped inside the building, he felt it. An overpowering feeling of pure malevolence. He'd witnessed hundreds of murders in his time with the Bureau, including the Angel's work. They'd all left a certain presence behind them. There was no way so much hatred could be unleashed upon another human being and not leave its mark. But the feeling he had here was like none other he'd experienced. He was in the presence of true evil.

Jack didn't dare call out to Dan, even though the building appeared unoccupied. It was quiet. Unbearably so.

Slowly he made his way up the stairs with weapon drawn. A grayish dust covered every inch of the place, clogging his throat and lungs. It looked like twilight here even though it was still light out.

A step creaked beneath his foot and he froze, waited and then held his breath as he started up the stairs once more.

Close to the second floor landing, he stopped for a moment. His hands were shaking. The reality of this moment finally settled in. The Angel killers had used Dan to lure him here.

For the first time in his career, Jack felt real fear. He wasn't ready for this. He'd been slipping for days. His public suspension had been the final straw that pushed him over the edge.

Jack's heart rate increased with each step. He tried to focus on Megan. He needed to stay focused on her because she would be next. He'd have to do something to stop them – whatever it took. Even if it meant his life.

The door to the second floor apartment stood open slightly. He stopped just outside the door and listened. Nothing. No sound came from inside.

Jack drew a deep breath then pushed the door open completely. It took a full minute for his eyes to adjust to the light. It was even darker in here. Someone had placed black plastic garbage bags over all the windows. As his eyes grew accustomed to the light, he saw something that took his breath away.

The crime scene of the last original Angel killing. He remembered it well even though it had been destroyed in the fire Eddie started to flee the scene. Six years ago today. The killers had recreated the scene once more, right down to the mattress and scarf. All that was lacking was the final victim. Megan.

"Jack, there you are."

Hearing Dan's voice, Jack let go of the breath he'd been unconsciously holding. He tucked his weapon behind his back once more then turned to Dan.

It took a few seconds to make out Dan's expression. But when he did, his blood ran cold. He barely recognized him. This wasn't the man he knew so well. The twisted grin on Dan's face made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. Instinctively, Jack backed away from the sheer depravity he saw there but Dan moved closer.

"What took you so long?" Dan asked, seemingly unaware of Jack's reaction.

Dan was his friend. He couldn't be capable of such evil. But when Dan chuckled gleefully, spotting Jack's fear, he knew he'd been wrong all along. This man standing before him now was capable of so much more.

Jack's left hand went inside his pocket. Did he have time to reach the weapon again? His fingers clasped the cell phone and hit the redial button. He tried to remember the last person he'd called. Dear God, let it be Peter.

"You figured it out, didn't you?" Dan sounded impressed. "Good for you, buddy! I was beginning to think I'd have to spell it out for you but now I see you're with the program. Good. She had your thoughts muddled for a while, didn't she? Glad to have you back, Jack."

"Dan, why? Why would you do this?"

"Oh, now dammit, Jack, you don't need to know those things. All you need to know is that this is where it ends. At least for you, buddy. And her. I'll take care of her too like I took care of Rebecca and Joy. You didn't deserve any of them. Rebecca was too good for you. And Joy, well, she never stopped hoping right up to the end."

"Oh my God..." Jack fumbled with the redial button again.

Please God. Let someone answer.

"Why did you kill them, Dan? They were your friends as well." He still couldn't believe it. His thoughts reeled.

"You want to know don't you? Well too bad, buddy. I'm not going to tell you. You're going to your grave not knowing the reason behind any of this." Dan laughed hysterically then drew his weapon, aiming at Jack's chest.

"You were so close to finding out the truth. You shouldn't have gotten Rocky involved in this, buddy." Jack flinched at the implication. Rocky would be dead. And he'd led Dan right to him.

"I really wanted to follow through with the whole Angel angle thing in killing you Jack, even though your initials don't really match but unfortunately I can't. You see, I have to call this in. I figure I'll tell them you were trying to kill me because I discovered the truth about you at last. Even though I didn't want to believe it. I'll tell them I figured out what you had planned for our girl, Megan." Dan smiled then aimed the weapon at Jack's head. "Nice try on the vest. It won't work though. In just a few minutes, you're going to know what it feels like to die, Jack. Say hello to all the people you've hurt along the way when you get there."

Dan sighted the weapon between his eyes. In an instant, he became aware of things happening quickly around him, even while his reactions felt as if they'd slipped into slow motion.

The phone inside his pocket vibrated, his finger touched the connect button once more and then he reached for his Glock and lunged for Dan's arm that held the weapon.

Their struggle seemed surreal until the sound of a shot fired into the silent room, resembling lightning striking. The burning pain searing through his head held the power of a thousand headaches combined. The last thing Jack remembered was the sound of Peter calling his name followed by laughter.

The maniacal sound of the Angel of Death.

* * * * *

"No." Megan felt as if something had literally propelled her up from the chair. The cards she held in her hands slipped to the floor. She became aware of two sets of eyes watching her in shock. The sound of her watch ticked off the seconds it took for them to react.

"Megan? What is it?" Geneva stood close to her.

"It's Jack!" She could feel him leaving her with every tick of the watch. "He's been shot."

The world around her exploded into action. Geneva and Judy exchanged a disturbing look before Geneva reached for the phone. Judy drew her weapon ineptly looking for something solid to fight.

And the watch ticked off more seconds.

"Are you sure?" Geneva shouted, trying to force Megan to focus on what she'd said.

"He's dying!" she started for the door but Judy stopped her.

"Hold on. Where is he, Megan?"

"I don't know. It's dark there. Abandoned. Dusty. Do something!" she screamed at her but Judy could only shake her head. Megan turned to Geneva.

She was speaking to someone. Peter. Megan listened to their quiet conversation, peppered with quick glances her way. Geneva knew something but wasn't prepared to tell Megan.

"What did he say?" Megan demanded when the silence lengthened and the ticks continued.

"He doesn't know anything yet, Megan. He's talking to another agent right now. Just calm down."

"I can't. I can't wait here and do nothing. He's dying."

"Stop it, Megan. You don't know that."

"I do," she told Geneva. "I do know that. I need to be with him."

Tick, tick, tick...

"Please!" Two sets of sympathetic glances followed her as she paced the tiny room.

Megan turned away from their pity and tried to reach Jack again. His thoughts were becoming jumbled – distant. He was losing consciousness.

Almost gone.

"Hold on, Jack. Someone's coming. Please hold on." She tried to tell Geneva to call Dan but no words would come. An uncontrollable darkness seemed to descend upon her with each new tick. Megan felt herself sinking into it. Letting go. Then everything went black and she could no longer feel Jack, or herself, or the world around her anymore.

* * * * *

"Dan? What in God's name happened here?" Peter demanded the moment he reached the crime scene.

He'd wanted to wait, make sure he was dead but someone, no doubt that bitch he'd been screwing, reached Peter and called in backup. The EMS team arrived seconds before Peter. They were taking Jack away. But he knew it would all be for protocol.

Jack Montgomery was dead.

"He went crazy, Peter! He asked me to meet him here. He said he'd figured it all out. When I got here I found this." Dan pointed in the direction of the recreated crime scene. "I didn't recognize him. He came at me – drew his weapon. He confessed everything, Peter. Jack confessed to all the Angel murders."

"Dear God," Peter managed as he surveyed the scene. Somehow, Dan kept his excitement from showing. Peter was such an idiot. The pompous jerk didn't have a clue how to run a division. He needed him to save his ass. Well, he'd done that. His time was coming though. Once things settled down, he'd be gone as well.

Maybe suicide. A fitting end for such a pompous jerk.

"Dan, I can't believe it's true. When you first told me, well I thought you'd lost your mind. Dear God, this is going to be a nightmare when it hits the press."

"I can handle the press, Peter. I know how hard this is for you." He put on his best understanding face and forced back the contempt he felt for the idiot.

"Sorry, Dan but you know the routine. I'll need your weapon and you need to leave the scene. We can't afford any more mistakes here, right?"

Although he knew this would be coming, he still needed time to search Jack's car. Jack said something earlier to cause him concern. Something about finding a key piece of the puzzle. What exactly had he uncovered? Not that it mattered. He could fix any of Jack's screwups. No one would believe anything he'd found out anymore.

"I know. Peter, someone needs to tell Megan. I think it should be me."

"Shit. She knows something's up. She had a premonition or something. One of the officers watching her called me already. I can't keep this from her long. Would you mind staying with her? I think she'll need your support Dan, since you were closest to Jack."

"You know I will do whatever you need me to do. But are you sure you don't want me to stick around here for a bit? I mean I know procedure and all but I could check out Jack's car. See if he left any clues there. Answer any questions the team might have."

"You know I can't let you do that. Go to Megan and tell her Jack's been hurt but don't give her any more details than that. Stay with her. I'll call you once we get the official word from the hospital about his death. Dammit, I hate this shit! Jack Montgomery was like a son to me."

Dan placed a comforting hand on Peter's shoulder. "I know. He had us all fooled, didn't he."

"He sure as hell did. I thought Jack Montgomery was as good as they came."

"Me too Peter. Me too." Dan turned away and smiled with satisfaction at a job well done. He was so far above this thing. But the time had come to take his next victim. Of course, none of them would be aware of that now. They thought it had ended here with Jack.

Megan.

I'm coming for you now, Megan. I've waited six years to finish this game and now no one is standing in my way. I can't wait a minute longer.

* * * * *

Someone tried waking her but she couldn't go back there just yet. She felt comforted here.

Vaguely she heard his voice.

I'm coming for you now, Megan.

But there was no more fear. This place was bright and pleasant. She could see Jack smiling, their daughter laughing. They were together as a family at last. She was happy. No more death. No more Angel. Only happiness. It made him angry. He wanted her fear. She laughed at his anger.

Don't worry. Everything will be okay.

"Jack!"

Slowly, Megan opened her eyes and smiled. The worried faces of Geneva and Judy watched her. And then she remembered.

Jack!

* * * * *

The fool. Did he really think he could keep her hidden from him? Him? The Angel of Death. He'd make sure to let him know what a huge mistake he'd made when he decided to show Peter Kensington he'd framed the wrong man.

The hotel was one of the more expensive ones. Surprisingly, the Bureau had gone to great expense. But then, this wasn't any normal case and she wasn't the usual witness.

She didn't know Jack was dead just yet. He could feel her trying to reach out to him. Identify him. Let her try. He'd become stronger than the teacher. He couldn't wait to surprise her with the truth.

Dan didn't bother with secrecy. After all, the two officers would never suspect a thing. They had the Angel already.

He knocked on the door of her suite and waited for a long time before anyone answered. A tall, thin woman opened the door slightly.

"Are you Agent Martinez?"

"Yes." He'd perfected the smile. Just the right amount of caring and humility. She opened the door without a second thought, letting him inside.

"She's in the bedroom. She's very upset. Has something happened?" the officer who identified herself as Judy Blake asked.

"Yes, we've caught the Angel of Death at last."

"Well, that's great! She'll be happy to have this thing over, right?"

"No. It's someone she knows. Someone she loves. Jack Montgomery."

"Oh my God."

"Yes. I need to take her back to headquarters. We'll need to question her. She's been with him the most over the past few days. I think maybe she knows more than she realizes."

"She's not really in any state of mind to answer a lot of questions right now, Agent Martinez."

"I'm not insensitive, Officer Blake. She's a friend of mine as well. As was Jack." Dan walked past the officer, opening the door to the room she'd indicated.

"Megan?" He stepped inside and saw another officer seated next to the bed.

"Who are you?" the woman asked but Megan stopped her.

"It's okay," Megan, told her. "I know him. She sat up in bed and looked into his eyes. She suspected nothing. But she knew something.

"It's Jack." Her voice sounded weak. It annoyed him. She was supposed to be his greatest challenge. Instead, her gift grew weaker.

"Yes." He turned to the officer. "Can you leave us alone for a second?" Dan smiled politely. The officer was immediately convinced she could trust her charge to him. She had no idea.

"I'll be right outside, Megan if you need me." She got to her feet and smiled at Dan. He could feel her attraction.

"Megan," he sat down close to her and took her hand. Just touching her accelerated his excitement. They were so close. He couldn't wait to take her.

"Where's Jack?"

"Megan, I'm so sorry. He's dead." He met her stricken gaze and saw her pain. His body came to life with anticipation.

"No."

"I'm sorry, Megan but it's true."

"No. No, it can't be." She tried to pull her hand free but he simply took her in his arms, comforting her for now. It was almost too thrilling to keep to himself. But he must be patient until they reached the place he had set up for her death.

She pulled away. She suspected something. Good. She would make it challenging after all.

"I'm going to take you home now. Back to Jack's place," he told her solemnly. "It's all over now, Megan. Not the way either of us wanted it to be but it's over just the same. Peter will meet us there. He has some questions for you. They're finished with the crime scene. There wasn't much to investigate really. Jack confessed to everything."

"I don't believe you, Dan. Are you sure?" she asked not wanting to accept it but left with little choice. Something of his excitement must have showed in his eyes. She became a little more suspicious. He would need to get her out of here soon.

"Yes, I know this is hard Megan but it's true. Now, I need you to come with me."

For a second, he thought she might refuse. She glanced at the phone as if she considered calling to check out his story. Then she got to her feet and pulled away from him.

"All right, Dan. Let's go. I just want to get this over with and then I want to see him."

"Of course. You'll be with him soon. But there are a few things that must be cleared up first."

He followed her outside.

"I'll be taking her with me now officers. You are relieved of your command. You may go now. I'm taking her home."

He didn't give them the chance to ask questions. He'd grown too excited to wait much longer. He took Megan's arm and escorted her out into the hallway. The two officers didn't follow.

"I'm parked just outside," he told her but she didn't respond. She moved like a robot, following his command. Irritation dampened his earlier excitement. He didn't want her like this. He wanted her to fight him every step of the way. Until the end.

He opened the passenger door and waited while she slipped inside glancing briefly up at the room she'd just left.

She closed her eyes. He could feel her reaching out to him again. He tried to calm himself but he was too excited. Some of his resistance slipped away. She sensed something that unnerved her. She turned to him with a look of fear in her eyes now. She had begun to figure it out.

Not yet...it's too soon.

He didn't want the game to be over just yet. He'd planned to savor his time with her, every minute of it. The drive to the crime scene. Her fear. He smiled calmly back at her.

Megan looked a little more confused. Maybe she thought she could be losing her mind. She turned away and grew silent. He felt her thoughts move from what she had begun to suspect toward grief again. Then she was reaching out to him again. Trying to put the pieces together.

* * * * *

Something didn't add up. Jack was dead? Not possible. She'd lost him for a moment but now she felt his presence again. Something wasn't right.

Why would Dan tell her this when she still felt him? Megan sat next to Dan as he drove her to Jack's home and all at once, she became afraid. Dan told her the nightmare ended in the worst possible way and yet it didn't feel over.

"Dan, I don't believe Jack did this. He's not capable of doing such things. I know he's not."

"Megan, maybe you didn't know Jack as well as you thought. Maybe you don't know a lot of things."

She turned to him. He smiled gently back at her. But she felt it again just as she had in the past. As she had right before they left the hotel. Something seemed almost twisted about Dan's reaction to Jack's death.

"What do you mean?" she asked, and then realized he wasn't heading for Jack's place at all. "Where are you going?" she said slowly, catching a glimpse of the expression in his eyes for the first time. It was like looking into the face of wickedness. She shivered at the very sight of it.

"We're going to the crime scene," he told her with a hint of excitement creeping into his tone.

"Why? I thought Peter wanted to meet us at Jack's place?" Dan gave her a gleeful look but didn't answer.

"Dan?"

"Just shut up and enjoy the game, Megan! This is going to be good for both of us. It had better be. I've waited long enough for you."

She fought to control the fear inside her from spinning out of control as the truth at last became apparent. His deranged laughter followed her realization. She glanced at the back seat and saw it. The white Hermès scarf. She didn't even have to ask to know it would be her scarf.

"Took you long enough! You didn't have a clue did you? Isn't it rich? The bigtime physic responsible for solving all the cases didn't have a clue. You didn't see that coming did you?" He tapped his palm against her forehead with another chilling laugh. "The Hermès scarves were a nice touch, don't you think. Using the originals from the first victims was sheer brilliance on my part. Just enough of a subtle hint to question whether or not you and Jack actually solved the first set of murders and shed more doubt on Jack's guilt. I used his name to sign off on the evidence. I admit you had me going for a little while. I couldn't figure out when your scarf had gone missing, and then it hit me. I had to make a special trip to that hellhole you call home to get the scarf...just for you. You'd better be worth it."

"You did this? You killed Jack?"

"You did this? You killed Jack?" he mimicked. "Of course it was me," he told her as if he were merely commenting on the weather. "And I had so much fun fooling you, Jack, the freaking FBI! What a joke."

For a moment, Megan's thoughts jumbled together. A thousand different questions floated through her mind but she couldn't bring a single coherent thought to her lips.

"You're impressed. I can see it. You've met someone worthy of you."

"Why?"

"Why? Why? You stupid cow! How can you ask me that?"

Megan shrank away from the insanity she saw in his eyes. Dan had finally slipped over the edge, taking on the full identity of the Angel of Death. The calm, in-control man he presented to the world completely gone.

"Jack was your friend? Joy? Rebecca?" She couldn't seem to grasp it all.

"Jack wasn't my friend. He was nothing but in the way. He should have gone down the first time, along with you. I had it all planned. He should have been dismissed, dammit! Humiliated! You were out of the picture. I was supposed to be in charge."

She stared speechless at him for a moment. "This was all about getting ahead? You wanted Jack's job?"

"You don't have a clue, do you Megan?" He laughed before swerving off the main road onto East Capitol Street. Then he turned to her again. She could hardly breathe. She knew exactly what he planned to do to her.

“Don’t worry, Megan,” he said with satisfied smile. “You’ll know all the answers soon enough.”

Chapter Fourteen

They stopped in front of the abandoned apartment building. Instinctively, she knew this was where he'd shot Jack. The place was now devoid of any activity. Jack had been tried and found guilty by a jury of his peers. There would no need for a lengthy investigation. The Bureau would just want to put the whole nasty business to bed as quickly as possible.

"Are you ready?" Dan asked as if he were merely asking her about the weather. She could only stare at him in horror. Not that he seemed to mind. He was too far gone for reasoning with now.

Once he got out of the car she tried to force her grief aside long enough to think of some way out of this. She must stay alive. Emmie needed her. She's lost one parent today already.

Megan remembered the gun she'd given to Jack. She had nothing to use as a weapon of defense.

Dan reached for her arm and pulled her from the car. "Stop stalling, bitch. It's time. I've waited six damn years for you. I'm not waiting any longer."

She stumbled to keep up as he dragged her inside the building. Her thoughts were all for Emmie. She couldn't think about what he had planned for her and not fall apart.

Megan forced herself to speak. She needed to distract him from the inevitable.

"You knew where to find me all these years. Why didn't you just come for me? Why hurt the others?"

He laughed with amusement before forcing her up the stairs to the second floor.

"For a psychic you really don't understand anything do you, Megan?" he said as he opened the door and shoved her inside. It was like going back in time to the past. Everything looked the same as it had six year earlier. The room had been gone over with a fine-tooth comb by the Bureau but the stage had been set just for her, right down to the bunch of lilacs.

"This isn't about you or Jack, you stupid idiot! This is about me! What I've accomplished. What I will accomplish still. I will be the greatest of them all. Better than Gacy, Bundy, Dahmer, The Ripper. I walked among the Bureau's best—the ones who were sworn to capture me and they never had a clue. Even the great Megan Beaumont was clueless. I will be the best. This is only beginning. I'm not done. Not by a long shot."

"What do you mean?" she couldn't help but ask.

"I'm thinking, why not keep going. After all, who's to stop me now?"

"What about me. Jack's dead, remember? How are you going to explain killing me?"

He leered at her before answering. "I'm thinking suicide for you. I'll tell them you insisted I bring you here and then you just went crazy. You took the knife you brought with you," he reached inside his jacket and produced it for her to see. "This knife. And you used it on yourself. I've got plans for Emmie as well." He spotted Megan's terror and grinned. "Maybe I'll keep in touch. Watch her grow up. Maybe I'll even marry her. She could be my Megan. What do you think?"

"No." The word slipped out into the thick air. Megan forced herself to hang on. She was close to losing control. The thought of her precious daughter going through what she would suffer was too much to think about. It terrified her. "Don't you dare touch her."

"Who's going to stop me, Megan? You? You'll be dead remember? Tragic really. Father a serial killer, mother committed suicide. The poor child will be starved for attention. I can't wait."

She lunged at him but he easily deflected her blows. Dan was much too strong for her.

He pulled her hard against his body. She could feel his excitement.

"Do you like it rough, Megan? Rebecca did. So did Joy. They loved it when I hurt them." His hands slipped over her body. Megan closed her eyes repulsed by the thought of him, by the pain Rebecca and Joy and his other victims must have endured.

Dan's face was inches from hers. "Are you going to fight me like the others?" His hot breath washed over her before his mouth clamped down on hers. Megan struggled for an advantage and managed to catch his bottom lip between her teeth.

Dan screamed in pain, loosening his hold for a moment. She ran for the door but he caught her and brought her back against his body.

"You'll pay for that, bitch. Repeatedly you'll pay. I'm going to enjoy hurting you."

She tried to kick him but he lifted her up and threw her down against the filthy mattress. For a moment, the force of her body being slammed against the floor stunned her. Her thoughts rattled. She tried to react but he forced his body down on top of her knocking the wind out of her again.

In his hand, she saw the knife. The one the Angel used to take the lives of his victims. Megan stopped resisting.

"Remember this?" he asked with a new spark in his eyes. Her fear pleased him. She had to control her fear.

"You'll never get away with this, Dan. They'll know about the rape." Megan tried to sound calm but inside she was terrified of never seeing her daughter again.

"I'll figure something out. It won't be hard. After all, I've been able to fool them for years. Maybe another patsy will be in order. Or maybe I'll just tell them you ran away

and I wasn't able to stop you. The loss of Jack was too much for you. Maybe you can be my patsy. After I've had the pleasure of you, it won't be hard getting rid of your body."

He held the knife against her throat, "Who's going to miss you really, Megan. Your daughter? Your grandmother. They're better off without you, aren't they, whore?"

He let the knife slide slowly down her body and she couldn't keep from showing him her fear. "Do you want me to use the scarf, Megan? Or do you want to watch it all."

A tiny whimper escaped and then she let herself go numb. She wouldn't struggle. He wanted her to fight him.

Megan tried to let her mind go blank as well. She didn't want Emmie to feel this. She might not be able to stop him from hurting her but she wouldn't make it more enjoyable for him.

Inside her thoughts, she could hear her daughter calling out to her. Megan tried to reassure her but Emmie knew.

It's okay, baby, I'm okay. Don't worry.

Emmie continued weeping and calling out to her father. She didn't know about Jack yet.

Something distracted Dan. A noise drew his attention away from her.

Emmie continued crying but among her helpless tears, Megan heard another familiar voice. Jack! Jack?

Suddenly a shot rang out. Dan screamed in pain and then his weight left her body. But Megan couldn't react. She was still thinking of Jack. Jack was still alive.

She became aware of other people and activity around her. The sound of glass exploding close by. A scream. Then silence.

Two sets of eyes – familiar eyes looked down at her. Judy and Geneva. One of them placed a jacket over her body. She couldn't stop shivering.

"It's okay, Megan. You're all right," Judy told her then called for help.

"That SOB! Did you see him jump right through that window? I shot him in the shoulder and it didn't even faze him. How'd he do that?"

She turned away and spoke into the phone.

"Did he hurt you?" Geneva gently examined Megan's body for broken bones.

"No, I'm fine."

"He didn't –"

"No. Thank God! But a few more minutes and..." She couldn't actually bring herself to say the words. Megan clutched at her shirt. The knife had all but shredded it. She slipped the jacket on and buttoned it.

"How did you know where to find me?" she asked.

"We followed him. Judy told me what he'd said to her in the beginning. Something didn't add up so we tailed him. We would have been here sooner but we were stuck in that jam-up. I'm sorry about that, Megan."

"God, Geneva, no—thank you! I'm so glad to see both of you. He was going to kill me. Dan was the real Angel of Death all along."

"Damn! Let's just see the feds beat what we did here tonight. We stopped the Angel of Death." Judy said with a wicked little grin. "The big guy's on his way with the cavalry. I told him not to hurry. We had it covered over here. Looks to me like they should have stuck around a little bit longer, huh?"

Megan started to laugh at Judy's confident words and just couldn't stop. She was still laughing when the cavalry arrived.

* * * * *

Within minutes, the place filled with Bureau people once more. Someone had called EMS as well.

"I'm fine. I'm just a little bruised," she dismissed the EMS worker, when Peter walked over.

"Megan, I'm so sorry. We'll get him. I only wished we'd been sooner. But we owe it all to Jack. He tried to leave me a clue. He left his cell phone on during the attack. Unfortunately, I couldn't hear the identity of his attacker but we found a box in Jack's car containing evidence linking Dan to all the original killings. In fact, it pretty much exonerated Eddie Stephens entirely. He was innocent all along. Just met up with the wrong person. The poor slob. Dan killed him a few weeks before he kidnapped you and killed Melissa Billings. He had Eddie terrified. Apparently he forced him to watch all the murders. But Eddie was smart. He left evidence that proved Dan was responsible for all the murders, just in case Dan did what he ultimately ended up doing, which was killing Eddie and framing him for all them. He killed Rocky too. We found him a little while ago."

"Oh God. Tell me the truth, Peter. Did he get away with it this time as well?"

He took his time answering. "No. We'll get him, Megan. It's only a matter of time. We have people everywhere looking for him. He can't get far. He's wounded. The officers got in a good shot before he escaped. We'll get him, Megan."

"How? You haven't managed to get him for six years. You ruined countless people's lives because you couldn't capture him."

"Megan, I'll make sure he doesn't hurt anyone else. I promise you. I promised Jack."

"I don't care about your stupid promises, Peter! They mean nothing to me!" she told him, literally shaking with anger. She was angry at Peter. Angry with herself.

"Jack? Where is he, Peter?"

"Megan—"

"Don't tell me he's dead! Don't you dare tell me that. He's not dead! I still feel him. He's still alive, Peter. So don't you dare tell me he's dead!"

The room around them grew silent. People stared curiously. Peter took her arm and drew her aside.

"Megan, I know you're angry with me and you've been through a lot but I'm telling you the truth. Jack is dead. So leave it at that. Dan is still out there. Until he's found, I don't want to leave you alone. I'm sending you, Emmie and your grandmother into protective custody for a while."

"What?"

"Until Dan is caught. I still have to believe he might try to come after you and your daughter."

"My daughter and I aren't going anywhere but home."

"No, you're not," he insisted quietly. "Even if I have to arrest you, you are not going home."

"Peter, you can't force me to do this."

"I can and I am." He motioned behind her to someone standing close. Agent Stan Kellogg, the rookie agent stepped forward. "Take her to where we discussed. I'll have the others meet you there. Don't let her out of your sight, Agent Kellogg. It's your responsibility if she gets away."

"Peter, don't you dare," Megan told him even as Agent Kellogg reached for her arm and pulled her along with him.

"Please, ma'am, just come with me."

"Peter! Peter, you can't do this!"

Peter turned away, ignoring her.

"Ma'am, please."

Agent Kellogg forced her toward the door but not before Megan managed to catch the eye of Geneva and Judy. They started forward and were met by two agents who prevented them from reaching her in time. Once outside the agent hurried her inside a black SUV and sped away toward the interstate before Megan could react.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, at last accepting her limitations. She couldn't do anything about this at the moment.

"I can't tell you that, ma'am."

"Stop calling me ma'am and tell me where you are taking me."

"Ma— Ms. Beaumont. I have orders not to tell you anything. I'm afraid it's classified."

"If you don't tell me where you're taking me and my family right now, I'm going to scream and swear to whoever will listen to me that you're attempting to kidnap me."

He stared at her for a long moment, trying to decide if she might be serious. They exited the interstate and headed in the direction of Bolling Air Force Base. When the SUV stopped at a red light, Megan rolled the window down.

"All right," Agent Kellogg said in resignation. "We're going to Maine. I'm taking you to Maine and that's all I'm going to tell you."

"Maine? What's in Maine?"

But he ignored the question and Megan finally gave up. Agent Kellogg had his orders. He would stop at nothing to perform them.

The SUV stopped at a section of the base that serviced the White House and non-military personnel. They would be flying to Maine.

"Just cooperate, okay?" Agent Kellogg told her finally. "The sooner you do, the sooner this will all be over."

The flight to Maine seemed endless. Megan tried to close her eyes and reach out to Jack. Something blocked his presence. But Dan was there reaching out to her as always.

Once the flight arrived, another agent met them at the airport and drove them to a small cabin along the coast.

"Mommie! Mommie!" Emmie ran out to meet her mother the second Megan stepped out of the car. Her grandmother and another agent stood close by.

"Mommie, Daddy's dead, Daddy's dead!" Her daughter wept inconsolably in her arms.

"Baby we don't know that yet." Megan couldn't accept that he was gone either. She wouldn't until she saw his body.

"It's true." Megan lifted her distraught child into her arms and carried her inside.

"Emmie, don't say that. We don't know anything yet."

"It's true and you know it! I can't feel him anymore, Mommie."

"Baby, hush, you'll make yourself sick if you keep this up." Megan struggled to control her own tears. She couldn't fall apart in front of Emmie. There would be plenty of time for that after she'd comforted her daughter.

"Mommie, I never got to know him. I just met him. It's not fair!" For the rest of the evening, Emmie wept despondently in her mother's arms. When she finally slept, it was almost the dawn of another day.

Once Emmie was in bed, Megan could finally talk to her grandmother.

"Do you think she saw it, Gran?" Megan poured coffee into a cup and stood staring out the window. She felt as if she were going through the motions of living.

Marie placed a hand on her granddaughter's arm. "Of course she did, child. She has the gift after all."

"I don't ever want to hear that word again." She didn't have to look at Marie to know her reaction.

"It's not a gift, Gran. I'm sorry. It couldn't be further from a gift and I won't have Emmie going through that."

Marie knew her granddaughter too well to respond.

"God, I don't know what to do, Gran. I can't imagine trying to explain how the father she just met could be taken from her so easily by someone he trusted. It's so unfair."

"Yes. But you are alive, child. And she will learn what a wonderful man he was from you. Megan, Jack knew his daughter before his death. He knew you would be there for her when he could not be. You and Emmie are both strong. You'll go on."

"I don't want to go on, Gran! I don't want her having the gift. I want Jack!"

"I know, Meggie but you can't stop it. I know you've tried her whole life but it doesn't work that way. Look at your mom. It destroyed her because she couldn't make peace with it. You have to find a way to make peace with it, child. You have to accept it and learn to live with it. And so does Emmie."

"How can I accept it, Gran? Look what's it's done to our lives. It's destroyed mine, Jack's and Emmie's. How can I accept it as a gift?"

"You have to, child, otherwise it will tear you apart. You have so much anger inside you, Megan. You have to let it go, before it eats you up inside. Use the gifts you have, Megan. And learn to make peace with it."

Chapter Fifteen

Two days later, Dan Martinez died. By the time the news broke over the major networks, Megan had known about his death for hours. Not through the Bureau but through the gift.

Since her arrival at the cabin, Emmie hadn't let her out of her sight for a moment. She slept in Megan's bed and spent each day quietly watching her mother. Marie believed she just needed a little time and reassurances from Megan that she wouldn't disappear from her life like her father had.

Megan hadn't felt Dan in her thoughts or dreams in those days. But that final night, she sensed his presence in her dream in the most unusual way. This time there wasn't any fear on her part. After all, she knew the Angel's identity now. As she watched Dan Martinez, she could feel his power growing weaker even as he reached out to her in the last moments of his life. She couldn't see the person who shot him but in her heart, she wanted to believe in some strange form of justice, it would be Jack.

In that second before his final death, she witnessed the blackness of Dan's heart. He felt no remorse for his crimes. Only an immense feeling of superiority to those around him, including his victims.

And then there was nothing.

The next morning, Agent Kellogg told Megan, she and Emmie and Marie would be going home to Texas in a few days.

The news hit the airways early the following morning. Public outcry demanded another investigation be launched immediately as to why the Bureau had not been able to find out the true identity of one of its own. There would be hell to pay by many including Peter.

But Megan couldn't find justice in any of this. She just wanted to put the whole thing behind her once and for all and return to her sanctuary in El Paso to mourn the loss of the man she would always love.

Agent Kellogg escorted them on their flight from Maine to El Paso where Marie would be staying with them for a while.

He dropped their bags on the front porch of Megan's house. Megan could tell there were many things he wanted to say to her. She couldn't listen to them yet.

"Megan, jeez, I don't even know how to begin to say I'm sorry."

This was the first time he'd referred to her by her given name. She gave Stan a weak smile then turned to Marie. "Gran why don't you take Emmie inside. I'll be there in a minute."

She waited until they were out of sight before answering. "It's okay Stan."

"I should have seen something out of place. I mean, I was with the guy for months..."

"You couldn't have seen it, Stan, because he didn't want you to see it. There was nothing you could have done."

He laughed bitterly before adding, "That doesn't help though, does it. And it sure as hell doesn't change anything."

"No, I guess you're right. But you can't blame yourself for this. There was nothing you could do to change what happened, Stan."

"Yeah? Then why do you blame yourself?"

Megan couldn't answer him. Couldn't tell him that she was the closest to the Angel of any of them. She should have uncovered his identity before anyone. From around the corner of the house, Bubba came charging to them, excited to see his family again.

When he spotted Stan he stopped in mid-bound and let out a low growl.

"That dog hates me," Stan said in an attempt to make light of Bubba's reaction. But Megan could tell he wasn't nearly as brave as he wanted her to believe.

"He's just protective of us." Megan turned to Bubba, "Bubba...friend. Stan is our friend."

Bubba crept slowly over and sniffed Stan's hand, finally accepting his presence.

"You won't have to worry about him anymore. He'll remember you," she told Stan. "What will you do now?" She'd sensed that Stan was at a crossroads in his life.

"I don't know. Maybe I'll go back to law school. I always wanted to be a lawyer."

"You'd make a great director someday. Don't make any rash decisions. Give yourself time."

He studied her thoughtfully for a moment. "I will. If it's okay with you, I'd like to stop by from time to time to check on you and Emmie."

Megan nodded after a moment. Stan was a good man. "We'd like that." She leaned close and kissed his cheek. "Take care of yourself, Stan."

She waited until he was out of sight before going inside the house that had once been her refuge. The place looked the same as when she'd left it and yet she could see Jack here everywhere. She wanted to cry, to be strong for Emmie, to say goodbye to Jack in the only way she knew how.

Once Emmie was sleeping peacefully in her mother's bed, Megan asked her grandmother to take Emmie back to Austin for a few days.

"It will do her good to be on the ranch with you, Gran. And I need to get over this. I'm no good to Emmie this way."

"Megan, come with us. You don't need to be here by yourself."

"Gran, I can't. I know you're worried about me but don't be. I just need to get myself together. I can't seem to let him go. I know he's dead and yet I still feel him with me."

“Megan, don’t do this to yourself. You’re only getting your hopes up. He’s gone, honey.” Of course, Marie would know what her granddaughter had planned.

For someone with the gift, trying to reach out to the dead could have dangerous results. You never knew who might be out there reaching out to you. Would she find Jack or someone far worse than the Angel of Death?

“Gran, I know – at least, in my head I understand he’s gone but in my heart, I can’t let him go. I have to do this.”

“All right, Meggie. You must do what you feel is right in your heart. But you’ll call me? The second its over, you’ll call?”

“Of course,” she promised.

Emmie didn’t want to leave her mother but she did. Megan assured her daughter she would join her at the ranch in a little while and that they would go somewhere fun for a few days. They both could use a little fun in their lives. While Emmie was afraid of losing her mother again, Megan believed she understood what she was doing.

After they were gone, the place grew quiet with just her and Bubba. They went for their usual run but that day Megan pushed further. She stopped by the boutique for a little while to talk to Jess, who seemed happy to have life almost back to its normal boring pace for once.

“I still can’t believe all those things that happened were real. God, Megan, I had no idea you had such a gift.”

“I’m sorry I got you involved in this thing, Jess. I wouldn’t wish that type of nightmare on anyone.”

“Are you sure you’re going to be all right out there by yourself?” she asked when she spotted the sadness that seemed to cling to Megan since Jack’s death. “I could stay with you for a while?”

“No. No, I’ll be okay. Maybe not for a while – but soon. I probably won’t come into the shop for a while, so you’re still in charge. Call me if you need anything, okay?”

By the time Megan returned home the desert surrounding her had grown dark. She and Bubba went outside to the porch. Megan sat in her favorite chair, rocking. In the distance, the coyotes howled.

She wasn’t sure how long she’d sat with her eyes closed before the world around her grew unearthly quiet and Bubba began to freak at the silence. He sensed something close as he crouched nearby and growled in a low throaty tone that warned her something was near that Bubba didn’t understand.

And then she heard it – the sound of footsteps against the creaky boards of her porch. It sent Bubba rushing out into the night in fear. But Megan remained calm.

“Megan,” Jack stepped from the shadows into the single light from the stark yellow bulb.

“What took you so damn long?” she asked quietly and heard him laugh. The sound of it fulfilled all of her longings.

"I couldn't come sooner. I had something to take care of first. I needed to fulfill a promise I made to a young girl to clear her brother's name. I couldn't let the Bureau leave those murders at Eddie's door."

"I know," she told him quietly and understood his commitment.

"Where are Emmie and Marie?"

"In Austin. I sent Emmie home with Gran today. She needed... I needed... Well I'm not sure what I needed. I just couldn't accept that you were gone."

"I know, love. We'll go get her tomorrow. Tonight should be for us. I'm sorry. I know you were hurting. But I couldn't risk Dan realizing he'd been set up. He was so close to you, Megan, reading your thoughts at all times. I couldn't risk him finding out I was still alive until I found him. But Dan chose the coward's way out. Even in the end, he proved to be weak. Nothing more than a killer."

"Yes, I know that now. I saw his death."

"You did? I guess I should have known."

Megan nodded. "Is it over?" she asked quietly, not yet looking at him. Bubba came reluctantly back to the porch, tail tucked between his legs. He sniffed Jack's hand once then settled back into his spot next to Megan's feet, apparently satisfied Jack was not the enemy. "Is it really over this time, Jack?"

"Yes. It's over and finished. I've finished it. It will never come back to haunt us again. And I'm finished. I've left the Bureau. We can be together now, Megan."

"You promise? I won't get Emmie's hopes up, Jack. She can't lose you again. I can't lose you to the job again."

"There isn't any job anymore. I'm done with it."

"And the investigation?"

"I'm not part of that. But there will be lots of people looking for new jobs soon, including Peter."

"Good. The Bureau needs to do some housecleaning. You won't go back, will you? You know they'll come after you for Peter's position. They'd be crazy not to."

"They already offered it to me. I turned them down. I told them no way. I'm finished with it."

"So what are you going to do to fill your days?" she asked, finally believing him. Megan got slowly to her feet and went into his open arms. He answered her with a kiss.

"I'm going to be the father Emmie needs me to be. I'm going to be the husband you deserve. I'm just going to be there for the people I should have been there for years ago."

"You're not going to miss the excitement?" She smiled against his chest. "The thrill of the game?" Megan understood how powerful and exciting the chase could be.

"The only excitement I need is what I find here with you," he added and then lifted her into his arms and carried her to bed.

* * * * *

“What went wrong, Jack? Why didn’t we know Dan was the Angel all along?” She asked him quietly after he’d loved her and convinced her throughout the long night that he meant all those things he’d promised her about the future.

“God, Megan, I wish I knew.” He kissed her temple then held her closer. The thought of Dan still held the power to unnerve him. The enemy had been so close and yet he hadn’t seen the warning signs that were clearly there, looking back at them now.

“I did some checking on his background before coming here. I had to know. Turns out, the people I believed were Dan’s parents were actually his adopted family. He was a juvenile so his records were sealed, but there were the usual signs of violence from the beginning. Pets mutilated. Acts of cruelty toward other children. And get this. His adopted parents told me Dan’s biological father murdered his mother. I saw the photos of the crime scene. It was identical to the Angel MO right down to the use of Hermès scarves and lilacs. And the Bible quote. I guess Dan wasn’t the original Angel after all. The police suspected his father might be responsible for more deaths although he took his own life after he killed Dan’s mother, so they’ll never know. Dan was copying his father’s work. And another thing. Dan had an IQ off the charts. Far greater than what we thought Eddie Stephens possessed. And there’s more.” He waited while she sat up in bed, wrapping the sheet around her body. “Turns out he framed Alec Harrison.”

“He wasn’t involved in any of this, was he?” Megan had guessed the truth.

“No. He taught at the academy recently but he wasn’t there during the time Eddie attended. And the missing instructor—James Young, well Dan lied about him as well. We were able to track him down easily enough. He still lives in the DC area. He wasn’t involved. Dan was probably the one who forged Eddie’s IQ test. Unfortunately, we may never know what exactly triggered the killer in him or why he did these things. We found out the scarves were never accounted for when Dan took them to the evidence storage facility last year. We managed to track where he purchased the lilacs online for each of murders. Get this, he used his father’s name.”

“He wanted to be the best. I think it was as simple as that. He told me he wanted to be known as the greatest of all time and yet in the end, Dan Martinez will go down in history as just another sick killer.”

She went back into his arms searching his expression. Since his return and even after countless reassurances she still believed this would all prove to be part of a dream.

“Jack, I don’t want to talk about Dan or the Angel of Death anymore. Let’s just promise each other we’ll let that part of our life go, okay?”

He took her face in his hands and kissed her until she believed.

“So, what are you planning to do for a living, Jack Montgomery? There aren’t too many jobs available in El Paso for former FBI agents.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ll think of something. Maybe they need a sheriff out here on the reservation. Or maybe I can just write about all the terrible things I’ve seen in the past,” he said and then smiled at her reaction.

“Well, you have to admit, it would make one hell of a story, right down to the part where the hero saves the day and ends up in the heroine’s bed. Kind of like right now.”

She laughed at the expression in his eyes as Jack turned out the lights once more and reached for her. The woman of his dreams.

About the Author

I'm a Texan through and through. I was born in a small Central Texas town as the youngest of four kids. Being the baby of the family and quite a bit younger than my brothers and sister, gave me plenty of time to entertain myself. Making up stories seemed to come naturally to me. I could keep myself happy for hours with all the possibilities.

As a pre-teen, I discovered romance novels and knew instinctively that was what I wanted to do with my over-active imagination. I wrote my first novel as a teen, (it's tucked away somewhere never to see the light of day), but never really pursued a career in writing until later, when I wrote my first romantic suspense and was hooked.

I still live in Texas and I still write romance. In fact, I cant think of anything I'd rather do.

Mary welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.cerridwenpress.com.

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