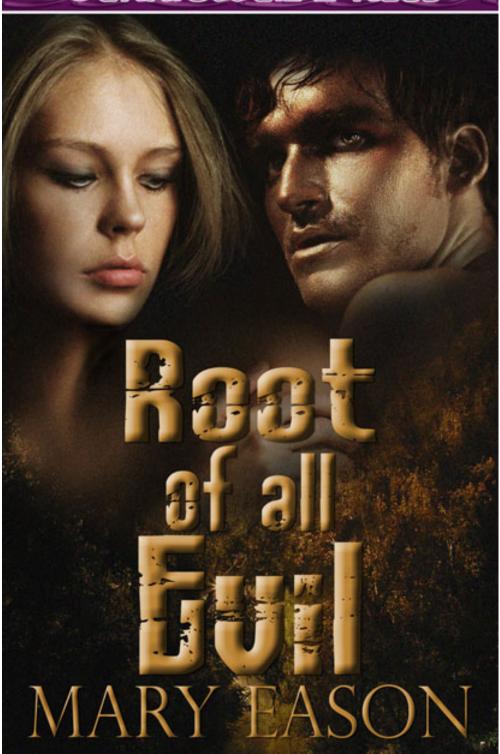
Cerritowed Press



Root of All Evil

Mary Eason

Burdened with guilt and sorrow, fearing for her life...her sanity, Anna Sorenson walked away from everything to gain redemption. A year earlier, Anna buried her husband Aaron. A week later, she lost the child she'd longed for. Anna's only thought was to put the tragedy of the past behind her and find a way to survive in a post-Aaron world. But the evil she escaped is hunting her down.

Agent John Delaney buried more than just his partner that rainy day one year earlier. He'd shoved aside his feelings, ignored the wrong he and Aaron did in the name of justice, and hoped the past would stay dead. It didn't. With Aaron's death and the arrest of his killer, the Bureau considered the case solved. No one had a clue the wrong man confessed to the killings. Until the real killer returned to claim his glory—and his next victim, Anna.

Now he's after the woman John still loves and he must choose between keeping his partner's secrets and losing Anna again. This time forever.

A Cerridwen Press Publication



Root of All Evil

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Edited by Helen Woodall Cover art by Dar Albert

Electronic book publication October 2009

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Prologue

The Monster Leaves The Abyss

He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.

Friedrich Nietzsche

He'd promised. Sworn the last time would be the last time. He'd lied. The throbbing pain cruising down the right side of her body, the dark bruises under her eye, served as vivid proof of the deadly extent of those lies. They were staring her in the face just as clearly as the choices she faced.

To stay would all but guarantee death. To leave would mean he'd follow through on his promise to track her down no matter where she went. Even to the ends of the earth. The third choice was unimaginable.

Which meant there was only one real choice left after all.

* * * * *

If you ask a dozen people what they believe the true meaning of life is, you'll get at least as many answers. So what's my take on life? What pearls of wisdom can I impart? Well, I am convinced that the true meaning of life can be found in this analogy. Life is like a book. You never know when one chapter ends what the next one will bring.

Take me for instance. Every important event in my life came at either the beginning or the ending of what I liked to call an imaginary chapter in my book of life.

One chapter ends. Another begins. And so it goes until the final chapter.

Today was no exception. The events of today represented the ending of another chapter. What most fiction writers call the black moment of the book.

It was certainly the black moment of my life.

Now, looking out through the sheets of pouring rain as the coffin bearing my husband's body lowered slowly into the weeping earth, I believed this was the blackest moment of them all. The kind that never ends. The kind you don't move beyond.

Soggy red dirt fell in bloody clumps, framing, covering the single red rose I'd placed on Aaron's mahogany casket.

Dead. Fifty was far too young to be dead, especially when the end came in such a humiliating way. Even now, it made me physically sick, and angry, and hating whoever or whatever could allow such a horribly tragic thing to happen to such a good man.

I glanced beyond the minister who watched me with an expression that did not welcome my tears or encourage sympathy, away from John Delaney, who'd glued himself to my side since Aaron's death, past the handful of mourners to where the gravediggers smoked and waited patiently to finish their task. Grudgingly I accepted this moment for what it was.

The end of another chapter.

I would always associate this chapter with the day I lost my innocence as well.

The only question facing me now was would it be the end of me along with Aaron and my book of life? At this moment, it certainly felt like it.

Today, the bleak D.C. sky allowed no sunlight to penetrate my despair. Not even the good times Aaron and I shared throughout our ten-year marriage could be found here today.

But I think if something had been able to make its way through the sorrow that had begun a year earlier with the first hint of the madness that lay ahead for me and Aaron, I would have done everything within my power to stop it. To end the horror before it could be allowed to take life within the unseen author's mind.

So I'd like to began this new chapter by saying I am not special. No one of any importance. I've never done anything remarkable in my life other than live, get up each day and do what thousands of others do in anonymity. Go to work, come home. Repeat the process.

So what makes me different from those thousands of others?

I'd made a very special connection.

A connection with a killer.

Chapter One

Look around. What do you see? Most people's answer would be the late summer flowers in full bloom. A warm sunny day. Children laughing and playing in the park close by.

But not me.

I see death. It's all around me. Part of me. On that rainy day a little more than a year earlier, it seeped into my bones and became fused with my soul.

See that man over there, the one who just passed by—his wife died a painful death. He still sleeps with her nightgown clutched against his chest. That woman in the blue dress—she's dying. I can feel death's grip all around her. That adorable little boy playing on the swing in the Yankees tee shirt—he's five, maybe six years old. He's lost both of his parents. He doesn't understand where Mommy and Daddy have gone. He still looks for them each day. His grandparents are heartbroken.

How do I know these things, you might ask? Am I a psychic? Not at all. Unlike what my sister Bev chose to believe, there is no such thing. I'm just good at reading others. It used to be my job to read people's hidden secrets.

Oh, and I'm a card-carrying member of a very exclusive club. The death club.

I blinked, turned away, rejected the images of death that were always close. With all my heart, every fiber of my being, I've tried to convince myself they no longer exist in my new life and the next chapter of my book.

Surely, there can be no place for death in paradise.

Today, I'm just another woman weighed down by the simple, mundane cares of the world. What to wear. What to eat. Don't forget to buy puppy food on my way home from work.

At this time of the year the skies over Florida can turn from endless blue and promising, to threatening gray in the blink of an eye. Today was no exception. The weatherman had been predicting thunderstorms for the island with the coming darkness.

I rushed inside the pet store next to my little shop while keeping a close eye on the gathering storm. Once I'd spotted Jezzie's favorite food, I picked up a little chew toy on my way to the register. With any luck, I'd have just enough time to leave the mainland behind, feed the love of my life, and take her for a short stroll along the beach.

Pensacola Beach was about as far removed from the D.C. hell I remembered, as a nightmare is from reality.

But it wasn't far enough to forget the memories of that night. They would be forever branded in my heart and on my soul. That day life as I knew it stopped.

Another chapter came to an abrupt end. Two weeks later, the final part of my oncepromising world collapsed around me.

The predicted thunderstorm hit as I cleared the causeway. I turned on to the quiet street leading up to my house and a familiar sense of calm enveloped me. I could see the ocean. More importantly, I was only minutes away from the sanctuary of my home.

I hit the Homelink button and the garage door sprang to life. From the depths of the house, Jezzie's enthusiastic yelping brought a smile to my face.

Jezzie and I were still finding our place in this new, post-Aaron world.

I made a mad dash for the mailbox, exactly twenty-six steps from the garage, all the while checking my surroundings. A habit from my past I couldn't shake. I gathered the mail, not sparing a moment to glance through it, and then I'm in a mad rush to return to the safety of the garage, my pulse reaching its usual frantic pace.

With the garage door closed, my heart rate began to slow. I unlocked the side door, then relocked it quickly behind me. Once I'd deposited my bags on the kitchen counter, I started counting.

Five. Four. Three... Jezzie never disappoints. She hit full canter halfway through the four count, skidded around the fridge, barely missed a headlong attack on the island stool before becoming airborne. I caught her tiny body and brought it up into my arms, accepting the lavish display of affection she willingly offered.

Our routine never deviated. Which was more reassuring than most things in my life. I could count on one hand the number of people I trusted in this screwed-up world. I could always count on Jezzie.

"Got you something." I managed to evade a direct smack on the lips long enough to open the bag containing dog food and the little squeaky toy shaped like a shoe. Jezzie adored shoes. I hoped the toy would replace my favorite three-inch black pump she'd adopted as her own.

She sniffed the fake with more disdain than interest while I placed food in her bowl. After a few lukewarm squeaks, she abandoned her new play pretty for dinner.

At times, I found myself wishing I shared Jezzie's enthusiasm for the simpler things in life. I hadn't enjoyed food or much of anything since Aaron's death.

While Jezzie devoured her kibble, from the living room I heard the constant beep, beep, beep of the answering machine. There were only two people who knew my number here in Florida. My sister and her husband.

When I'd left Washington, I severed all ties to my previous life. Including the ones from my once-promising career.

"Anna, it's Bev. Give me a call when you get this." My older sister's cheerful demeanor didn't mask the reason behind her call. Bev was worried. I could hear it in her tone. I deleted the message. I'd call Beverly soon. Honest I would.

Three more calls, all from Beverly within an hour of each other brought the hair at the base of my neck to full attention. Beverly knew exactly what time I'd be home from work, which meant whatever she needed to talk to me about couldn't wait.

I had just enough time to erase the final message when the phone rang again. "I was going to call you."

She barely waited for me to get the words out. "Are you okay?"

It was that tone again. The same tone as... I almost dropped the receiver. "Yes. Yes, I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?"

Oh God no. Not again. I still remembered her frightening call seconds before I'd learned of Aaron's murder.

"I'm coming for a visit." She tried to keep her tone nonchalant but her voice shook over the words.

I gripped the phone tighter. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just need a vacation from Ed." Whenever Bev resorted to lying about her husband, I knew things were bad.

"Bev-"

"Nothing's wrong, Anna. I'm on my way."

"Right now? It's at least a nineteen-hour drive." My sister lived in Manhattan.

"I'll be there tomorrow around lunchtime. Why don't you close the store for a few days so we can spend some time together?"

I struggled to force out an answer. "Bev, this is my busiest time of the season. With back to school and all." My voice trailed off. My mind wondered back to darker places.

"Do it, Anna. I need you to do it, okay? I'll see you soon." She hung up the phone, denying me the opportunity to argue.

When I tried to call her back the call went straight to voicemail.

The familiar uneasy sensation crept down my spine. The first omen that my life was about to turn dangerous once more.

Just as it had back then. When Aaron's nightmare first began.

* * * * *

"Oh, hell no." The second he saw the body, Agent John Delaney knew his day was about to take a twisted turn toward past mistakes.

The stark reality of the brutality the female victim had endured was evident from her wounds. And the expression of terror written on her face not even death could erase. The end hadn't come quickly but it had been excruciating. Her nude body had been tossed aside like a piece of trash next to the small pond located about fifty-some-odd-yards from the walking path at Rock Creek Park. Such horror seemed oddly surreal amongst the tranquility of the setting.

He glanced around the area trying to get a sense of the crime scene. "Anyone see anything?" he asked. His rookie partner, who'd been canvassing the scene, came to a halt next to him.

It was like reliving the worst possible case from his past. The latest victim had turned up just six days after Daphnia Scott's body was found within a stone's throw of this spot.

John had almost been able to convince himself the first one had been a coincidence. Almost.

Now there were two.

Same wounds as the original case. Same cause of death. The only difference? This was one year later and the man responsible for those murders sat in a federal prison awaiting execution.

"Nope. No witnesses. The person who called 9-1-1 jogs this same path every morning around the same time. There aren't any surveillance cameras set up at this end of the park. No doubt the perp knew this. A patrol car reported driving by around two a.m. Obviously the body was dropped something after that."

He crooked a thumb back over his shoulder. "The ME over there estimates the time of death around thirty-six to forty-eight hours earlier. She wasn't killed here. Sorry, John." Agent Rick Garner confirmed the rebirth of the nightmare with a terse shake of his head.

"Dammit." John squatted next to the body, his partner and Medical Examiner Maria Woo leaning over his shoulder. "Doc, any chance that these wounds weren't caused by the same type of knife?" God he hoped she'd tell him yes.

He didn't have to look at Maria to know she'd be rolling her eyes at the ridiculousness of that question and thinking the same thing he was thinking. This was no copycat.

John got to his feet. "We able to ID her yet?" He directed that question to his partner, who slanted his commander that familiar look John had grown to hate. The one that indicated how pointless the younger agent considered his question.

"No. No ID was found on the body. Just the note," he added unnecessarily. "Which is a pretty strange coincidence, don't you think?"

John didn't bother responding. He didn't have to ask what note his partner was talking about. He knew every word of the damn thing by heart.

Rick was right. There was no denying the note found on the two latest victims had all the characteristics of the original killer. He'd be willing to bet even before the Bureau's handwriting experts came back with the final proof it would be a direct match.

"Where the hell's he been for a year and why would he let Peterson steal his thunder. I mean, these guys are supposed to be media hogs, aren't they?"

John had recruited Rick personally a few years before the first Rock Creek Park murder case broke. He'd never dreamed, back then, that just a short year later the rookie would be replacing his senior partner.

His unwilling thoughts returned to the night in question. The one that would be forever branded in his subconscious. The night his work became personal. And a serial killer made good on his promise to make the morning headlines.

George Peterson had done all of that and more.

At least that's what they'd all thought. Until now...

"What do you want to do?" Rick seemed to be reading his thoughts.

With a whole lot of difficulty, John forced the past back into the dark recesses of his mind.

He didn't answer Rick's question right away. He watched the ME's assistant zip the body bag closed over the sightless eyes of their unidentified victim. John waited until the woman's body was in the wagon.

"How soon can you get the prelims to me, Doc?"

"Should have something by this afternoon. I'll give you a call." Maria snapped off her gloves off and tossed them in her bag then headed for her Mercedes parked on the street.

"John? What do you want to do?"

"Do?" His gaze fell on the flattened and bloodied imprint left in the grass. God he needed to be sure. Before this thing exploded in the press again.

"What's our next move?" Rick clarified, arching an eyebrow at John's indecision.

The only thing he could do. "Talk to Peterson." John turned from the crime scene. Normally the temperature of these late summer days could reach a boiling point by midday. Today the atmosphere in D.C. had turned cold and foreboding.

As if even the weather might be predicting the future.

Rick scrambled up the slight embankment after John.

"What do you think you're doing?" John jabbed the unlock button on the Bureauissued Crown Victoria. He'd come directly from home when the call came through. Rick's flashy yellow Corvette convertible was parked down the road a ways. He needed to do this alone. After the way things went down with Aaron. God, the last thing he needed was a witness, even though he knew Rick would back him up no matter what. If things went as he was expecting them to go and he had to force the truth out of Peterson, the less people involved the better.

"Going with you, of course."

John slanted a dark look the younger man's way. Most days, Rick's cheerful demeanor was a bonus. Today was not one of them.

"Rick-"

"I know, I know. You're ordering me to stand down. You're the boss. You can do that." Rick stood his ground, his hand on the Vic's passenger door.

In spite of his foul mood, John had to smile. "Yeah. So why aren't you doing it."

"Because you need me, partner. And I have no intention of letting you go back down that black hole alone."

Chapter Two

Because I loved Jezzie with all my heart, I forced aside the paralyzing fear that'd continued to challenge the small amount of confidence I'd managed to build over the past year.

It was all due to Bev's disturbing call. It sent me back into the darkness I'd struggled to put behind me.

Since Aaron's death, I'd worked hard to overcome the agoraphobia that my shrink told me was just a form of misdirected grief. Leaving D.C. and all the memories of Aaron's tragic murder helped in the beginning.

I'd packed up everything that reminded me of the good things I loved about my husband and left the bad.

My first stop had been Manhattan. I'd wanted to be close to my big sister, with good cause. Bev had been more of a mother to me than our own. She'd fussed over me like a hen protecting her chick. So going home to the comfort of my second mother seemed as natural as breathing. I thought having family close would help me deal with the excruciating loneliness nothing could have prepared me for.

Watching Bev and Ed's normal, day-to-day life only served as an agonizing reminder of all the things I'd never have again. Although both my marriage and my life with Aaron hadn't been anything close to normal.

I'd lasted just shy of six months in New York. Then I'd packed up everything I owned, along with Jezzie, and moved south again.

My small, two-bedroom beach house had come fully furnished. I'd turned the smallest bedroom into a work area where I played at designing my own line of clothes. Big dreams. Different dreams. Safe dreams.

All the rooms of my new home were small and cozy because small spaces made me feel safe.

For almost a year now, I'd managed to get myself dressed, bravely walk out my front door, and pretend to function normally. Jezzie was the only one close enough to me to know what a complete phony I'd become.

Sometimes, in the dark, the memories of that night would slip into my dreams, unwelcome. No matter how hard I fought to keep them away during the daylight hours, at night, while sleeping and vulnerable, they came for me.

So you see, I knew. Long before Bev's call. I knew something was coming. Something from my past would find me again. It was inevitable.

All that evil had to leave its mark somewhere.

Jezzie's wet nose nuzzled my leg. She stared up at me with those huge baleful eyes. Jezzie's way of reminding me she'd been waiting very patiently while I had my meltdown. It was now time to come back to the real world.

I had no idea how long I'd been sitting curled up into a tiny ball on my couch. As if by doing so, I could somehow make myself invisible.

"I'm sorry, baby. I'm okay. Really, I am. Don't worry." The dog crawled onto my lap and curled into her favorite spot in the crook of my arm.

Some days, Jezzie was the only thing keeping me from losing it.

I got to my feet, grabbed Jezzie's leash from its drawer, snapped it into place, and searched for my house key, which was right where I'd left it earlier.

Because I loved Jessie and owed her so much more than I could ever repay, I stepped out into the cold world once more instead of retreating into that little spot in my closet where I spent far too much time during those first few months, hiding in a cramped corner where I felt safe.

The storm outside had passed. The one within me would never end.

The waters of the Gulf of Mexico churned with renewed power, thrashing wave after wave against the beach and belching up the contents of the ocean's floor.

Jezzie yelped as if her tiny voice could somehow still the crashing waters.

"It's okay, girl. It'll settle down in time." If only that were true of my own restlessness. I doubted there'd ever be a time when I could say with confidence I'd found stillness in my soul.

Somehow, I managed to corral Jezzie after only a short romp down the beachfront. She loved me, but she loved being outside as well and she hated having to leave her fun.

"This weekend we'll spend as much time as you like out here, I promise." Brave words. I'd have Bev here with me as a buffer against the phobia that lurked beneath my surface.

Even knowing the house was secure, it was still hard to walk into an empty place. Aaron's murder had taught me you never knew what evil might be waiting for you. He'd gone into an empty building and confronted his worst nightmare.

"Don't think of that now." Something dark and unwelcome was trying to reach out to me, but I couldn't open that door. Couldn't let that nightmare back in.

It took a couple of deep breaths before I was able to close that door. And all the while Jezzie stood patiently waiting for me to unhook her leash.

"I'm sorry, baby." I ruffled her ears then gave her new chew toy a squeeze, instantly capturing her attention.

With Jezzie happily doing battle with the squeaky shoe, I went about my nightly routine of securing locks and windows. I'd check them once, then one more time so that I could sleep at night.

Tonight, for reasons I couldn't begin to explain to myself, I deviated slightly from the routine by pushing aside the thick drapes covering my living room window. The window faced out onto my quiet street. It was then that I spotted it. A car parked across the street, lights off. I quickly released the drape and ducked out of the line of sight, a learned trick from the past, as the world around me spun out of control. I couldn't breathe. Couldn't move. I dropped to my knees on the floor and tried to force air into my lungs.

Vaguely I was aware of things taking place around me. Jezzie's bark. Her wet nose nudging at my arm. A car engine starting.

When I could breathe again over the pounding in my chest, it was a battle to keep from losing my threadbare hold on realty. I couldn't fall apart. Not now. Not with Jezzie depending on me.

"It's okay, baby. I'm okay," I managed to say with some amount of normality for Jezzie's sake.

I scooped my baby into my arms and slowly got to my feet, then forced myself to glance out the window, being careful to keep out of the line of sight of anyone looking in. The street was now empty. The car gone. Had it even been there or was it just another part of my delusion?

Even after I assured myself everything was secured, I still couldn't shake the feeling that had been tailing me for hours. Since Bev's call. If I were being honest, since Aaron's death.

Unfinished business, it screamed. Unfinished business.

* * * * *

He'd thought he'd seen the last of the place. Prayed the last time would be the last. He'd been here, on a far different day. He'd watched the gates of the Federal Correctional Institute in Petersburg, Virginia, slam shut behind George Peterson, and he'd walked away from the prison with only a hollow feeling of justice served.

The personal cost had been great. He'd given up much—everything—to catch the worst killer to flee the gates of hell. It had won him a promotion, lots of publicity. It'd cost him his partner and friend.

As always, he couldn't think of Aaron and not remember Anna. Not the Anna he'd come to care about. That woman was gone, maybe for good. No, the Anna he remembered was a shadow of the vibrant woman she'd once been.

The memory of their final scene was always close, ready to haunt him whenever he thought about her. About Aaron. He couldn't drive by the emergency room of Capital General and not remember holding his partner's lifeless body. Or forget the blood. At times, he could still feel the blood soak his clothes.

And he'd never forget holding Anna while she lost what she believed to be her last connection to Aaron. The child. Barely a baby girl. Gone forever.

Anna's grief had manifested itself in bitter words. They hadn't been able to move beyond them. They'd faced each other across the remains of the child. Him silent, accepting. Her angry, accusatory. All in an inept attempt to kill the pain.

"John? You ready?" He turned and looked into his partner's eyes. It was obvious Rick had been asking that question for a while. John didn't acknowledge the other unasked questions written in his partner's solemn expression. Instead, he yanked the door open with more than necessary force.

"Yeah?" The duty officer, an overweight fifty-something, whose girth barely allowed him to squeeze the buttons on his shirt into place, spared them an intimidating look before he returned to Judge Judy on TV.

"Agent Delaney, Agent Garner. FBI." The flash of their Bureau-issued IDs managed to pry the officer's attention from Judge Judy's current case. It only took a moment for the officer to recognize John. Once the Rock Creek Park murders hit the presses, John's face and story had been plastered all over the national news and even a few celebrity rags. He could only imagine the headlines this latest development would bring.

The man passed a couple of fat fingers over his receding hairline. "Yes sir. What can I do for you?" Under different circumstances, the officer's about-face behavior would have been amusing, but John had lost his sense of humor when the final victim's body surfaced.

"We need to speak with George Peterson. Have him brought up for interview."

Officer Frank Barrera glanced at his watch. "He'll be eating right now —"

"I don't care if he's taking a shit, get him up here."

Officer Barrera's opinion of John's rebuke was clear, but he did as he was told and grabbed the phone, turned away and passed his anger on to the hump on the other end. "Get Peterson brought up front. Now." He slammed the receiver down with more force than necessary then went back to watching his program.

Standing only a few feet away, John could clearly hear Rick's amused chuckle. "Some day, you're going to have to tell me how you do that."

John didn't see the humor. "Trust me, you don't want to know."

"Oh, I don't know. I bet it works miracles with the women."

John couldn't argue the point. Woman were all but coming out of the woodwork since the first magazine article touted him the "new face of the Bureau", and recruits had been signing up in record numbers to become part of the next generation FBI.

Barrera's phone shrilled and he yanked the receiver to his ear. "Yeah? Okay." Barrera took his time conveying the message. A deliberate attempt at getting back at John. "He's ready. I'll need you to sign in and hand over your weapons."

John's smug expression barely passed for a smile. Barrera seemed pleased when he deposited his Glock into the tray along with Rick's. Barrera snatched the weapons up, removed a bulging key ring from his overworked belt, and unlocked the weapons cabinet.

Ordering the FBI around probably came as close to being a real cop as the man had gotten in his career.

"This way." Barrera buzzed the barred door open and headed down the long corridor without waiting to see if the two of them would follow.

They wouldn't be going into the main prison itself. Peterson would have been brought up to one of a couple of stark rooms used for visitors and interrogation. John remembered the peeling gray walls only too well.

Barrera stopped in front of the first door and peered into the window. With a satisfied wag of his head, he took the key ring off again and unlocked the door then turned to John. "He's cuffed to the table so he shouldn't give you any problems. I'll have to lock up. When you're ready, knock and Officer Schultz here will let you out." He motioned to the young officer who leaned his tall lanky frame against the opposite wall. Officer Schultz gave them a couple of fingers' salute then went back to his thoughts.

John didn't bother acknowledging Barrera's speech. He and Rick stepped inside the bleak cubicle that reeked of unwashed flesh and squashed hope. They waited until the door had been relocked and Barrera's mass was in motion before facing the man handcuffed to the table.

His time in federal prison hadn't done Peterson any favors. He looked at least ten years older than his twenty-eight years and he wore his physical scars like medals. Peterson had barely been incarcerated more than a week before someone tried to win a name for themselves by killing the Rock Creek serial killer. They'd buried a shank an inch beneath Peterson's right eye, taking away its sight. There were other scars as well. Peterson certainly hadn't been a choirboy, but it was the emotional demons warring with the man's sanity that were the most disturbing.

The left corner of Peterson's mouth inched upwards in what could only be described as a maniacal leer. It confirmed all of John's fears. "Figured it out, did ya?" Peterson made a noise that sounded like a growl.

In an instant, John's world crumbled around him. "Dammit." This man might be responsible for killing a federal agent, and deserving of his cell in federal prison, but he wasn't the Rock Creek killer.

It took Rick another half a click to catch up, his sharp gaze beating a path from John's to the man seated at the table. "Shit. Why the hell did you confess to a crime you didn't commit?"

Peterson tossed Rick a disinterested look. "New partner, Delaney?" A deliberate dig that John had no intention of responding to.

"Answer the question, Peterson. Why'd you confess to Cheryl Larsen's murder? Janice Daniels and Belinda Cardwell's? You didn't do any of them."

Peterson's answer was a bored lift of his shoulders. He was playing with them. John's patience stretched a little closer to the breaking point.

He smacked the table hard with his hand, garnering a startled jump from inmate 6752335. "Answer. The. Damn. Question."

"Why do you think? I was going to prison anyway, thanks to your partner. What'd I have to lose? I figured I might as well make a name for myself. Get some of the glory if I was gonna spend the time for doing your partner."

The introduction of Aaron into the conversation threatened to snap the last bit of control John was clinging to. "What are you talking about?"

"Your partner, the illustrious Aaron Sorenson."

"Leave him out of this, you son-of-a-bitch. You were seen at Cheryl Larsen's apartment complex the night she disappeared. You were stalking her. She'd reported you to the police. You were the last person to see her alive—"

"Except for the real killer, you mean." Peterson confirmed without blinking an eye. "I'd say he was the last one to see that bitch alive, wouldn't you?"

* * * * *

"What's our next move? The press will be all over this thing before long. We don't have a hell of a lot of time. Do you think it's time to bring in the AD?" Rick, who had followed the heated exchange with interest, kept his questions to himself until they reached the Crown Vic.

"God no." The thought of Assistant Director Mark Warren's anger was enough to make John's decision final.

"No, right now all we have is two murder victims with a similar MO, and the word of a convicted killer. We need more than that before taking Mark on." John put the car in reverse and eased the Vic out of its parking spot.

"O-kay. Then what are we going to do."

John met Rick's gaze. "We need to go back over all the cases. The originals and these new ones. Something got missed along the way. If Peterson isn't our killer, then it's only a matter of time before the real one strikes again. We need some answers and fast. Before this hits the six o'clock news."

* * * * *

Dear God, he was home. She could hear his key in the door, his heavy footsteps lumbering down the hall. The scent of pure evil permeated every molecule of her being and the familiar dread settled in around her.

It took all of her strength to leave the comfort of her safe haven, the tiny space in her bedroom closet where she found a small amount of peace, to face him again.

She'd prayed. All day long while he'd been working, she'd spent the time on her knees until they ached and numbness seeped up her legs. She'd begged and pleaded with God to kill him and end her pain. God had other things in mind. Other plans. Or maybe he was simply not in the business of answering the prayers of sinners.

Chapter Three

"You look terrible." When Bev arrived at exactly ten the following morning, I'd barely managed more than half an hour's sleep in-between strange dreams. Troubled dreams filled with dark shadows, danger and peril.

And Aaron.

In them, was not the handsome man I'd fallen in love with, but the bloodied Aaron whose body I'd insisted on seeing the night of his death. Each time I awoke, I felt as if Aaron were trying to warn me of something.

When Bev called to tell me she was two blocks away, I downed the last of my coffee and tried to make myself presentable. Obviously without much success, according to Bev's straightforward remark. With Jezzie tucked in my arms for strength, I undid the chain and opened the door to be enveloped in my big sister's loving embrace. The smell of lavender, Bev's trademark scent, was always comforting.

"Thanks, Bev. Good to see you as well."

She looked me over then square in the eyes. "I've missed you, Anna."

It took a second to find my voice. The memories of Aaron were still too close, leaving me unsettled. "I missed you too."

I grabbed the bag she'd tossed on the floor next to the door, mostly for something to do with my hands. Neither of us wanted to bring up the real reason for her visit just yet.

"That can wait. Show me the place." Bev glanced around my cozy living room. "I like it. It's definitely you."

The grand tour of my little beach house took less than five minutes. We returned to the living room with those uncomfortable questions still hanging between us.

The troubled look on Bev's familiar face made it impossible for me to remain seated for long. "Want some coffee?" I jumped to my feet and raced toward the kitchen hoping to outrun the inevitable.

"Anna, I had a dream about Aaron." With those seven quiet words, Bev fulfilled my worst nightmare. And just like that, the past caught up with me at last.

I stood frozen where her words had pinned me, unable to think beyond them. Bev had had this strange connection with me for as long as I could remember. It had long ago stopped freaking me out.

She found me where I stood mannequin-still. "I'm sorry."

I was busily shaking my head, trying to deny it, but I couldn't quite bring myself to lie to her. "It's not over, is it?"

Bev didn't answer. There was no need for words. We both knew it wasn't.

"Come sit down. I'll make some fresh coffee. What's in the pot smells scorched."

Bev pulled out a chair, grating it along the tile and my frayed nerves. I dropped limp into it. A few seconds later, Jezzie hopped into my lap, ready to comfort. She knew something was wrong. Jezzie possessed the same natural dog instinct that allowed some animals to predict illnesses in their masters.

Bev set a fresh cup of strong black coffee in front of me. I realized I'd lost time again. Enough had passed for her to make more coffee.

She pulled out the chair across from mine. "You've seen him as well."

I tested the strength of the coffee. Bev's taste ran unnaturally toward sludge. This time was no different.

"It's just what you need so drink it." Bev always seemed to know what I was thinking. I could never decide if that was due to her gift or simply a big sister's intuition.

She preferred to believe her special gift came from psychic powers. I did not. There was no such thing as psychic abilities. If there had been, I'd never have bared my soul to John. Aaron wouldn't have died. I wouldn't have lost my baby and pieces of my sanity. What Bev and I both possessed was just good insight. It had helped me tremendously in my career at the Bureau.

As hard as it was to open this particular door, I had to know. "Tell me what you saw."

That she chose to stall over her answer told me whatever she'd seen had been bad.

"The dreams started about a week ago. At first, well, I thought it was nothing."

"Bev, tell me what you saw."

After what felt like an eternity, she finally gave in. "All right. I saw Aaron, not the Aaron we knew and loved." She didn't elaborate. Again, there was no need. "He told me you needed my help. You were in danger. He said he'd made a mistake. They had the wrong guy."

I got to my feet with Jezzie still in my arms and headed for the window. Ignoring last night's nightmare, I pushed aside the buttery-yellow curtains, unlocked the window over the sink and threw it open. The calming presence of the ocean didn't have the same effect on me today. "No. They didn't get the wrong guy. George Peterson killed Aaron. There's no disputing that truth. They didn't get the wrong guy, Bev. It was just a crazy dream."

"You know what I mean."

I turned from the window with a sigh. "Yes."

"What do you think we should do? Have you heard from...him?"

Bev honored my wish never to speak John Delaney's name again even though she didn't agree with it. I blamed John for Aaron's death. She did not.

"We can't do anything. We're not part of this. And no, I'm sure I'm the last person he'd want to have any contact with anymore."

From the expression on Bev's face, it was easy to see she'd picked up on the undercurrents between me and John right from the start. "I wouldn't count on that. Anna, I think we—"

"No we shouldn't. And I don't want to talk about this anymore. I can't. Let's just enjoy the time we have together. Whatever's going on in D.C., I'm not part of it anymore."

Bev was not the type of person to walk away from a problem. She faced life's trials head-on and embraced her talent for problem solving. She'd certainly gotten good at solving my problems.

Letting go of that desire now had to be all but impossible for her, but she did it for me.

"All right."

Even under these circumstances, it was good to have her with me. "How long can you stay?"

"A few days. You know Ed. He'll fend for himself okay a while, then the poor man'll start consuming chocolate like it's going out of style."

The image of the pencil-thin Ed, shoving chocolate bars into his mouth was enough to lift some of the darkness from my mood.

"Poor Ed. You need to cut him some slack. He doesn't smoke or drink. Chocolate's his only vice." Bev wasn't fooling anyone. She'd told me once that she'd fallen in love with her college English professor the first time she'd heard him quote Robert Browning.

She read my thoughts easily enough. "Which is why I want to keep him healthy."

For once, the need to get away from the shrinking walls of my sanctuary was stronger than my fear of what lay outside of them. "Then let's not waste a second of our time together. Why don't I show you around Pensacola?"

* * * * *

"Here's something. The ME thinks the weapon used on our latest murder victim, Marissa St. James, was a serrated—"

John glanced up from Cheryl Larsen's autopsy report, happy to have a distraction from the gruesome details printed there. Cheryl's death hadn't come quickly but it'd certainly been painful. "Kubota kitchen knife," he finished for Rick. The same knife used in all the three of the previous Rock Creek murders.

"Yeah." Rick continued to scan the details of the report. "Shit. They haven't made that particular knife in fifteen years or more."

"Yeah, I know. The company's since filed bankruptcy. Anything else?"

"Nope." Rick wiped a hand over his eyes. "Dammit. I thought I had something. I can't find a single common thread between our two latest vics. They didn't know each other. Didn't run in the same social circles. Zip. Nada. Nothing. Anything in the old cases about the vics knowing each other?"

"They didn't. Aaron and I went over every aspect of their lives with a fine-toothed comb. There's nothing." John glanced at his watch. They'd been at it for half the evening. He needed coffee. And not the kind he'd find in the Bureau's break room. "I'm going for coffee. Want to come?"

He'd barely gotten the words out before Rick was reaching for his jacket.

Outside, a blood-red moon watched over the D.C. skyline. The words to "Bad Moon Rising" played through John's head.

"What?" John had known his partner had questions about the Peterson investigation since they left the prison. He'd just chosen to ignore them until now.

Rick slanted him a look and changed his mind. "Nothing."

John's hands tightened on the wheel. As much as he didn't want to talk about Aaron or the past, he needed Rick's help to keep this case contained.

John blew out a heavy sigh. "It's okay. Ask what you want."

Still, Rick hesitated for a second longer. "That night. What happened? Why did Sorenson go after Peterson like that? I read the file. There was no evidence to link him to anything more than being a creep and a slightly bumbling stalker. He had an alibi for the night of Cheryl's death. What happened?"

John did not want to relive that night again. That nightmare was reserved for his dreams. But like it or not, time was running out and he was out of ideas. "It was the note," he said at last, resigning himself to the inevitable.

John spotted Rick's baffled glance. "The notes found near the victims' bodies. Aaron...knew one of the victims." Saying that Aaron knew Cheryl Larsen was putting it mildly. Aaron's relationship with Cheryl had crossed the lines of professional interest. John had learned a few weeks before Aaron's death that he'd been having an affair with Cheryl off-and-on for years.

"Aaron remembered her telling him about seeing someone fitting Peterson's description near her home."

John could almost recite Rick's next question before his partner got the words out. "That wasn't in the case files. I've gone over every word in the previous three cases and the two current ones. There was no mention of it."

"That's because Aaron asked me to keep it out of the file." A quick glance at his partner confirmed the reaction he'd been expecting. John spotted a primo parking space in front of the coffee shop, braked too quickly, momentarily distracting his partner, then slid into the spot and killed the engine. "Well? Say it."

"Dammit, John, that could be a key piece of information in solving the original case. It could have kept Aaron alive. Not to mention the latest two victims."

"I'm aware of that, but Aaron had his reasons for not wanting the information in the files." Damn, he hated bringing Anna's name into this. He'd tried to honor Anna's wishes by not mentioning the note or how she'd ultimately come to discover its existence, but it wasn't going to be possible much longer.

"What possible reason could...oh."

"Yeah. Aaron found the note in the mailbox outside of their home. He believed it was meant for Anna. For whatever reason, Aaron believed the killer was targeting her."

"Sorenson's wife? She was the profiler on the case. So why'd Sorenson risk the creep getting to Anna by not mentioning the note? Did he have other reasons for keeping it from his wife? Personal reasons? Or was he afraid his wife might have a few questions of her own? Was Sorenson having an affair with this victim you mentioned?"

John couldn't even begin to explain Aaron's strange behavior in those last few months. The sudden bursts of anger. The abuse of alcohol. The affair. All were things pointing to something dark and troubling going on in Aaron's life, but his partner hadn't chosen to share whatever it was with him.

"I don't know," he stumbled over the lie and hoped Rick didn't pick up on it. "But I intend to do my best to keep that accusation away from Anna. With or without your help."

Rick turned in his seat to watch John carefully. Was there something in his voice that gave it away? He couldn't talk about her and not have some of his feelings show.

After another second ticked by, Rick shook his head. "Okay."

"Okay?"

Rick reached for the door handle. "Yeah, okay, but you understand if this comes back to bite us in the butt, it's your ass, not mine." He climbed out of the car without waiting for an answer.

John had expected more of an argument.

He followed Rick into the coffee shop where his partner ordered the largest cup of coffee he could find along with a sandwich and one of those strange pastries loaded with gooey filling and calories, in spite of the fact that they'd had pizza less than an hour earlier. Rick hooked his thumb in John's direction when the clerk asked for money. "Oh, and you're paying for this."

* * * * *

"This place is as close to paradise as it gets. You think Ed would miss me if I decided to stay here, oh, say, forever?" The unpredictable weather had decided to cooperate and allow us a glorious day spent wandering around the gift shops along the beach. Bev stocked up on trinkets with Pensacola Beach emblazoned in colorful pastels for herself and Ed.

We'd skipped lunch in order to indulge ourselves at Sandy Beaches, an expensive restaurant made famous for its fresh Gulf Coast seafood caught daily by the local fishermen.

"Now this is heaven." Bev took a bite of homemade Key Lime pie and closed her eyes, savoring the moment. I had to smile. Having Bev with me today was like having a favorite warm blanket wrapped around me on a cold, rainy day. Letting her go would not be easy. I'd begun to dread the moment already.

Hiding that regret from her was impossible. "It's been a great day."

Bev put down her fork and reached for my hand, squeezing it. "I miss having you close, Anna. I worry."

As much as I didn't want to have this conversation with Bev again, for a second, with her near, I found myself wavering. The insecure woman existing in me screamed that she couldn't go through the coming nightmare alone. Maybe if I just went for a little visit. New York would be pretty this time of year. I could close the shop for a bit. Enjoy the changing seasons with those I loved.

The sensible woman inside me, the one who'd once been a celebrated profiler with the FBI, reminded me I'd only be postponing the inevitable.

I patted her hand and tried to come up with some reassurances. "I know you do, but I'm okay. I'll be fine."

She let the matter drop for the moment even if she didn't believe me. I couldn't blame her. I could feel the evil coming like a tidal wave, growing stronger with each passing moment.

"Feel up to a walk along the beach before we turn in?" Bev's question shook me from my musings. Tonight there wasn't a cloud in the sky. The moon hung low above the water. There were dozens of people milling around. And I was afraid.

Was the suspicious car parked in my neighborhood just a disturbing coincidence or the beginning of the inevitable?

I squelched the terror creeping to a boiling point inside me. Bev needed my reassurances. "Sure. Why don't we pick up Jezzie first? She'll never forgive us if we walk the beach without her."

Bev sensed the truth, but let it go. "Sure. Jezzie's a doll. I'd like to kidnap her along with you and bring both of you home with me."

Jezzie's enthusiasm was easy to catch. For a time, Bev and I were happy to laugh as Jezzie entertained us with her antics. Charging the tide as it rushed out then retreating to the safety of our legs when it came crashing back against the sandy shoreline, threatening to soak her pristine coat.

I searched for something to keep from discussing the dream. "How's Ed's work? Is he still planning on retiring at the end of next year?"

"Um huh." Bev had grown unusually quiet, fueling my imagination. What did she know that she wasn't telling me?

A thousand different scenarios spun through my thoughts. I couldn't ask a single one of the questions. Instead, we finished our walk in silence and opted to have that discussion another time.

"I'll just check the mail. I'll only be a moment."

Bev nodded and took Jezzie up the walk to the front porch while I walked to the mailbox close by, silently chanting reassurances to myself. Tonight, there were no mysterious cars parked in front of the Millers' house. Just a gorgeous ending to a perfect day.

If Bev noticed the slew of locks decorating both doors, she didn't acknowledge them. I piled the mail on top of the stack that had been accumulating for days. Something red slipped from the mound to the floor at my feet. Bev, who had managed to unhook Jezzie leash while the dog jumped and licked her face, reached for it first, our hands colliding.

She picked it up and handed it to me. My name, my maiden name, was printed in childlike blocked letters across the front of the folded page. Fear and dread bubbled up inside me. I'd seen this note before. No, not this one, but one very similar. I'd found it by accident a few days before Aaron's death. Along with some personal information that had been removed from Cheryl Larsen's case file. I'd thought...

I opened the page and read the words written there. The same words as before.

Beloved, now that I've found you again. I will never let you go. You will be with me soon. And always.

The paper slipped from my fingers to the floor. This time Bev didn't bother to retrieve it. Her full attention focused on my horrified expression. "Anna? What is it?"

Words weren't possible. I couldn't speak of the terror. Couldn't breathe it to life. Slowly, just as the lifeless paper had slipped to my feet, I slid to the floor and into the open arms of the welcomed darkness waiting to embrace me.

"Anna, wake up."

Since I was a very small child, Bev's voice always seemed to bring comfort. I lost count of the number of times I'd run to her room and buried myself in her arms growing up. Our mom had long since checked out on us emotionally. I guess she figured it was easier to deal with divorce, single parenting, a sick child and a rebellious teen that way.

The ten years that separated Bev and me made her seem cool and sophisticated to the child I'd once been. I remembered sitting next her as she got ready for a date and thinking I wanted to be just like her when I grew up. I'd idolized her so much that I'd emulated her in many ways. I'd married a man twenty years my senior.

"Anna, that's enough. Wake up." The worry in her tone diffused that long ago memory, returning me to the here and now. The nightmare. I opened my eyes and found Bev's anxious face mere inches from mine.

Something wet and cold nuzzled my cheek. Jezzie.

"Are you okay?"

I managed to sit, breathe. Function. "Yes, I'm fine." After another tense moment, she accepted my answer.

"Come sit down. You're shaking all over." Bev helped me to my feet and to the nearby sofa. The note was nowhere in sight.

After she assured herself I was okay and hadn't injured myself in the fall, Bev asked the question I knew was coming. "I've never seen you look so frightened. Not even... Who sent it?"

How could I possibly answer her when I had no face or name to put with the horror that followed me? I shook my head. I almost wished I could put a face to the terror. "I don't know."

Bev didn't buy it for a minute. "Bullshit, Anna. Why are you so frightened then? It could just be a crank note. Kids. A creep who spotted you on the beach and has a hard-on for you—"

"It isn't."

"How do you know that if—"

"I know because I've seen the note before."

The space of time following my revelation charged with tension, curiosity.

"When?" she managed at last.

"A few days before Aaron's death. I found it in his desk at home." When I confronted Aaron about the note and what I believed to be his intimate relationship with Cheryl Larsen, he'd turned defensive, accusing me of snooping. He'd later explained that Cheryl Larsen had found the note, although there had been no mention of Cheryl ever receiving a similar note like the other victims. Instead of pushing the issue and perhaps hearing my husband confess he'd fallen in love with someone else, I'd internalized it, growing more angry and resentful at what I knew in my heart. I'd been so furious with him for so long. By the time he died we were barely speaking. Had Aaron been trying to protect me? It killed me to think I'd been angry with him for shutting me out of whatever was bothering him and he'd only been trying to keep me safe.

"Was it the same..."

"Yes, I think so. I never got the chance to ask him about it. Aaron and John were working around the clock, trying to solve the murders. I called, got his voice mail. I never talked to him again."

"What about after..."

"Aaron's death?" She slowly nodded. "You know what happened then."

I'd fallen apart. Physically. Mentally. I'd lost it.

"We need to report this, Anna. If the same person who killed those people in D.C. is still out there then someone needs to know about it. We owe it to the victims," she added when she spotted my answer.

"No. I'm not getting involved in this thing again. I can't. I'll call the local authorities tomorrow and let them know. They can take it from there."

Bev's disapproval was obvious. "I'm sorry, but I can't go through that again, Bev. I don't think I'll survive this time."

Chapter Four

"Agent Delaney, this is Beverly Stewart. I don't know if you remember me or not, but I'm Anna Sorenson's sister. Something disturbing has happened to Anna today, Agent Delaney. I need to talk to you right away. Please call me back as soon as possible."

Something happened to Anna. Dear God, no.

He'd missed the original call because cell phone reception in the Federal building could be almost impossible at times. The second the beep alerted him to the waiting message, John retrieved the number and somehow managed to dial it.

"Come on, pick up." He listened to the rings on the other end and imagined all sorts of scenarios. None of which were comforting. It was almost midnight. Would Beverly have gone to bed? The fear in her voice had been undeniable before. The moment she picked up it was still there.

"Hello?"

"Beverly, this is John Delaney, what's happened to Anna."

"Just a moment, Ed." He held the phone away from his ear and stared at it as if expecting answers. Had he dialed the wrong number? He stuck it against his ear in time to hear what sounded like a door closing.

"Sorry about that, Agent Delaney, but if Anna knew I'd called you she wouldn't be happy. I had to wait until she was in the shower to get your number."

He choked out a breath. Thank God, Anna was alive. "It's okay. It doesn't matter. Tell me what's happened," he cut across her unnecessary explanation. He would be the last person Anna would turn to for help.

"I'm not sure. That is, I'm not sure what to make of it and she's not telling me everything, I can tell. There was a note in the mailbox today. It was strange. It made no sense. But Anna's reaction to seeing it was what was so frightening."

A note! Dear God, he was coming after Anna again. How had he found her? Hell, John barely knew where she'd landed. She'd cut ties. Refused each and every one of his calls and emails. She wasn't interested in hearing his apology one more time. Anna wanted nothing more to do with him or her past.

"Is she okay?"

Bev's silence was almost as alarming as her words. "To tell you the truth, I don't know. My sister, well, she's not doing so good. Since Aaron's death...I don't think she's strong enough to get through this. She needs help."

The urge to rush to Anna's side was strong. He wanted to protect her. "Tell me about the note," he said instead. Even though his gut was assuring him this was the same creep, he needed more details.

"I thought it was a joke at first. It looked as if a child had written it...hang on just a minute."

John tried to control his impatience while Bev spoke with someone, no doubt Anna. "I have to go. Please help."

"Bev, wait." Before he could get another word out, Beverly Stewart was gone. But the fear she'd left in her wake remained with him. And he had a choice to make. Protocol demanded he bring his AD into the loop immediately. Hell, he'd already violated that directive. He'd let his need to protect Aaron's mistakes and his own stand in the way of catching a serial killer.

The Bureau and the world believed the Rock Creek killer was behind bars. Only John, his partner, and Aaron's killer knew the truth.

Along with the real Rock Creek killer.

* * * * *

She loved the park. Sitting on this isolated bench, the sun warming her bruised skin, it made the horror of the night before seem not so bad. He'd been angry with her. In his eyes, the list of her transgressions was endless.

She'd forgotten to bake the bread the way his mother prepared it. No, that wasn't the truth. She'd lost track of the time, snuggled in her quiet corner, she let her mind drift to happier days while her body healed. She'd lost time. She'd rushed to prepare the evening meal, but there wasn't enough time for the bread.

She could still see the monster as it emerged within him. More and more lately, the monster was in control. She knew soon, the man that she married would disappear forever, leaving only the monster in his place. And then what?

Each time, after he beat her, he'd beg for her forgiveness and she'd give it to him. He'd fallen asleep with her clutched tight against his chest as if fearing she might escape. When he left for work, she'd slip away and come to this little park bench to contemplate the future.

Did she dare follow through with her plan? She prayed for guidance. What she considered went against everything her parents taught her. Would they forgive her? Would God? The only answer was the rustling trees, the passing day, and the reassurance that time was quickly running out.

* * * * *

"It's me. Want to take a trip to Florida?" John had debated getting Rick any further involved in his screw-up for a long time. But it was a fifteen-hour drive to Pensacola and he was desperate to be there with her.

That he'd wakened his partner from sleep was clear from his slurred words and enormous ear-cracking yawn. "What's in Florida?"

"Anna. Aaron's wife. The killer sent her another note."

"You talked to her?" John could hear rustling as his partner searched for clothes then dressed in a rush.

"Not exactly." On the other end, the rustling ended.

"What do you mean not exactly?"

"I spoke to her sister. She told me about the note. Look, I'm going to Pensacola with or without you-"

"No way. You're not leaving me behind to clean up this mess." It irritated John that his partner sounded amused. This was his worst nightmare. There was nothing funny about the resurrection of a killer. "Besides, I want to meet the only woman who's ever managed to elicit any kind of a reaction out of the mighty John Delaney."

"Rick, don't go there. I'd hate to—"

"I know you'd hate to pull me off the case but you will. Sorry, partner, you're in too deep for that. I'd suggest you start talking."

He was right. He needed Rick quiet. Needed him to keep his secrets. But more importantly, he needed Rick's distance. Rick wasn't personally invested in this case yet. He could catch details that John was too close to see. He needed that.

"I'll be outside your apartment building in ten minutes. I'll explain everything on the way."

* * * * *

"Okay, when I said start talking, I actually meant before we reached Pensacola." The sarcasm in his partner's voice didn't mask his obvious curiosity. It'd been brewing for hours, revealing itself in slanted glances and exaggerated sighs.

John had been debating how much of the personal shit to reveal to the man since they'd left D.C. They were now on the outskirts of Pensacola. He'd made the trip in a record-breaking ten hours. "The killer left a note in Anna's mailbox which—"

Rick waved away his attempt at broad stroking of the facts. "I know that. You told me as much when you woke me up. What I don't understand is why he's targeting this particular woman. I mean, it's obvious he isn't the one responsible for your partner's death. Hell, the MO's aren't even the same when you think about it." Rick shifted in his seat to better gauge John's reaction. "I'm guessing that little fact escaped everyone's attention when the case was officially closed. And seeing her connection to the old case, I'm betting she's going to end up being the key to finding this creep."

"We don't know that—"

"Oh come on, John. Tell me the truth for God's sake. You trusted me so far not to sell you out. Don't tie my hands now."

John quirked a grin in his partner's direction. "That's not exactly how I remember it, but you're right. I need your help. Look, it's almost midmorning and we're about another forty-five minutes away. I'll call Beverly and make sure everything's okay there then let's grab some coffee and I'll try to fill in the pieces for you, okay?"

Rick squinted against the bright morning sunlight trying to make out John's reaction before nodding. If he were half the detective John knew him to be, he'd have seen behind that half-truth. He'd know John was only going to tell him the bare bones of the case. The parts he thought he'd need to be useful. The other stuff, well, that was best left in the past. It could serve no purpose dredging up those painful emotions. The lies he'd covered up for Aaron. The betrayal. And he for one couldn't face Anna again and get through this thing if he let himself remember the worst betrayal of all belonged to him. He'd fallen in love with his best friend's wife.

* * * * *

"How long have you been up?" I'd been jarred awake from a fragmented dream to find the world around me didn't feel quite so threatening. Until I remembered the note.

I stumbled out of bed and rushed into the kitchen praying it had all been a bad dream. It was there that I found Bev, coffee cup in hand, staring at the toaster as if expecting it to somehow come to life.

"Not long." The evasiveness of her gaze told a different story. So did the dark circles under her eyes.

"Bev..."

"Okay, I haven't been to bed. I couldn't. Not after..."

Discovering that note amongst the innocent pieces of my mail had catapulted me back into the terror. Bev knew very little about the details leading up to Aaron's death, only that they had all played a part in bringing Aaron to that deserted warehouse and face-to-face with George Peterson.

For me, sleep would never have been possible if Bev hadn't insisted I take one of her sleeping pills. Because I loved my sister dearly, and because the worry and fear in her eyes had me wondering if the note was real or if I'd imagined it on my way to insanity, I gave in and took the pill.

Bev's worry scared me almost as much as the note. The oblivion of the pill-induced sleep had been welcomed.

"Want some coffee?" She managed to stifle a yawn with the back of her hand. "I could make some breakfast."

My gaze slipped to the counter where I'd last seen the note. "What'd you do with it?"

My big sister was trying to protect me. "Hmm? Do with what?"

"Bev, don't play dumb. You know what I'm talking about."

With a weary sigh, she reached inside the pocket of her loose-fitting jeans and dragged the note out. I'd almost wished I had gone insane.

I dropped to the closest chair I could manage. Bev in turn, jumped to her feet, shoving her coffee cup under my nose. "Drink it."

I did as my big sister asked for a moment before my academy training kicked in and remembered the note might still hold some trace DNA evidence. I rummaged through the drawer until I found a plastic sandwich bag and dropped the note inside before returning to my coffee.

"Dammit, Bev, they said they got this guy. They said Peterson was the Rock Creek killer. How could they have screwed this up?"

Bev poured more coffee then plopped back down into her chair. "I don't know." Even her tone sounded exhausted.

Jezzie hadn't left my side throughout the night. She jumped into my lap. I ran absent fingers along her silken fur. "I need to call the police." Those words were the hardest to get out. No matter how much I wanted to deny it, I knew the moment the locals got the news, John Delaney and the rest of the task force that'd been assigned to the case would come knocking on my door. I wasn't ready to face them, but most of all, I wasn't ready to see John again.

"I've taken care of it."

I eyed Bev suspiciously for a minute longer. Bev had given in to my request not to get the FBI involved a little too quickly. "What did you do?"

She couldn't make eye contact with me and she fidgeted with the buttons on her shirt. Bev's tell-tale signs she was lying. "I told you."

"Bev, you didn't. You called him?" I prayed she would deny. She couldn't. "Dammit, Bev, you know I don't want to talk to him. I thought I'd made that clear enough in the last time."

Bev's cup hit the table with a noisy clatter, startling me. She was furious, her fear for me fueling her anger. "Oh, you made it clear all right. Clear as mud. You refused all of his calls. You cut off the one person who knew and mourned Aaron as much as you did. You refused the comfort he could have given you—" Bev chose to ignore my sarcastic snort. "Instead, you decided to wear your grief like a suit of armor, ignoring everyone who tried to help you move beyond Aaron's death. And when we tried to reason with you, you moved thousands of miles away to an island, clinging to your grief and your phobias as a way of keeping from feeling again."

I jumped to my feet, sending Jezzie bailing from my lap and running for cover. "That's a lie! You have no idea what you're talking about. You don't know what it's like to lose someone you love."

Bev somehow forced her anger aside. I wondered what disgusting secrets she might be seeing in me now. "You're right, I don't. But I do see my once beautiful, vibrant sister, wasting away before my eyes and it's killing me to watch. Aaron may have been killed that night, but you've been dying ever since." The quietness in her tone brought home the seriousness of her words. They brought tears to my eyes as well.

"That's not true." I couldn't even deny it with conviction.

"It is. You know it is. You need to get beyond this thing so you can start living again. Let me help you. Let John help you—"

"No! Not him. I'll talk to the local cops, the FBI, anyone but John Delaney."

Bev's reaction told me how childish she considered my behavior. "Anna, that's probably not going to be possible. He'll know the case. If this is the same guy—"

I sank despairingly back to my chair. "It isn't. It can't be. The Rock Creek killer's in prison, remember." I turned away from her skepticism. "This is probably just a copycat. You know how these sickos come out of the woodwork. Besides, it's been a year."

Bev patted my hand then got up to rinse out our cups. "I hope you're right, Anna, but I have a bad feeling about this thing." The uneasiness in her had me turning in my chair to stare at her. "A really bad feeling."

Chapter Five

Rick drummed his fingers and whistled under his breath to get his point across.

"All right, give me a second. This is hard." The coffee shop had just seen the last of the morning rush-hour crowd when they showed up at the front door. They'd waited while the clearly disgruntled clerk took her time making fresh coffee.

"Look, Aaron Sorenson was not only my mentor, he was my friend. I respected the hell out of him. I was just a cocky rookie who thought he knew everything when Aaron recruited me. He made me into the agent I am today. I owe him everything, okay?" That much certainly was true enough. But it was the way he'd repaid his friend that stuck in his head, torturing him every single day that he lived and his partner didn't.

"I get that. Sorenson was a legend at the academy and around the Bureau halls. Everything I heard about him spoke of a stellar reputation. So why all the secrecy?"

John couldn't hold onto the intensity in Rick's gaze. He suspected his partner had figured out a whole lot more than he was letting on. "I'm sure you've guessed as much. He let this thing get personal."

"You're saying Sorenson was so worried his wife would find out about the affair he was having with the victim that he went after Peterson, hoping to squelch the thing? Why? Did Peterson catch them in the act or something?"

John gave him a "bingo" look and Rick sucked in a breath. "How'd Sorenson let that happen?"

At Rick's naïve questions, John actually smirked. Had the man never been in love, or at least lust, for God's sake? "I guess Aaron was thinking with other parts of his body when it came to Cheryl Larsen." John certainly understood the concept. He'd thrown every sense of training and caution to the wind when it came to his own affair with Anna, telling himself it was okay. After all, Aaron had been the first to be unfaithful.

He shook his head. "Look, I'm going to put all the cards on the table for you. Aaron was having an affair with Cheryl long before the first Rock Creek killer emerged. Years maybe. That's why he took such a personal interest in Cheryl's stalking case."

Rick's gaze never left his. "Damn." He breathed out the word, his tone coming as close to astonishment as it got for Rick.

"Still, I don't buy it. John, he framed an innocent man."

"Peterson wasn't innocent. He was obsessed with Cheryl Larsen. He followed her everywhere. She was terrified of him."

"But he didn't kill her." Rick stated the obvious.

No, Peterson hadn't killed Cheryl. He'd killed Aaron and in the process, he'd destroyed all their lives.

"I read the Larsen file. Aaron was convinced Peterson was the killer without any substantiating evidence. He went after Peterson even before Cheryl's murder. He stepped over the line because of her."

John certainly couldn't deny it, but he wasn't prepared to share the extent of those secrets with Rick. Not now. Not when he was about to face the woman he hadn't been able to get out of his head no matter how many others he tried to replace her with.

"This is getting us nowhere. If you want to ruin the reputation of one of the Bureau's best agents then go ahead. If you want to help me solve this case before another innocent victim is murdered then let's go over the facts as we know them."

"As we know them or as you're willing to share them?" Rick stared at him across his steaming cup. When John made no attempt to dignify the remark, Rick blew out an annoyed sigh. "Okay, got it. Let's go over the facts again."

Rick picked up the case files from the original murders, while John tried to control the shakes. He thought he'd buried deep Aaron and his own lies. He thought that with Aaron's death their secrets were safe. He'd been wrong.

And now two women were dead and Anna's life was in danger.

"Janice Daniels, thirty-three, the first victim. Her body was found a short distance from the central jogging path behind some scrubs. Stabbed forty plus times, the killer's rage was obvious. Two weeks later, Belinda Cardwell—" Rick broke off as the coffee house clerk, sloshing coffee from a full pot, headed their way. John waved her off. Coffee could wait. No one needed to hear these things. They were bad enough for a seasoned professional.

"Belinda Cardwell, twenty-seven, was found at the opposite end of the park, same basic MO. The killer stabbed her thirty-nine times. I guess he got tired."

"Or someone interrupted him."

"Both women weren't killed at the park. Their bodies had been transported there. The killer wanted them found but he didn't want to be caught. The park is usually very busy during the daytime. He must have dropped them off sometime between sunset and dawn. Which leaves an awful lot of time for the killer to work with.

"Then there's Cheryl Larsen," Rick concluded.

"Wait a minute. Let's hold off on Cheryl for a second. We found prior notes at both Janice Daniels and Belinda Cardwell's homes, correct?"

"Yes. But neither woman seemed worried about them. If they were they didn't make a report, tell a friend. And neither reported having any problems until they ended up dead. Only Cheryl. And as I recall, there was no mention of a note in Cheryl's file."

John was conscious of Rick analyzing his reaction. Rick thought he knew more about the case than was reported in the files. He was right.

His partner drained his cup then got to his feet. "I'm going for more. Want some?" John handed him his cup without answering. He picked up the plastic evidence bag that held the note from Janice Daniels' place. It was different from the one left at her

crime scene. The same applied to each of the other victims. It was almost as if once the perp killed them, his desire for them ended.

If it weren't for the murders, the note left at the victims' homes prior to their deaths could mean anything. With the exception of Cheryl Larsen. Or so John'd thought, until Aaron confessed Cheryl had turned the note over to him.

Beloved, now that I've found you again. I will never let you go. You will be with me soon. And always.

"You know, something's always bugged me about the way the case played out," Rick said as he held out John's coffee and slid into his vacated chair, sipping his own.

John shoved the note back into the file and accepted the cup Rick held out to him. "What do you mean?"

"Well, for one, why did Sorenson think Peterson was the killer? How did he even come up with him as a suspect?"

"You mean did he do it because Cheryl told him about Peterson and the restraining order?"

Rick nodded. "Was Sorenson the one who had Cheryl file the order?"

John accepted the angry undertone in Rick's voice without comment. "No, I don't think so. It was the note. We analyzed the note, found out only a few places in D.C. sold that particular type of red parchment paper. Aaron discovered Peterson worked at one of those places. He had easy access to the paper and he was stalking Cheryl Larsen."

"Hum, okay, so what about Cheryl? The killer didn't send her a note—" Rick's gaze narrowed as he studied John and then it hit him. "But he did, didn't he? You and Sorenson just left it out of the file."

John slowly nodded. No point in denying it. "Yes. I found out about the note after Cheryl's death. Aaron was convinced he'd found the Rock Creek killer."

Rick shook his head, his disgust easy to read. "Why'd Sorenson keep the note from the file?"

John wished he knew the real answer to that question, but Aaron's actions in those final weeks had been anything but rational. "All he told me was that he was afraid the note contained something that might incriminate him." John spotted Rich's confusion and tried to explain. "I think it was more like he was afraid Anna would learn about the affair."

Rick kept his opinion confined to his disgusted expression.

Outside the sun hung above the bay like a blinding orb. The blue-green water of the Atlantic glistened with myriad colors off in a distance.

Paradise. But even in paradise, evil existed. Just as it did here.

As hard as he tried, John couldn't imagine her living here, in this sleepy coastal town. In his mind, Anna would always be the cosmopolitan woman she'd once been. She'd thrived on the life of the city. And the Bureau. She'd told him once D.C.'s energy fueled her imagination. She'd given up a promising career as a profiler when she'd just

begun to come into her own. She could have been one of the great ones. After he'd lost track of her when she left New York, he'd freaked until he tracked her down, discovered she was living the life of anonymity running a small clothing boutique on the mainland. A far cry from the success she might have achieved with the Bureau had she remained in D.C.

* * * * *

The small, white Cape Cod would have been forgettable if it weren't for its pastelyellow shutters, white picket fence and overfed lawn. Of course, the emerald green water backdropped behind the house didn't hurt much either.

Rick twisted in his seat to get a better vantage. He seemed about as surprised as John. John acknowledged the look with a grin. "Yeah, I know. I wouldn't have put her here either."

Rick barely accredited his explanation with a grunt. They exited the car at the same time as if choreographed. John took the time, taking in his surroundings he told himself. He was stalling. Putting off that ugly first scene he knew was coming. That Anna hadn't okayed his coming was just a gut feeling. One he didn't doubt for a second.

Rick picked up on John's qualms. "You sure you're up to this? I can take the lead if you'd like."

John was spared the need to answer when both his and Rick's voicemail alarms chirped in unison. John grabbed his phone and checked the call-in number. He recognized it right way.

"You want me to call him back?" Rick asked.

"No, I'll do it. You need to stay out of this as much as possible."

"What about..." Rick motioned toward Anna's house.

"You go ahead. I'll be there as soon as I take care of this." John stepped from the porch and covered enough sidewalk space to keep the nasty conversation he knew would be coming once the AD learned of the latest murder from any curious onlookers.

"Assistant Director Warren's office."

"Melinda, it's John. I'm returning the AD's call."

Only a moment's pause passed before the AD's executive assistant voiced her relief. "Oh thank goodness, John. He's been screaming for you and Rick for hours. Where are you anyway?"

Melinda was one of the mistakes he'd made after Anna's disappearance. One he'd been determined not to repeat. They'd become friends after a brief period of adjustment. Having her on his side allowed him certain insights into the otherwise closed-off AD's office.

"Never mind. You'd better let me explain." She didn't answer but the next voice on the line was Mark Warren's.

"You want to explain to me why I'm learning we have a second victim fitting the RCK's MO from the *Post*, Agent Delaney?"

Dammit. He should have known, hell he did know the *Post's* bloodhounds would be all over this. He just thought he had time. "Mark, I didn't want to bring this to you until we were certain."

"According to the *Post*, there's little doubt. I want you and Garner in here now. I want this thing contained before we have an all-out panic on our hands."

John wasn't sure how to explain to the AD that he and his partner were hours away from obeying that command. "I'm afraid we can't do that, Mark-"

"Why the hell not?" The reputed explosive anger of the AD became clear in each of those over-enunciated words.

"Because we're following up on a lead."

"What sort of lead?" While the AD was still furious that he'd been shown up in the press, he was also curious.

Until he knew how cooperative Anna would be, John decided the best way to handle the AD's questions was to avoid more of them. "I'm not sure yet if it's legit or not, but it's the best we have."

The very loud and very annoyed hurrumph on the other end left John with little doubt what the AD's reaction to this piece of information was. "You have today, Agent Delaney, to bring me something useful, otherwise you're off the case along with your partner. And you'll be lucky not to be facing a review board."

The pressure that had been building since the call last night ratcheted up another level. He'd do whatever he had to do, kiss the AD's butt as much as necessary, but he couldn't let himself get pulled from the case until he knew Anna was safe. "Thank you, Mark. I should know something within the hour. I'll update you the minute we have anything."

"You'd better, Delaney. Or poster boy or not, you're gone."

When he stepped into the house and saw her for the first time he froze. Time froze. His breath froze in his chest.

One year, four months and twelve days hadn't been enough time to purge his feelings for her. She looked like she'd just endured the worst night ever and yet she'd never appeared more beautiful. She'd be thirty-one in four months' time. She still looked the same as she had the first time he met her. Anna would be the type of woman age and time befriended.

Yet time hadn't softened the edges of her reaction to him any.

She spotted him in the foyer the second Rick's gaze shot his way.

Rick needed answers. Did he still have a job to return to? John waved his questions off with a simple negative jerk of his head because the wind had just been knocked from his body by green eyes that rivaled the ocean outside in beauty.

He doubted that she was even aware she'd gotten to her feet in perfect time with him stepping into the living room. She placed the dog she'd held in her arms on in the seat she'd vacated.

"What are you doing here?"

The edge of John's mouth quirked upward at the volumes of bitterness contained in those simple words. He still loved her. She still blamed him for Aaron's death. And the baby's. "Anna. It's good to see you. You've met my partner, Agent Garner."

The room around them shrank to just the two of them. The deluge of emotions sparking between them was enough to challenge the strength of a nuclear power plant.

He watched her struggle and finally capture her feelings. Anna picked up the dog, sank back down to the sofa, and reached for the hand of the woman seated next to her while Rick carefully considered the display and came up with the correct conclusion. Not that it was much of a leap. Rick had pretty much figured out there was more to the story than John was providing. And if he didn't want to have to spend the entire trip back explaining that story then he'd better do something to divert Rick's attention.

His gaze landed on the woman next to Anna. He'd met Beverly Stewart twice. Once at Aaron's funeral and once as she and her husband, Frank, or Fred...no, Ed, took Anna away that final time.

John stepped forward and offered Bev his hand. "It's good to see you again, Beverly. I'm sorry it has to be under these circumstances."

Once their hint of civility had passed, John turned his attention to Rick and the only purpose he had here. The note. He had to keep reminding himself, business was the only thing happening.

"Agent Garner, where are we so far?"

Rick glanced from John to Anna then back to his notes. "I'd just begun to get the background information. Ms.—Mrs. Sorenson told me the note was in the yesterday's mail. There was no postmark, the note would have been placed in the mailbox by...someone."

John took the only available seat, a small tapestried chair that looked like it was more for show than comfort. "Have you noticed anything out of the ordinary lately, Anna? Any calls, anyone following you, any unusual activity in the neighborhood?" John shifted miserably in the uncomfortable chair. He'd tried to make eye contact with Anna but she was looking anywhere but at him.

It was her sister who answered. "Not that I'm aware of, but I just arrived two days ago." She smiled apologetically and glanced at her sister.

John couldn't tell if it was just that she realized she couldn't ignore this thing any longer or maybe she just didn't want to disappoint her sister, but he could feel her accepting his interference in her life. He'd seen that same resignation in the days following Aaron's death. She resented him, blamed him, hated his reminder of past mistakes, but she'd honored his right to be there.

Anna shook her head. "No, Bev, there was something. The night before you arrived. There was a car parked across the street at the Miller house. Its lights were off."

John ignored his promise to let Rick take the lead. "What type of car? Did you report the incident to the police?"

Her answer was brittle. He understood why. She was a professional. She knew the importance of that piece of information. "I don't know what type of car. I told you it was dark and the lights were off." She'd caught a glimpse of the anger simmering in him that was close to matching hers and attempted to amend her tone. At least appear polite for those around them. "I think it was a four-door sedan of some sort. Probably black or gray. Something along those lines. I didn't get the license. It scared the hell out of me though."

John had little doubt she would have kept close tabs on the neighborhood. That's why she'd chosen such a nondescript, quiet place to call home. "Has it been there before?"

"No, never. And whoever was in the car hasn't returned. It could be just a coincidence."

She didn't believe it, but she looked to him for reassurances. He couldn't give them to her. "I doubt it. Not in light of the note. Where is it, by the way? We'll need to take it with us."

Anna handed the dog to her sister. Without a word, she got to her feet and left the room. The second she was out of earshot, Bev's worried gaze drilled his. "Please help her. I don't know what's happened between you two but she's barely keeping it together. I'm worried she won't make it through this thing—"

She broke off when she heard Anna's footsteps returning. John didn't doubt for a moment the truth behind her sister's concern.

Anna silently handed him the plastic bag containing the note. "Bev and I both handled it but I thought..." she offered when she caught his surprise at her careful handling of the note.

All the dread that he'd shoved aside returned when he saw the familiar red paper. The childlike writing. The past reborn.

"Dammit." John handed the note to his partner for inspection. He hadn't needed to read the note to know it would be same.

John tried to bring his chaotic thoughts under control long enough to come up with some workable plan. He couldn't leave her here. She would never agree to come back to D.C. with him. Or going into protective custody for that matter. But he and Rick would have to be back in Washington by tomorrow if they wanted to keep chasing the killer. AD Warren had pretty much made that clear.

"I have to go to work. I can't close the store for two days in a row." Anna's innocent observation sent three sets of stunned reactions her direction.

John's denial came quickly. "You're kidding, right? There's no way you're going anywhere. Do you realize how serious this is, Anna?"

The look she gave him would have sent even the strongest of men crawfishing. "I think I do. I think I, of all people, know exactly how serious this is, but I can't give up any more of my life to this thing. I can't. If I do..."

She might not ever return from it. Yes, there was little doubt in John's mind that Anna was just one more nightmare away from disappearing from them forever, but he couldn't let her risk her life. He couldn't. He owed it to her, Aaron, the baby. He couldn't lose her to this thing like he'd lost Aaron.

He had to try to get through to her. "Anna, I need you to come with us—"

Her reaction was swift. "No. I'm not leaving my home."

He'd expected her reaction. The passion. The anger. All fueled by fear. "What you really mean is you're not going back there with me."

Their eyes locked. It was just the two of them again. "What I mean is I'm not going anywhere with you."

John was aware of Rick's spiking curiosity. He was probably wondering what his partner had gotten him involved in. It took everything inside of him to back down.

Rick tried to stay the storm. "I'll contact the Miami branch as well as the local PD. We can have someone stationed outside. One of our own here with her—"

"No. I don't want that either —"

John reached the end of the negotiation. He was only willing to bend so far. Even for her. "Then I'll have you arrested for impeding a federal investigation."

Anna's mouth slammed shut on her reaction to those words. To her credit, she'd recognized John's mood as dark. She'd certainly seen it enough in the past. They'd argued fervently about the case, about their sins. About Aaron and the future. But they'd made love with just as much passion.

John glanced his partner's way. "Call the locals. Bring them up to speed. Have a team go over every square inch outside and get them started on tracking the car. Also, check into where this particular brand of paper can be purchased in the area. It's a long shot, but at this point I'll take anything." He waited through his partner's scribbling then looked directly at Anna. "We need to talk. Alone."

Chapter Six

If I ever believed in bad karma, it was now. Today. Facing the man responsible for feelings I'd hoped were gone for good.

I could feel his dark, unforgettable eyes, so familiar, sliding over my body with as much power as a caress. Just like those times in the past, my breathless reaction to John scared the hell out of me.

"How are you, Anna?" When he spoke, the anger I'd seen in him moments earlier was gone. The soft, sexy tone replacing it was far more disarming.

I whirled to face him. "How am I? How the hell do you think I am?" He watched me silently, seeing more than I wanted him to see. In a half-baked attempt at self-preservation, I turned the tables. "I doubt you came all this way to ask how I was. Or to chase a note unless...there've been others, haven't there?"

He didn't try to deny it. Dear God, why didn't he deny it.

I forced words out on a shaky breath. "How many?"

"Two." His eyes never released mine.

Just like before. Just like with Aaron. He saw me come to that conclusion.

I untangled my gaze before I lost what little hold I still laid claim to. I ran a visibly trembling hand across my eyes and stared out at the late morning sun as it bounced along the ocean's calm surface, blinding me for the moment. I shielded my eyes.

Exhaustion and fear kept my voice unsteady. "You told me you had the creep responsible for this. You promised me, John."

He didn't react to my anger. "I told you we had the person responsible for Aaron's death—"

I tossed an angry glare his way. "For God's sake, don't play with words. The person responsible for Aaron's death is the same—"

He shook his head. "No, it isn't." He confirmed the nightmare's validity with those simple words.

Fear crept down my spine like an electrical charge. I no longer tried to be strong. "I can't go back to D.C. I won't. I can't go there, John."

He'd moved closer without me realizing it. John was just shy of six-four and *extremely* fit. Against my wishes, my mind took me to places I wasn't prepared to go. I remembered all the times past he'd made love to me. The way his body felt beneath my fingertips. Inside me. I shuddered from the weight of those memories. The needs he'd ignited in me once more hurt physically. It was like being frozen solid then thawed suddenly. There was nothing comfortable about wanting John.

When he spoke, I could feel his breath caress the nape of my neck. "Anna..." His hands cupped my shoulders, drawing me back against him. All anger left me the moment his body met mine.

"Anna, I can't let anything happen to you. I promised Aaron—"

I jerked from his grasp and rounded on him. "Don't you dare. Don't speak of Aaron as if you care about him—"

I lost my nerve the second I saw the raw desire in John's liquid gaze. Just as quickly as it appeared, the anger my accusations ignited tamped it out. He caught me before I could move away.

"Aaron was my friend, my mentor. My partner. I would do anything to protect him and you. So don't *you* dare tell me I'm not entitled to care about Aaron. I care, Anna. Whatever happened between you and me didn't take away my feelings for Aaron. I loved him."

"Is that why you went after me? Because you loved him? You were jealous of him. You wanted what he had—"

"The only thing I ever wanted of Aaron's was you. Just you, Anna. Only you." He was inches away. We both were breathing as if we'd run a marathon. "You were the only thing I would have fought Aaron to the death for, if I thought there was a chance..." His eyes softened as they slipped over my face, not missing any of the emotions I couldn't hide from him.

Just like all those times past in D.C., John had the power to make me doubt all that I felt. I wanted him as I wanted my next breath. We had history. But I loved Aaron. I loved my husband. Yet I'd cheated on the man I loved for a few stolen moments in John's arms because of Aaron's devotion to the job.

"John, the agents are here." Neither of us heard John's partner open the sliding glass door leading out to the deck. We jumped in unison and turned guiltily toward the younger man.

"We'll be right there." John managed an answer. I could not. When the door slid back into place, we stood frozen side-by-side watching the man retreat.

That had been John a few years back. Cocky. Confident. In charge. The man standing close to me now was the senior agent, just as Aaron had been. He'd changed. I could almost feel the weariness in him. Dealing with death had a way of doing that.

I breathed in the ocean and fought for the calm I didn't feel. "He reminds me a lot of you."

John turned to get a closer look at me. I think he suspected I was being sarcastic. After a moment, he nodded. "Yes. Although I can't remember the person I was before Aaron's death. Before the baby. Before I lost you."

While I tried to recover from those heartbreaking words, he stepped to the door and waited for me. Cool and professional again. For a moment, I thought I'd imagined the

whole thing, until I looked into his eyes. The pain I'd glimpsed in him from the moment he walked into my life again was still there.

The secrets were all over as far as he was concerned.

* * * * *

"John, this is Agents Brady and Hays." Rick nodded to first one man and then the next, but it was easy to see who the senior agent was.

John was conscious of his partner's curiosity. But he was more aware of everything Anna did. She'd followed him back inside reluctantly. She hadn't joined in the introductions. She'd simply disappeared into the belly of the house.

Agent Hays appeared to be somewhere in his mid-forties. He carried his resentment and disappointment like a chip on his shoulder.

"Agent Delaney. I've heard a lot about you." He gave no further insight into what he'd heard. John could only imagine.

No doubt, his lack of leadership skill had caused him to be passed over by the superiors in D.C. He'd been buried in Florida, in the Pensacola satellite office where the biggest case he'd been allowed to oversee would have something to do with drugs. He'd be looking for some angle to propel him into the spotlight.

John shook both agents' hands. "I take it my partner has brought you up to speed on the case?"

The younger of the two, Agent Brady, started to answer but thought better of it. No doubt Hays had drilled that useless tactic into the young recruit. Brady turned to his partner and waited.

"Yes, we're up to speed. It's my understanding that you and your partner believe this case has something to do with the Rock Creek killings a few years back."

John could see the barrage of barely disguised jabs. He might be Hays' senior officer, but Hays wasn't above dredging up the past to get his one-ups. "That was your case, wasn't it, Agent Delaney? I thought they had creep locked up in Petersburg, Virginia?"

John ignored the taunt and the obvious challenge to his authority. "Until we have all the facts, we're investigating this incident as a separate case. There's no need in alarming the public until we're sure. Do I make myself clear?"

Hays resented having an outsider come into his territory and take a case out from under his nose. Especially one who'd received all the recognition from a case the way John had from the Rock Creek killer case.

"Of course." Hays waved a careless hand. "But it's only a matter of time before the press gets wind of this and someone puts two and two together."

John spotted the rise of Rick's hackles and decided it was time to put an end to Hays' pissing match. "That's why time is of an essence here, Agent Hays. Along with discretion. I need you and your team to go over the grounds outside inch by inch along

with the neighborhood...as discreetly as possible," he inserted when Hays was ready to point out the obvious.

"Focus on the house across the street and have someone check the mailbox for fingerprints. Rick, you've contacted the local PD?"

His partner nodded, ignoring the red creeping up Hays' neck at John's rebuke. "Yes, they're on their way. They'll provide round-the-clock protection. They can help out with the canvassing as well."

"Good. I expect everyone's full cooperation on this thing."

From the doorway, Anna cleared her throat. All four men followed the sound. She was dressed for work. The Anna he'd known in D.C. had pretty much perfected the image the Bureau was going for when it came to female members. Sexy. Smart. He'd always admired the way she made even the "business suit", as she called it, look desirable. But this new Anna, well, she'd gone for the extreme. The soft pastel-green dress tied snug around her waist and was fluid with her body. She'd lost a good twenty pounds she didn't need to lose. Her tanned legs were bare. The strappy sandals gave just enough protection to be called shoes. She was still angry, defiant, lost. Afraid. And she'd never looked more beautiful.

It occurred to John that she hadn't changed because of the company. She intended to make good on her threat to go to work.

"No way, Anna. No today," John warned, but she ignored his attempt at sounding stern. She'd seen his weakness. She knew he still craved her, no matter the cost.

"Yes, today. I'm not sitting here all day long going crazy with your people tearing my life apart. I'm going to work. Bev's never seen my shop and she's on vacation. Your goons can come if they want, but I'm warning you, they'd better stay out of the way."

He knew better. This was the last thing he should be doing. There were too many things depending on solving the case quickly. Important things like Anna's life. His future with the Bureau. The last thing he needed to be doing was following Anna around like a puppy dog.

He knew better but he couldn't help himself. A year was a long time to need someone.

He left Rick in charge of getting the task force organized and keeping Hays under control while he drove Anna, Bev and the rat of a dog Anna called Jezzie to work.

It was an unwelcome compromise on both their parts. He knew, if she could have thrown a fit and got away with it she would have. The last thing she wanted was to have her troubled past tagging along into her uncertain future. As it was, she forced Bev into the passenger seat next to him while she sat shooting daggers at his back with the dog growling in reaction to her anger.

The trip to the mainland was made in uncomfortable silence. He wasn't sure how much of their relationship she'd discussed with Bev, but knowing Anna, he had a good idea it would be bare bones.

Island Breeze, located in an upscale strip mall a few blocks from the ocean, was surrounded by typical tourist shops, a pet store and a couple of trendy restaurants.

The boutique's pastel mint green front displayed a rainbow of colorful clothing designed to catch the tourist's eye.

He arched a brow when she threw him a defensive look, challenging him to say anything as she unlocked the store's door.

John waited until she'd disarmed the alarm. "Stay here," he ordered, then stepped past her into the store and stopped. The hum of the AC was the only noise in the place. He took his time searching the boutique, the storage area and the small office space in the back.

Once he was certain they were clear, he nodded to Anna. "How much traffic does the store see on a normal day?"

The defiance in her tone answered the question for him. "Why?"

He'd had enough. "Dammit, Anna, I'm trying to help."

Bev stepped between them as if expecting a battle. "Anna, for once stop being so defensive and listen to him."

Anna's focused anger shifted from John to her sister. She closed her eyes. He could see her visibly struggling to let go of it.

"You're right. I'm sorry. It's just..."

His heart melted at the little lost girl expression in her eyes. He remembered that look too well. The night of Aaron's death. The baby's. "It's okay." He forced himself to keep their relationship professional. It was the only way he'd get through this thing. He couldn't afford to let down his guard for a second.

Anna's gaze met his. The longing in hers threatened his resolve and had him ready to break all of the vows he'd just made to himself to protect her at all cost.

"I'll go make some coffee. I need to go over the books and..." She left Bev and John watching her leave.

Bev made no move to break the silence once Anna was gone. She simply went about the room, turning on the lights.

It took all his resolve not to go after Anna, demand answers. In the end, he knew what small amount of cooperation he'd just gained would be destroyed.

"I'm sorry." He wasn't aware of Beverly standing close until he turned and found her watching him with eyes so much like Anna's. "She's not normally so prickly."

"It's okay. I know. She's been through a lot." He turned from the sympathy in Bev's gaze, refusing to let himself be drawn in. It wasn't his place to answer the questions Bev was about to ask.

"John..."

Before he had to dash her curiosity by telling her he couldn't discuss his relationship with Anna, he was spared the need when Anna returned carrying two

Styrofoam cups steaming with coffee, and handed them each one. She remembered exactly the way he took his coffee. John was still trying to recover from that shock.

"There's not usually a lot of traffic right now."

He almost lost the sip of coffee he'd just taken. "I beg your pardon?"

"The store. You asked about foot traffic. During this time of the year, there's not a lot of tourist traffic left. It's almost Labor Day," she went on when he looked at her without a clue. "People are taking one final vacation before the kids go back to school. There's lots of visitors on the island but not here. By the weekend, the beach will be so crowded you can barely see the sand. The locals have learned this is the best time to shop for back-to-school clothes, so most of the customers I'll have will be local. People I trust."

He nodded. "You may trust them but I don't. I can't afford to. Not until we know what we're up against."

He'd almost forgotten the upcoming holiday. Holidays weren't something he celebrated much less enjoyed. Labor Day would be just another workday. "Anna, I don't have to tell you this is a bad idea. Staying here. He knows where you live now, chances are he knows where you work. You're vulnerable. He could be anywhere or anyone—"

"I'm not leaving my home, John. I told you—"

"You can't go back to D.C. I know. Then let me take you somewhere else. Somewhere he'll never think to look for you. I know of just such a place. I promise you'll be safe there."

* * * * *

You'll be safe there...

I had no idea what safe felt like anymore. And at this moment, I doubted if I ever would.

I shook my head. "There's no such place. We both know it's true. As long as he's out there, I'll never be safe." The truth in those words was reflected in his eyes. I turned away. "I have work to do. If you want to help me, then catch the man responsible for this."

I left John searching for something that might change my mind. When I reached my tiny office, I closed the door, drove the lock home, then leaned back against it.

Even with the door locked and John close by I'd never felt more afraid. It had nothing to do with the monster who haunted me and everything to do with the man who wouldn't leave my heart.

Not my husband as it should have been. It was all John Delaney. Our affair had all but destroyed my life long before it resulted in Aaron's death.

At least a thousand times, during those days before Aaron's murder, I'd asked myself what I was doing. I'd promised myself that the last time in John's arms would be

the last time. Each time we'd made love, I gave away little pieces of my heart to him and it became harder to remember the love that brought Aaron and me together in the beginning.

"Anna, are you okay?" My sister tapped softly against the door.

I rubbed my hand over my eyes to scrub away the pain. Not that it mattered. Bev would know.

I pushed off the door and unlocked it. "Sure. I'm fine." I opened the door then returned to my desk and pretended to sort through the stacks of orders scattered there.

Bev closed the door quietly then came to my side, seeing too much. "Anna..."

I closed my eyes. I didn't want to have this conversation now. "What?" The word came out angry. Hell, I felt angry. With Bev for insisting I confide in her. With John for reminding me of things I wanted to deny. With Aaron for dying before I could settle the matter in my head.

"He has a point," she told me quietly.

I dropped the papers back on the desk and sank to the chair. "I know, but I can't do it, Bev."

She saw the fear and the pain in my eyes. "Okay. But at least let John have his people stay with us. Please, Anna. Do it for me."

I knew I couldn't let my sister down. "Okay, okay, I'll do as he asks, but you don't have to stay here—"

"I'm not leaving you alone, Anna. I've spoken to Ed. He agrees. In fact, he's coming here as well."

"Bev, that's not a good idea. It's not safe—"

"It doesn't matter. We're your family. We're not leaving you to deal with this alone."

I knew it would be pointless to argue with her. She'd been taking care of me since I was a child. Bev wasn't about to stop now.

"So what do you need me to help you with here?" She glanced around the room at the boxes that had arrived a few days before the nightmare began.

I understood her need to keep busy. "Okay. You can help me unpack these boxes."

Bev and I spent the rest of the morning in companionable silence. Opening boxes and sorting through the new fall collection I'd been so excited about. It seemed like another lifetime when I'd ordered them.

Bev asked the question on her mind. "Do you miss it?" I knew she wondered how I could give up my successful career so easily.

I dropped the sweater I'd been admiring on the pile of sweaters. Their rich fall colors of golds, greens and browns covered the muted beige carpet of my office. I'd come up with my first fashion creation before I was a teenager. I even had my own

label, Anna's Answers. By the time I was in high school, I was designing most of my own clothes. Bev and I had been so sure this would be my life's work. Then I'd gone away to college and discovered I possessed other talents. It wasn't long before I was top of my class in behavioral science and catching Aaron's eye.

"Sometimes. I miss it. But I don't know if I have it in me to do it anymore."

"That's bullshit. You're very talented, Anna. You can certainly do whatever you want."

I looked at her and wondered how she could believe those things. I wasn't that woman anymore. If she ever existed, she'd died with Aaron.

I got to my feet and tried to stretch out some of the kinks from my body. I glanced at my watch and saw that we'd been sorting clothing for almost three hours and I hadn't seen Jezzie once during that time.

I started for the door when John stepped inside carrying the dog in one hand and a large pizza container in the other. "I thought you two might be hungry."

He sat Jezzie on the floor at his feet. I could almost swear the dog looked pissed that he'd dared let her go.

"Thank you, John. You've read my mind. I'm starving." Bev patted his arm, eliciting a fraction of a smile. Then his eyes met mine. The smile still in place took my breath away. Our eyes locked and held. It was just the two of us. And it was as if time had melted away.

His gaze slid over me like a caress. My next breath lodged hard against my throat. Some piece of me was aware of all the things I must be confirming in Bev's mind, but for the life of me, I couldn't look away and it was John who was the strong one again.

He untangled his gaze from mine. "I wasn't sure what you liked so I got a little bit of everything, minus the anchovies. I draw the line on fish and pizza."

"I-I think I have some paper plates in the kitchen. There's some drinks in the fridge as well." I beat a hasty retreat from the awkward moment.

When I first opened the store, I'd hosted a grand opening party to let people know I was there. It had been only moderately successful. A few of the party favors still existed. Paper plates and napkins announcing, "grand opening".

Bev and John followed me to the tiny room that passed for a kitchen. It was barely big enough for a dorm-sized fridge and a table with four mismatched chairs. A few years before I'd leased the small retail space sandwiched between a bookstore and a pet shop, someone added a sink and a couple of cabinets, thinking it would increase the value of the place.

John glanced around the room. "This is a nice place, Anna. You've done well."

For two people who'd shared their bodies, pieces of their lives, death, it almost hurt to think we couldn't come up with something more important to say to each other than the sanitized small talk of strangers.

"Thank you. I've worked hard to make it mine."

He nodded, at a loss for words as well. His eyes met mine. There was a pleading in them that shook me.

For the first time since his return, I let go of all the blame and resentment I'd piled on John's shoulders. He wasn't any guiltier of causing Aaron's death than me. He hadn't forced me into bed. I'd been his willing partner.

I got to my feet and began clearing the clutter. Bev joined me. When I glanced back at the table, John was gone. For the rest of the day, he stayed away from me. Choosing to watch the perimeter of the store and question my neighbors.

The drive back to my house was made in silence. Bev and I were just too exhausted from lack of sleep to come up with any stimulating conversation and John drove in brooding silence. I wondered what he'd learned that put him in such a foul mood.

Dinner was an equally quiet affair. The only difference was the number of players. John's partner and the two agents assigned to guard me retreated to my small workroom with their plates. Standard Bureau procedure. I remembered Aaron telling me once how hard it was to keep an emotional distance from victims who were being stalked because they were terrified and wanted to cling to those who were assigned to protect them.

Bev and I were silently clearing the table from our meager meal when John found us. Even before he spoke, I knew he was leaving. For the life of me, I wanted to cling to him. John was as much a part of my past as Aaron had been.

"I'll just go check on Jezzie." Bev left us alone without being asked.

John waited until we were alone. "Anna, I have to leave."

It was hard to keep my emotions from showing but somehow I kept it together. "I see." I wanted to ask if I'd ever see him again. I couldn't.

"You'll be in good hands with Brady and Hays. There'll be two uniforms guarding the house and the store when you're there. You'll be safe."

I nodded because words just would not come.

John stepped closer, his dark eyes searching my face, seeing what I could not hide from him. "Anna—"

"You're right. I'll be fine. You should go."

I tried to turn away but he wouldn't let me. "Anna, we should talk."

Even before he got the words out, I was ready to deny them. "No, John, there's nothing to talk about."

"There is and you know it. What happened between us, it wasn't just an affair, no matter how much you want to deny it."

I jerked away. "No. That's not true. I loved Aaron. What we did was wrong."

He rejected my answer with a simple shake of his head. "You don't believe that. No, there was nothing wrong about what we did. And one day, when this is over, you're going to see that. But for now, until we catch this creep, I'll keep my distance

because I need to keep a clear head. And when I'm near you all I can think about is how much I want to take you in my arms and prove to you how much you still care for me."

Chapter Seven

"So."

John had been ticking off the seconds in his head, wondering how long it would take for his partner to ask the first question. They'd barely cleared the causeway.

John tossed Rick a warning glance. "So what?"

Rick blew out an exaggerated breath. "Oh come on. You're gonna play dumb with me? Give me a break! The village idiot could pick up on all the tension between you two."

John decided to give it one last try. "She blames me for Aaron's death—"

"You know what I mean. I want to know how long you and she were—"

"Watch it..."

"An item," Rick amended. "How long were you and your partner's wife sleeping together?"

The judgment in Rick's tone was easy to pick up on. John glanced over at him. He never would have pictured Rick being conservative. "Look, it's complicated."

"By that you mean you have feelings for her. Oh, I get that. Still."

"You don't approve," John answered for him.

Rick shrugged his shoulders in an effort to convey neutrality but John caught the hardening around his mouth. "Can't say that I do. But then, I don't know the circumstances, do I?"

"No you don't."

"And you're not going to talk about it are you?"

"Nope."

"All right, then maybe you'd care to tell me what the AD had to say. You know it's my butt in the sling along with yours, buddy."

John slanted another assessing glance Rick's way. He knew he owed his partner something in the way of explanation. "You're right. I know you're right, Rick. Yeah, I screwed up with her, but I love her."

Rick seemed taken aback by John's confession. After a moment he said, "I see. And does she..."

"I don't know. She's still so angry with me, with the world. Herself. I don't know."

"Well, if it's any consolation, all that anger has to be masking something more."

In spite of the hopelessness he felt inside, John smiled. "Yeah. But getting it out of her won't be easy. Anyway, the AD's pissed as hell because the latest killing has hit the

Post. But I think we can appease him with this new piece of information. Assuming we still have a job when we get back."

* * * * *

It was still early in the morning when the lights of the Capital city came into view. John had left a message at the AD's office letting him know they'd be in the office fist thing the following morning to update Mark.

John stopped the truck in front of Rick's apartment and turned to his partner. "If you want out of this, I'll understand."

Rick took his time. In the darkness of the cab, John could see the struggle taking place. "I love my job. This is what I've dreamed of doing since I watched my first episode of *X-Files*."

John shook his head. He certainly understood the passion. He decided it was time to let his partner off the hook. "I'm reassigning you to another case—"

"Wait, you didn't let me finish. I love my job, but part of the job for me is having my partner's back. You're my partner. I'm not letting you down."

God, he could almost recite Rick's loyalty by heart. He'd said pretty much the same thing to Aaron and because of it they'd both ignored the rules. And now, it was all about to come crashing down around him.

He couldn't let his partner go through that. "I appreciate your honesty and your loyalty, Rick, but when this stuff comes out, it could very well cost us both our jobs. I can't let you do that. I know how important this job is to you."

"You're not letting me do anything." Rick stared up at his apartment building, his hand on the door. After another moment, he opened it. "I'll see you later. Try to get some sleep. I think we're both going to need it."

He got out of the vehicle and shut the door before slapping it with his hand and lifting a single finger as a parting farewell.

John waited until his partner disappeared inside the building before putting the truck in drive.

The past was here beside him just as if Aaron sat next to him. Tonight it was stronger than ever. And it was all because of Anna. Being away from her had helped to bury all the things he'd done wrong.

He often wondered in those final days if Aaron had some inkling of his affair with Anna. There had been times, certain remarks, a look that made him almost positive he did. Yet Aaron never said a word. The truth was, Aaron had his own demons to deal with and his behavior before his death had taken a turn toward bizarre at times.

He still remembered Aaron almost bragging about his affair with Cheryl. He'd hinted at others as well. When John, much like Rick, but for far different reasons, couldn't control his disgust, Aaron had made some idle accusation about Anna being a

cold fish. John had not been able to tell him that the woman he knew was anything but cold, in bed or out of it.

He drove along damp streets until he found himself in familiar territory. Arlington Cemetery. Even though the night was moonless, it didn't matter. He could find the marker in his sleep.

Aaron Michael Sorenson

Loving husband. Patriot. Father.

Father.

Every time he read that word, it was like a knife to his gut. Anna refused to accept the child she'd carried for only three months wasn't Aaron's. But in his heart, John knew the truth. And it had nothing to do with a father's instinct and everything to do with the secrets he'd hidden in his heart. Aaron's secrets. Aaron had told him he'd stopped finding his wife desirable the moment her career overshadowed his.

The familiar mixture of emotions were there again tonight. But they were stronger than ever. Heightened by the truth. From seeing her again. From desire. Grief. Guilt. Anger.

Aaron of all people knew better than to go into an unsecured building without backup. He should have waited for John. At least called for backup. He'd done neither.

"Why'd you do it? Why did you destroy her life? Mine? Why the hell'd you do it? For what?"

Payback for Cheryl Larsen's murder? Aaron wasn't the macho type. What'd gotten into him with this woman? John had asked him point-blank if he was in love with Cheryl. Aaron had denied it, but it was obvious he cared about her. Enough for Aaron to let down his guard and put aside protocol. Throw away what Aaron had once referred to as the most important thing in his life.

Tonight as always, the answers he needed didn't come. The grave was as silent as the sacred ground around him.

He glanced around the last resting place for America's fallen heroes. The simple white crosses always reminded him of his childhood. He'd grown up believing in all the things those crosses represented. Human nature destroyed all that. His time at the Bureau taught him that goodness was an illusion.

Something out of the ordinary caught his eye. The ground was still soft from the recent rains. After the funeral, once Anna moved away, no one visited Aaron's grave anymore except for John and he hadn't been here in months, yet there were fresh footprints in the grassy mud.

Someone had been here recently, within the past day or so.

John made his way back the truck and retrieved his flashlight. The footprints were all over the gravesite, starting from the road. A curious visitor? Or someone who'd come here for a purpose.

He shone the light around the marker and spotted it. A single folded piece of paper. Red. Fear and dread kicked his pulse into overdrive.

"Shit." He closed his eyes, not bothering to pick it up. He didn't need to read the note to know who'd written it. Aaron's grave had now become a crime scene.

He dug out his cell phone and called his partner.

"What? I've barely gotten to sleep. Where are you anyway?"

"Arlington Cemetery. At Aaron's gravesite. I need you over here and call the CSU." $\,$

"CSU? What the hell-"

"He's been here, Rick. The killer has been here and recently. We need to get this place shut down now." John glanced up at the sky. Clear so far, but the weather channel had been touting gully washers for most of the day. "Before the rain hits again and whatever evidence he might have left, if any, is gone for good."

* * * * *

From down the road, an unmarked police car flashed its lights twice.

"The place is secure, ma'am," Agent Hays informed me in his usual condescending way. He didn't like his babysitting assignment. Probably thought it was beneath him. Not that I could blame him. I hated having him and his partner invading my privacy as well.

"Agent Brady and I will take shifts. Brady will be up first," he informed his partner without consulting with him.

"Okay. Why don't Bev and I make you both something to eat first?"

"Not necessary, ma'am. We have all that we need. We'll be setting up command here in the living area. If he tries something, we'll get him."

"Fine, but I need to take my dog for a walk," I asserted. What I really needed was to take back some of the control of my life.

Agent Hays gave me a terse nod. "Not going to happen, ma'am. Agent Brady will take care of the dog."

At a loss as to how to answer him, I handed Jezzie over, feeling like a traitor when she whimpered and stared at me with those baleful eyes. I shook my head, turned away, and left the two of them to their games.

"Geez, could he be more of a hard ass?" I barely waited for Bev to close the kitchen door. She knew this was coming. She'd been watching me carefully all day, since John left, waiting for the expected meltdown.

I sank into one of the kitchen chairs. "What's his problem anyway?"

Bev patted my shoulder then went about the task of making us a snack. "He hates this assignment, I'd say. I'm sure it's not his first choice of things to do. "

"I hate it too. I hate having them here."

Bev, who'd been searching the fridge for something to eat, turned back to me. "I know, Anna, but they're trying to protect you. Give them a chance."

In my head, I knew what Bev said was true, but my emotions were all over the board. Seeing John again, having him close, hearing him say those things to me had brought all the feelings I'd tried to bury with Aaron's death back to the surface.

God, why was this happening again? Why was this creep after me? Hadn't I paid enough of a price for my sins? I'd lost Aaron. My child. My life. I'd never be able to live without looking back over my shoulder. Hadn't I paid enough?

"Here, eat this." I glanced down at the pitiful sandwich and chips Bev set before me. "It's all I could come up with. Tomorrow, I'll see if I can't do some shopping."

I took a bite of the ham and cheese and tossed it back on my plate.

I heard Jezzie's excited yelps coming down the hall as Agent Brady brought my dog back to me.

"Everything's fine, ma'am. Don't worry, you'll be safe here. We aren't going to let anything happen to you."

"Please stop calling me 'ma'am'. My name is Anna. This is Beverly. And how can you be sure everything's going to be fine? We don't even know who we're dealing with. Don't make promises you can't keep."

Agent Brady wasn't fazed by my anger. "That may be true, but we are trained to deal with anything this creep can throw at us. We don't have to know the enemy to keep you safe from him...Anna. It will be easier if we have your cooperation, though. And with all due respect, Anna, I don't know what happened in the past with this case, or what's going on between you and Agent Delaney." He held up a hand when my mouth popped open in shock. "That doesn't matter. Your cooperation does. It's going to be hard for us to do our job without you."

I resented his presumptuousness, but his cockiness reminded me so much of John. "What happened between me and Agent Delaney is none of your business."

He didn't back down. "Maybe not. Keeping you safe is. And I'll do whatever it takes to accomplish that. With or without your help."

He turned on his heel and left me sitting with my mouth still agape.

Next to me, Bev tried without much luck to control her amusement.

"What are you laughing at? You're stuck here with me."

She shook her head and wiped tears from her eyes. "Remind you of anyone?"

I decided to ignore her remark. I knew who she was talking about. I took another bite of the sandwich, mostly to have something to do.

Bev poured coffee and handed me a cup. We finished the snack in silence.

"You look beat. Why don't you try to get some sleep." She glanced at me as we finished cleaning up the kitchen.

Sleep sounded like heaven right now, but the thought of being alone in the dark with the nightmares I knew would come was frightening.

"Why don't I bunk with you tonight? It'll be like old times. We can talk as long as you like." She spotted my reaction. "Or we don't have to talk. It doesn't matter."

The last time Bev and I had a sleepover like this was the days following Aaron's death.

Having my big sister close now made me feel as safe as I could possibly feel under the circumstances. The house had grown quiet. No doubt, Agent Hays had called it a night as well. Jezzie lay sleeping at our feet. And the silence between Bev and me was filled with questions.

"You want to know what happened between John and me," I said into the unbearable stillness.

"I didn't say a word," was her only answer.

That typical Bev response made me smile. "You didn't have to."

She turned on her side and looked at me. "Anna, whatever happened I'm sure there was a reason. I know how you felt about Aaron. He knew you loved him. Maybe it's time to cut yourself some slack."

I closed my eyes. If only it were so simple. I hadn't been able to tell Bev I still remembered that last day with Aaron. The angry words we'd exchanged. An accumulation of weeks of silent standoff. Months of living separate lives. The times before Aaron's death were not easy ones for either of us.

"Aaron and I were fighting all the time." The words slipped out. I wasn't sure what I was expecting from my sister, but Bev never judged.

"That happens in a marriage. You know Ed and I went through a rough patch a while back. It's normal."

I shook my head. "But you didn't cheat on Ed." I forced myself to face her and prayed that I hadn't lost my big sister's respect.

Bev never let me down. "No, but I can understand how it might have happened. Aaron's job was intense. So was yours. You two worked side by side under the worst possible circumstances. I'm sure it was hard."

That much was certainly true. "Yes. But we'd worked through some difficult cases before. Something changed with the Rock Creek murders. Aaron changed."

I could feel her studying me in the dark. "In what way?"

It had been hard to pin down. The subtle change in Aaron. I'd noticed it even before the Rock Creek murders began. In fact, if I were being honest, it had started several years before. I'd just chosen to ignore it, refusing to believe our marriage might be troubled.

After the first killing, those changes in him intensified. It was as if Aaron was looking for ways to start an argument. When the first body was found, I'd been teaching a criminal profiling class at Quantico for a couple of years. As one of the best

criminal profilers at the Bureau, I'd been called in to work the case. On more than one occasion, Aaron openly challenged my conclusions. With the death of Cheryl Larsen, Aaron's animosity toward my assessments turned vicious and personal.

"It's hard to explain. We argued all the time. Aaron was openly critical of my work. I learned from John that he'd tried to have me taken off the case. Aaron was old school and he didn't always agree with my science, yet he was never publicly disrespectful. But it was more than just work. Aaron seemed to look for excuses to be away. Whenever we did actually find time to be alone, he ended up working on his book until late into the night. Usually he'd fall asleep on the sofa in his office. It was as if he were deliberately avoiding being close to me."

"Did you try talking to him?"

My laughter didn't mask the bitterness. "Oh yes, many times, but he refused. He told me I was being paranoid. Profiling our marriage, he said. That I should give it a rest." I took a deep breath and went on. "I went to John for help. He was the closest thing I had to Aaron. I thought, well, maybe he could tell me what was worrying Aaron. Of course, he refused. John always kept Aaron's secrets."

"So how did the affair start?" she asked quietly.

I grinned at her. "How do you think? Like any other affair in the history of the world. John talked to me. He was interested in what I had to say. We became friends. Friendship led to something more."

Whatever Bev's opinion of the relationship was she kept it to herself. "And was that where it ended?"

I knew she'd guessed there was more to the story than what I was telling her. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Are you in love with John Delaney?"

I took a deep breath and tried to deny it. "No. Bev, how can you even ask me such a thing? I loved Aaron. John was a mistake."

She was silent for a long time, watching me carefully. "The baby?"

This was the hardest of my sins to confess. After a moment, I took a deep breath and went for the absolution only my sister could give. "It had been so long since Aaron and I made love. I don't know." But I did. Aaron and I hadn't made love in months. I knew the baby was John's even if I hadn't been able to admit that truth to John or Bev.

I suspected she knew as well, yet she didn't say a word. Bev nodded against the pillow. "That explains a lot. John certainly acted like a man who'd lost his child that day at the hospital."

I swallowed hard. That final scene between us still stood out fresh in my mind. John had wept for the loss of his daughter, yet I couldn't accept that his grief was real or warranted. "Yes, John believes the child was his."

"Did Aaron know about the affair?"

"I don't know. I don't want to believe he did, but I'm not sure. There were things he'd say at times that made me wonder, but then he'd go off on another tangent and I'd think, no way. He just doesn't love me anymore."

"Oh, Anna. I don't believe that for a minute. Not the man I knew. He adored you. Maybe it was just the pressure of the job, and the book, and teaching the classes at the academy."

"Maybe, but I know there were things John knew about Aaron, secrets that he never told me. Something was going on in Aaron's life. He just wasn't sharing it with me."

After the funeral, I'd been angry and bitter. I'd torn apart Aaron's office but found nothing. Not a clue what might have been troubling my husband in the months before his death.

I'd even read the manuscript Aaron told me he'd been so close to completing. He'd started it five years earlier. He was writing on the making of a serial killer. For the most part it was brilliant. At least in the beginning. Aaron's later work took a turn toward disturbing. I hadn't been able to talk to anyone about the troubling, sometimes rambling insights I'd seen there. But I'd promised myself it would never see the light of day. Aaron's book would never be published. Because there was no way I'd let the world see the delusional thoughts of the man who'd once been so brilliant. I owed Aaron as much.

I remember thinking I'd try the mountains once this thing was over. That was the last coherent thought I had before sleep overtook me and the dreams returned, robbing me of a peaceful rest. Strange dreams of a mysterious woman. Even though I didn't know her, I could feel her desperation. It was etched on every inch of her face. I tried to reach out to her, to bring her comfort, understand her pain, but each time, just before I reached her, she'd disappear only to be replaced by dreams of Aaron along with John, mingled together until it was impossible to tell the one from the other. Or if the storm that raged close by was real or just part of my troubled dreams.

The sound of gunshots seemed so real. I could almost smell the gunpowder.

"Anna, wake up."

I opened my eyes to find Bev leaning over me, shaking me.

I sat up in bed. "What is it?"

"Gunshots. Three of them, I think," she whispered breathlessly.

I grabbed my robe and started for the door when she was out of bed and reaching for my arm. "No, Anna, you can't go out there. You don't know what's happening. It could be him."

We stood huddled together, trying to decide what to do next when Agent Brady opened the door in a rush, sending it slamming against the neighboring wall. "Get dressed and get your things. We're moving you out of here right now. We've been compromised."

I was ready to argue but he didn't let me. "Now, Anna. It's not safe here anymore. We're moving the two of you now."

Bev and I rushed to dress and throw essentials into a bag before we were being whisked into the depths of an unmarked car in the middle of the night and driving at breakneck speed over the causeway.

"What happened?" I finally allowed myself to ask Agent Brady.

He glanced at his partner's stony expression. "Someone tried to break into the house."

"What about the two officers outside."

Even before Agent Brady glanced into the backseat where Bev and I were huddled together, I knew the truth.

"There're dead. He killed them both. They never stood a chance. They had no idea what was coming until it was too late."

My thoughts spun into a thousand different directions. "How could you let that happen? You're the frickin' FBI, for God's sake," I demanded while trying to hold on to what was left of my self-control.

"Where are you taking us?" Bev asked, but I knew. I was going back to D.C. To the one place I feared the most. Back to a past I didn't want to uncover.

Chapter Eight

"Heads up," Rick whispered in John's ear. "Big cheese on the premises."

They'd been working under the sectioned-off part of the cemetery with the heat of floodlights making the task that much more miserable, while trying to beat the rain.

The CSU had been meticulously combing every square inch of the area for hours even as the first rays of sunlight crept over the distant pine trees. So far, all they had to show for it was a size-ten footprint pattern of a Nike running shoe. And another note. This one different. This one directed at John personally.

She'll never be yours, just as she was never his. You can defile her body all you want, but you'll never possess her heart. That belongs to me. Soon, I'll have all of her. She'll be with me as before, always.

Whoever wrote the note had figured out a few things about John's relationship with Anna. The vile insinuation contained there had just enough facts thrown in to make it believable.

The last thing John needed was the appearance of AD Warren on the scene. But on the scene he was. Climbing out of the back of his Bureau-issued limo as if a celebrity had graced their presence.

John and Rick waited for the man to make his way to them. That he was in a foul mood was evident even from across the way.

Rick had arrived first on the scene, took one look at the note, and became an accomplice to all of John's former crimes. It didn't matter how much John tried to reason with his partner, he stood his ground. John knew Rick meant well, but he didn't want his partner's career to come to an end because of him.

"Even though I know most of the facts, partner, this thing is damning. The AD will have your job if not bring you up on charges. I don't see that helping anyone. Let me do this for you. When this thing ends, it will be worth it. Trust me."

Facing the AD's five a.m. anger made John glad he'd listened to his partner, even though it was technically tampering with evidence and destroying a crime scene. Just to name a few offenses.

"Mark." John acknowledged the AD's presence with a terse shake of his head.

The AD barely acknowledged John's greeting. "What do we have so far?"

Rick took up the lead again. "Not much more than what we had a few hours earlier when John called you. We've identified the shoe type. We'll check stores around the area for purchases of that type. The footprints stop at the gravel road. There doesn't appear to have been any recent traffic through the area, so we believe he probably walked in."

The AD nodded briefly. "And what about the other thing?"

John knew, of course, he was talking about Anna. He'd been second-guessing himself ever since he pulled away from the house. He should have forced her to come with him. Hell, he should have done a lot of things he hadn't done.

After a quick glance John's way, Rick continued to update their commander. "We have agents combing the area. We're hoping someone saw something. She's under protective custody, so if he tries anything, we'll get him."

At John's unusual silence, AD Warren turned his full glare to him. "You know anything more about this, Agent Delaney? What's the connection? What does a former Bureau profiler have to do with five other seemingly unrelated deaths?" Warren barked into the thin early morning air.

John wished he had some plausible explanation. He'd gone over every piece of evidence from the previous victims in his head but he'd come up with absolutely nothing. "We don't know yet. We're still working on a connection."

"Why'd he come back here if she's the target? Assuming that's what happened?"

"I don't know. Maybe it was an act of defiance, desecrating Aaron's grave, or maybe this was done before tonight. Hell, maybe he's enjoying the game."

AD Warren wasn't amused. "Whatever it is, you'd better hope something comes of this. Otherwise, we're going to have a state of panic on our hands and someone's gonna pay." He looked John square in the eye. "And I can promise you, it won't be me."

Rick waited until the AD was out of earshot. "That went well."

"I'd say so. But he meant what he said, Rick. This thing won't end well for any of us. He'll be gunning for me. Make sure you don't do anything to get caught in the crossfire."

"I can take care of myself, partner. What's our next move? Please tell me you have a plan."

John glanced at the ordered chaos going on around them. "We're wasting our time here. Let's get to the office and go back over the evidence we have on hand from the previous cases. We'll let someone else deal with this."

Five hours into the case files, it was as if someone had it in for them. They'd gone over every piece of evidence, every word written, yet nothing had turned up.

John tossed a file on the conference room table and glanced at his watch. "I'm going to check in with the agents in Pensacola."

Rick didn't glance up from his file.

After the fourth unanswered ring on Hays' cell, John was ready to drop everything and hit the road. His fingers shook as he dialed Anna's number then Agent Brady's. Brady picked up on the first ring.

"What the hell's going on down there?"

Brady didn't answer right away. John could hear what sounded like a car door slamming. "Hang on, Agent Delaney." A few more unsettling seconds ticked by before Brady acknowledged John's question. "He tried to come after her last night. The house's compromised. And the two officers watching the house were stabbed. They're both dead."

It felt like eternity before John managed to get words out over the bile that had risen in his throat. "Dammit. How'd this happen?"

"The guy managed to take them by surprise. He cut both of their throats before they could even draw their weapons. Apparently one officer had stepped out of the cruiser to check out the area on foot. He was the first to die. The other officer did manage to hit the talk button on the walkie-talkie, probably while he was being attacked. We heard it. Heard the massacre, went after him. I got three shots off, but I don't think I hit him. We'll have a forensics team go over the place tomorrow to see if they can find anything. I'm betting it's a wash. We're bringing her to D.C."

"Shit." John released the word in a ragged breath. Then he drew in another. Putting Anna into protective custody in D.C. was the best move. They'd be able to keep an eye on her and more importantly for his peace of mind, *he'd* be able to keep an eye on her. But dammit, for the life of him it felt as if history were about to repeat itself.

"What's up?" Rick spotted John's reaction to the news right away.

"That bastard went after Anna last night. He killed two of the officers guarding the house. Dammit, Rick, we're missing something here. We have got to figure this out before he succeeds."

"Crap. This isn't what we need right now. Warren's having a cow. We've gone over every single piece of evidence in these files a dozen times. We're coming up empty-handed."

John glanced at the files in desperation. "You know what, screw the files. Let's start over from the beginning. Let's start with the first victim, Janice Daniels. We need to go back to the beginning. Interview her family. Friends. Acquaintances. Anyone who had a connection with her, however inconsequential. I want to know what she liked to eat. Who she dated. What was her favorite music. I want to know everything about her life before her death."

"You don't think we know all that already?" Rick hurried after John who'd started for the door.

"No, hell no. We can't possibly know everything about her. Because if we did, we'd know who her killer was by now."

* * * * *

Janice Daniels' parents still lived in the same Roanoke neighborhood they had the night John and Aaron had to bring the worst possible news to them.

A quiet middle-class area where most of the houses had been around since the Nixon administration.

John glanced at his watch. Eleven fifteen. It felt as if that moment in time would stand out in his memory forever.

Rick glanced his way, sensing his mood. "What if they're at work? What do they do for a living?"

"The wife was a homemaker. She volunteered at the hospital a couple of days a week. The husband worked for an insurance firm in the city."

When his first barrage of rings didn't elicit any answer, John resorted to banging on the door.

"Whoa, buddy, lighten up. We want their help. Remember, as far as they're concerned we had their daughter's killer in prison."

John spotted the morning paper lying on the front porch. The headline announced the worst was yet to come.

Rock Creek Killer Returns. Did Feds Put The Wrong Man In Jail For The Wrong Reasons?

He picked it up and handed it to Rick. "Not anymore."

"Dammit," Rick whispered under his breath. "This isn't good."

The door opened and Frank Daniels stood in the doorway.

"Yes?" It took him a second longer to recognize John. "Agent Delaney." It occurred to John that the older man had been expecting him.

"Come inside. I've been expecting you." Frank Daniels opened the door and waved them inside.

John waited until they'd taken the proffered seats on the living room sofa before beginning. "I need to ask you some questions about Janice's life." He'd racked his brain trying to think of some common denominator between the victims. He'd come up empty.

"So is it true then?" The old man looked as if he'd aged ten years since John had last spoken to him.

"Yes. We believe so."

"How it that possible, Agent Delaney? You assured us you had Janice's killer."

John wondered where the man's wife might be. "I know. We were certain of it. But in the light of this new evidence, the two new cases and some other information, well, we now believe George Peterson is not the man responsible for Janice's death or the others. He is, however, still guilty of killing a federal agent."

"And that's the real reason why the case ended so abruptly, isn't it. Because Peterson killed one of yours, the Bureau was eager to put an end to the whole thing. Sweep it under the rug."

John couldn't blame the man for being angry. "That's not what happened. My partner believed the evidence gathered against Peterson was enough to prove he was the Rock Creek killer."

Frank Daniels wasn't impressed with John's passionate plea. "And now we know the truth."

"Yes, I guess we do."

"And you've come to me, for what? To dig into my daughter's life some more. Try to find some dirt on her?"

"No sir. That's not the case at all. I'm just hoping that you or your wife might remember something new. Something that didn't occur to you at the time. Something that might help us connect the cases."

"My wife can't help you. You see she passed away six months ago. She finally gave up."

John could see the depth of the man's pain in his eyes. "I'm sorry...I didn't know."

The old man simply nodded his head. "So what do you need from me?"

If only John knew the answer. He had no idea what to ask. It occurred to him the old man's description of his wife's death seemed odd. "What did you mean she finally gave up?"

The question clearly surprised Frank Daniels. "My wife's health had been failing for years. She finally gave up."

"Was it..." How was the best way to ask the man how his wife had passed?

"Her kidneys, the doctors tell me, among other things. They finally gave out on her."

John glanced over at Rick. His partner, who had been busily scribbling notes, glanced up at the latest piece of information. "Did your daughter suffer from the same illness?"

Rick's question seemed out of place to John. It was even more perplexing for the old man. "Yes, to a much greater extent. Janice had to have a kidney transplant when she was twelve. Since that time, well, she was able to live a normal life for the most part, with the exception of having to take daily medication. A small price to pay for being whole again."

John met Rick's glance and silently nodded. He knew what Rick was thinking. "Can you think of anything else that might seem out of the ordinary? Anything at all," his partner asked.

The old man took a moment to consider the question. "Janice was getting married in eight months. But then you knew that."

John nodded. They'd checked the fiancé out thoroughly for any possible connection to the others. There hadn't been one. He'd been cleared early on.

John got to his feet. They needed to check on the other victims. It might be a long shot, but at the moment he'd take it. It was the only new piece of evidence they'd come

across. "Yes sir. Thank you for your time, Mr. Daniels. We'll show ourselves out. As soon as we have anything at all I'll pass it along to you."

Once they were in the car, John ran with Rick's line of thought. "We need to check on the other victims' medical history. See if they had any medical treatment around the same time as Janice Daniels."

His partner's question wasn't any great surprise. "How'd that piece of information get overlooked in the first investigation?"

"I guess the ME didn't think it was important, maybe. In other words, I don't know."

He started the Crown Vic's engine while Rick continued voicing doubts. "You know this is a long shot, don't you? I mean even if Janice Daniels and Belinda Cardwell, or any of the other victims did have a transplant, the odds of all of them having this medical history is slim. And what about Anna Sorenson? How does she fit in?"

John dismissed Rick's argument, although he'd wondered the same himself. "I don't know and I don't care at this point. Dammit, this is something. Hell, it's all we got."

Rick nodded. "Yeah, it's something new and it's more than we had yesterday. The question is, what about the other victims. We'll never get their medical records pulled in time."

John knew how impossible it would be to get their hands on confidential medical records. They'd be buried in red tape for days. They didn't have that much time to spare. He'd talk to Anna in private when she arrived in D.C. "We'll need to talk to the relatives. Belinda Cardwell's parents are both dead, but she has a brother living in Richmond. We should have time to drive there before Anna arrives. Feel up to it?"

Barry Cardwell had been Belinda's older brother by two years. At the time of her death, they'd shared an apartment together.

John had called ahead to tell the man they needed to ask him a few questions about Belinda's health. He could tell from the length of time it took him to answer the question, Barry Cardwell considered this an odd question. It was just as clear he knew the truth. Not that it was any great surprise. The news had been all over the radio and the papers. It would probably hit the national news by evening.

Cardwell was waiting for them when they arrived at his home. He'd since moved from the apartment he and Belinda shared to a smaller complex across town.

"I won't waste your time, Mr. Cardwell. Obviously, you've heard the news, so I'll be brief. We've discovered some new evidence that I think may help us identify the true killer."

Barry Cardwell would be just shy of thirty. His sandy blond hair was cut short in typical military fashion. Cardwell had just returned from a tour of duty in Iraq a few months before Belinda's murder.

"Come inside. You know I never did believe that Peterson creep was capable of being a serial killer. He just didn't appear all that bright, in my opinion."

Looking back with the benefit of hindsight's twenty-twenty, John had to agree. "You may be right."

"You said you needed to ask some questions about Belinda's health? What sort of questions?"

The man didn't ask them to sit. John didn't mind. He just wanted to get to the facts and get out of there. Losing someone as violently as Barry had lost his sister left its mark on those left behind. He knew all about those types of emotional wounds. He wore the same scars thanks to Aaron's death.

"There's no easy way to ask this, so I'll just say it. I need to know if your sister had any type of transplant done?"

Cardwell looked as if he'd seen a ghost. The man's expression told John he'd hit pay dirt. "Transplant? How did you know about that?"

Thank you, God, John breathed in a silent prayer while glancing Rick's way. Relief was etched all over his partner's face. They had something tangible. Finally, they had something to build on.

"One of the other victims had a transplant as well and we believe there may have been more. We're looking into a possible connection."

Cardwell accepted his explanation with a nod. "I see. Yeah, Belinda had a cornea transplant when she was just a kid. It's been almost twenty years now."

"Really? Was that here in Richmond?"

"Yes, at Richmond Memorial."

"And do you remember the year."

"I should. It was my fourteenth birthday. I remember it like it was yesterday. Does that help?"

"Yes, tremendously. You've been a great deal of help, Mr. Cardwell."

Barry Cardwell's gaze shifted between the two agents. "Good. You'll let me know if anything comes of this. I want to be able to go to my sister's grave and tell her we caught the bastard who did this thing to her."

"I will. The second we know anything I'll let you know," John assured him.

Once they were outside the building, John called Ryan, one of the agents working the case. "Get a court order to pull the medical records for Janice Daniels and Belinda Cardwell. Hell, get the records of all the RCK victims. I want to know everything about their medical conditions, whatever you can find, and I want to know it today. Do whatever you have to do, I don't care who you piss off. Just make it happen."

* * * * *

The closer we got to D.C., the more my fears seemed to grow. It was as if they'd taken on a life of their own. It had nothing to do with the killer who stalked me, and everything to do with the past. My past with Aaron. Something I'd tried to outrun for more than a year was waiting for me, rearing its ugly head once more.

I wasn't aware of it, but I'd been squeezing Bev's hand in a vice grip.

"Anna, relax. They'll get him." Bev had called Ed the minute she got the okay from Hays to tell him what was happening. He'd caught the next flight out to Dulles. Two agents were to meet him at the airport and bring him to the undisclosed location where John would be stashing us.

I wished I could share my fears with Bev, but I couldn't bring myself to open that door. Not even for my own peace of mind.

"We'll be arriving at HQ in a couple of hours. Your husband's flight is on schedule, ma'am." Hays pinned Bev with one of his nondescript looks. As senior agent, he'd apparently declared himself the designated informer. Brady had barely spoken a handful of words to us since leaving their Pensacola office. Instead, he drove steely-eyed, hands gripping the wheel.

"Where will we be going after that?" Bev asked, mostly to fill the awkward silence that had plagued us the whole trip.

"Not at liberty to divulge, ma'am," was all Hays had to say on the subject.

Bev turned to me and made the goofy face of hers that always had me laughing.

"Stop it." I pretended to be angry with her, but I was actually grateful.

"At least I made you smile."

I loosened my grip on her hand. "You're always good at making me laugh."

The smile left her face. Bev's tone turned serious once more. "Don't worry. It will all work out, you'll see."

"Promise?"

Only a second passed before she gave her word, but it was enough to scare the hell out of me. If my big sister couldn't make me a promise and mean it, things were bad.

* * * * *

"What about Cheryl Larsen?" Rick asked while hanging onto to the grab handle of the Crown Vic as John whipped around a slow-moving Caddie and zigzagged in and out of the light afternoon traffic heading into the city.

He'd gotten word from Hays that Anna and Bev had arrived at the Hoover Building safely along with Ed Stewart a short while ago.

"Slow down, will ya? It won't do anyone any good if we end up in a body bag, and I for one have a date this weekend I'd like to keep. I already have the serial killer screwing with my love life. I don't need you doing it too."

John glanced at his partner who'd closed his eyes, fearing the worst. Grudgingly, John slowed the Vic's speed. Rick was right. Anna was safe for now.

"Cheryl Larsen has no living relatives to ask, but there's no record of her having any operation in the past twenty or so years, much less a transplant. I did find one curious piece of information. Cheryl Larsen was a nurse. I'm checking to see if she ever worked at one of the hospitals where some of the previous transplants might have taken place."

After his partner popped an eye open and noticed John's somewhat more rational driving, he decided it was safe to open the other.

Rick swore under his breath. "Well, it's a start. There has to be some connection between her and the others. Shouldn't we be checking out the new victims?" he added when he realized where they were heading.

John nodded. "Yes."

"But you want to see her first?"

John didn't answer.

"I can have Ryan help with the rest of the victims' medical records. I trust him to keep his mouth shut."

John breathed out a sigh of relief. He knew the AD would be expecting him to do his job without prejudice. Warren didn't know about his personal relationship with Anna and John for one hoped to keep it that way. As far as he was concerned, she was simply Aaron's widow.

"Yeah, if you could. I just need..."

"I know, buddy. You need to make sure she's safe."

* * * * *

The Hoover Building had never looked more ominous then it did with the sun shimmering off the Federal Bureau of Investigation logo. At the sight of it I squeezed Bev's hand tighter and tugged Jezzie's mutinous body closer against my chest. I wondered if Jezzie would ever forgive me. She'd hated leaving her home. She'd been whimpering and pouting ever since I'd had to force her into the government-issued car.

A virtual battalion of federal agents met Bev and me at the steps of the building and escorted us up to a sterile conference room lacking in any human warmth.

For the first time I understood the emotional rollercoaster ride those who entered the doors of this world faced. They'd come to us for help. In the past, I'd always been able to keep a certain distance from their pain. Not anymore. I was one of them now.

We'd barely had time to enter the room before Assistant Director Mark Warren joined us.

"Anna, it's good to see you again. I'm sorry it has to be under these circumstances."

I'd had only a limited amount of dealings with Mark Warren while Aaron was alive. With his death and because of my own professional connection to the team, Mark Warren had made it his personal mandate to make a public showing of capturing the RCK. The pressure had been enormous to convict George Peterson for all the murders. There'd been whispers, even back then, that Peterson wasn't responsible for the RCK murders. I knew the truth even though I'd removed myself from the case both professionally and emotionally with Aaron's death.

Peterson hadn't fit my profile any more than I did. He wasn't a serial killer. He'd only taken one life. The most important to me.

I somehow managed to answer Warren, but I couldn't hide the resentment I felt at being back in D.C. "Thank you. I wish my coming back here wasn't necessary." After Aaron's death, and to his credit, AD Warren had insisted on putting me on an administrative leave of absence. Officially, I was still a government employee, although I knew in my heart I'd never return to this life.

"I know. I'm sorry, Anna. Is there anything you need? We want to make this as tolerable as possible for both you and your family."

Need? I needed this nightmare to end. Would that ever be the case? Whoever was responsible for these killings had a personal connection to the victims, or at least that's what he believed in his delusional world. The criminal profiler in me had begun working the case the minute I heard about the other victims, although few of the details were being shared with me, purposely. As a victim, the less I knew about the others the more cooperative I'd be.

"No, only can you tell us when my brother-in-law will be arriving? We were told that his flight was on schedule."

AD glanced to Brady for confirmation. "Yes. He's being picked up as we speak. He'll be here within the hour."

Warren headed for the door, the unpleasantries over with in his mind. He stopped in the entrance and spared us another glance. "Good. Then just sit tight. Agent Delaney and his partner are on their way. They'll be taking over your case from Hays and Brady who are needed back in Florida to continue the investigation there." If Warren noticed Hays' pissed-off reaction, he did his best to ignore it. Only Brady seemed unaffected by it all.

He had been busy roaming around the conference room with too much pent-up energy. Just like John. John hated the business side of the business as he called it.

He thrived on the details of the case. The hunt to capture a killer before he struck again was where John's talents shone.

With nothing else to do but wait, Bev and I homed in on the coffeemaker in the corner of the room. It was the same cheap brand of coffee used by all federal agencies, but beggars couldn't be choosers and I was in desperate need of something to occupy my head and push aside all the times in the past where I'd worked this room with a team.

The last time I'd been here was with Aaron and John while working the RCK case. That time was still fresh and raw in my heart. Aaron's anger and unwarranted resentment of my presence on the case still hurt. I'd found myself turning more and more to John for understanding...and comfort. He'd been all too willing to gray the line of friendship to be with me. John and I had argued over many things but we always worked together as a team. And at night, well those nights I'd spent with John, no matter how wrong, had been all that got me through the dark days with Aaron.

Aaron's attitude had continued to become more condescending against me and my skills as the cases and the lack of evidence to tie them to each other grew.

"You okay?" Bev, the constant big sister, had been keeping her motherly eye on me for some time.

It was hard letting go of all those memories. I wondered, if I'd known how little time we had left together, would I have done things differently with Aaron? Would he?

I tried to smile to ease Bev's fears. "I'm fine, just tired."

"Why don't you try and get some rest?" She pointed to an uncomfortable-looking sofa someone had shoved in the corner of the room. It looked as if it had landed there by accident. Probably some executive had gotten new furniture and insisted the old be kept for use to justify the cost.

I shook my head. There was no way I could close my eyes and not relive every second of those final hours of Aaron's life, along with all the mistakes I'd made.

I was spared having to answer her probing, unspoken questions when Ed arrived. He was escorted into the room by two agents. Ed scanned the room until he spotted his wife. The love they shared for each other was easy to see. In the past, this had been a comfort. When I met Aaron, and as our love grew, well, I certainly understood it, or at least I thought I did until Aaron and I started having problems. I never once saw Bev and Ed go through the things Aaron and I went through.

After Aaron's death, well, their love had shined a spotlight on the things lacking in my marriage that I wanted to gloss over.

Ed reached for his wife, drawing her into the shelter of his arms. "Are you okay? I've been so worried." The tenderness in his eyes made me want to turn away. This was a private moment not meant to be witnessed by anyone both those two.

"Yes, I'm fine, we're both fine. Just shaken." Bev kissed her husband then turned to me as if reading my thoughts.

Ed released his wife and took me in his arms. Ed was the big brother I'd always wanted. When he and Bev married, I'd gone to live with them in their small house near the University of Virginia where Ed had first started out his career.

As usual, Ed tried to lighten the moment for us all. "You look like any strong wind could blow you over. Is the dog eating all your food?" He tickled Jezzie's ears. I could almost swear she remembered him although it had been more than six months since he'd doted on her.

I squeezed him tighter. "It's good to have you here. Thank you."

"For what?"

"For sending Bev. For letting her stay. For coming."

Ed wasn't accustomed to this softer side in me. "As if I could have stopped her. Not when it comes to you. She'd move mountains to get to you if she thought you needed her." He winked at his wife.

"Yes, I know."

"What happens next?" Ed addressed this question to Agents Brady and Hays. "My two companions on the ride over weren't very informative."

Agent Hays was quick to assert his meager authority. "You'll all be placed into protective custody until the killer is caught, which means a safe house. But you shouldn't worry. It's only a matter of time."

Ed accepted the agent's answer without question.

"Want some coffee, hon?" Bev tried to smile, but there was no masking her worry. Bev needed time alone with her husband. Ed followed his wife over to the coffeepot and they spoke quietly to each other.

I picked up my coffee in one hand while clutching Jezzie close with the other and headed for one of the conference room chairs away from everyone else. I hated bringing my family into this thing once more.

I wasn't aware of it, but somehow I must have slept, right there in that uncomfortable chair surrounded by the past, which surprisingly wasn't part of my dreams. Just the strange, frightened woman and an uneasy feeling. In my heart I knew she was trying to warn me of something.

* * * * *

Last night had been the worst. He'd broken bones last night. He'd showed her the future and it was just as bleak and barren as she'd believed. In some odd way, it was liberating as well. With the introduction of his latest means of torture, all of her previous choices disappeared. It hadn't hurt all that much, the serrated edge of the blade tore at her flesh in the beginning, but surprisingly there wasn't the expected pain.

Maybe it was all in her head. She'd managed to disappear in her mind when he'd hurt her in the past. Last night was no different.

Today, as she sat on the park bench, her face turned upward to the sun's warmth, she'd unwittingly come to a decision. She took out pen and paper from her purse then glanced fearfully around. Time was slipping away. He'd be home soon. She jotted the note as quickly as possible, her writing almost illegible through the pain because he'd broken her hand.

Not that it mattered. There wasn't much he could do to her now. And it was only a matter of time.

* * * * *

I awoke to the familiar sound of John's voice close by and I was comforted. My face had gotten plastered against the table. An empty Styrofoam cup close by and Jezzie nowhere to be found.

I sat up quickly, disoriented for the moment. The disturbing dream fresh on my mind. Bev and Ed were not there, only John and his partner. When they saw I'd awakened, John's partner, Rick something, left us alone after a nod of acknowledgement for me.

Once he'd left I was at a loss again. Being alone with John here was too familiar. I asked about Bev.

"She and Ed have been taken to a safe house. I was hoping to keep them out of this as much as possible."

His thoughtfulness brought tears close. To cover my emotional confusion, I remembered Jezzie. "Where's my dog?"

He stepped outside. I could breathe again. After a moment, he returned carrying a hyperactive Jezzie in his arms. "I had someone walk her."

When she spotted me, she squirmed in his grasp until he let her go.

I scooped her up and accepted the kisses she offered. "Thank you, John."

He stood watching me for a moment. He'd found something. I'd seen that look a thousand times in the past. "Anna, I need your help."

John waited for me to say something. When I couldn't, he took the seat across from me. "We have a lead, our first real lead."

Relief collided with fear. I was scared again. "What is it?"

"My partner and I discovered two of the previous victims had transplants years ago." The questions were all there, but for a moment, I was too stunned to say anything Surely this could be no coincidence. I struggled to understand its importance.

I hadn't thought about that part of my life in a long time. The sickly girl I'd once been seemed like the life of another person. I'd come so close to death, hours really, before the call came through. A heart had been found. I'd lived while someone else had died.

"How did you..."

"I didn't." He'd seen the painful truth in me. John's resentment was easy to read. "Did Aaron know at least?"

I nodded. John and I had shared so much of ourselves with each other. It surprised me that he'd never asked me about the scar, but then when we were together, our thoughts were on other things.

I cleared my throat and answered him. "Yes, he knew."

"Dammit, Anna, why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it was none of your business."

The warmth and anger in his eyes challenged that. "I think it is. Everything about you is my business."

His answer thrilled me a little too much. "I'm surprised Aaron didn't mention it." I tossed my husband's name between us deliberately.

John and Aaron shared just about every part of their lives with each other. I was surprised and a little disappointed that Aaron hadn't discussed the transplant with John. It made me wonder what other secrets Aaron might have kept from John.

I watched John visibly regroup. "He didn't," he said quietly. "Believe it or not, Aaron didn't share all aspects of his life with me. Maybe he had his reasons." The implication was clear. John suspected Aaron knew about us.

We'd let things become personal between us again. I struggled to shift the conversation back to the case. "You think my transplant along with the others is in some way connected to the killer?"

"Yes. Maybe. I don't know. I'm pulling the records of all the victims." His gaze locked with mine. I knew my records would be included in that list. I wasn't sure how I felt about having to relive those days when I'd faced death almost daily.

During that time, Bev had been there for me. My own mother used work to distance herself from her sickly child. I think she believed that God was punishing her by having her husband walk out on her as well as giving her a child such as me late in her life, when raising another baby was the last thing she wanted to do.

John continued to see the things I didn't want him to see. "What do you need me to do?"

He hesitated for a moment longer and I knew. John needed me to take another look at the case. Profile it. See what I could come up with.

"There'd been two murders before he came after you. My partner is checking on those two victims' medical history right now."

I would have given anything to refuse, but I knew if I wanted to have any chance at having a future, overcoming my fears, I'd need John to catch this monster before it was too late.

"All right, I'll do it," I answered a little too quickly, surprising him. He'd expected more of a fight. I couldn't let John see the truth. I'd help solve his case and catch the man who wanted me dead, but I'd do it mostly because I needed answers more than I wanted to remain in fear.

I needed to know what secrets my husband kept from me.

For a moment, John simply watched me with those eyes that always got to me, then he nodded. He suspected something, but he needed my help more.

He got to his feet. "Good. I'll have the files delivered to a safe house. You'll be more comfortable there. If you'll excuse me for a moment, I have to brief Mark on the latest findings."

He left me in the hands of two of his subordinates. Of all the places in the world, the Hoover building was one that represented safety to the world, but today, nothing about the place felt safe for me. Aaron's ghost was everywhere around me, as were the questions I desperately needed answered.

Chapter Nine

He'd been so close. He could smell her. She still smelled the same as she did twenty years earlier, only her face had changed. Not that it mattered. It wasn't her face he wanted. It was her heart.

And now she was gone again. He watched them work methodically. His anger growing. They had no reason to keep her from him. She belonged to him. He'd spent years searching for her, survived the dark place to be with her. He needed to ask her forgiveness, tell her he was sorry. It wasn't him, it was the monster inside of him. He understood that now. He knew how to fix the rage. Knew what needed to be done.

He'd come close to finding her in all the others but failed. Now he was positive. She was the one and nothing they could do would stop him from claiming her as his forever.

* * * * *

John had seen that look in Anna before. The night she came to him asking for help in understanding the change in Aaron. He'd skirted the issue. Convinced her she was making too much of Aaron's distant behavior even though he'd begun to suspect something was different in his friend beyond the affair with Cheryl or the others that Aaron had hinted at. Those were just symptoms. John knew Aaron didn't love any of them, including Cheryl. He *loved* Anna. *They* were a sign. A sign that something was serious screwed up in Aaron's world.

John reached Warren's office door. This was not going to be a pleasant meeting. AD Warren's growing distrust of John was becoming more evident with each passing day. He suspected John of holding back evidence. It was only a matter of time before Warren put the screws to Rick for answers.

John knocked once and waited.

"Enter." The flatlined tone in Warren's voice did little to encourage.

He steeled himself for the confrontation he knew was coming and walked into the room.

Mark Warren eyed him for a moment then pointed toward one of the chairs.

"You have news for me?" Warren's gaze never left John's.

"I do."

"Good. Then maybe that can explain why you've managed to keep me in the dark about these new developments in a case I personally closed a year ago, and why I had to find out from the *Washington Post* instead of my senior agent that the RCK was still at large."

John knew no matter how he chose to play this, he'd made a powerful enemy of the AD.

"Because I didn't believe it was wise to jump to any unnecessary conclusions without proof, Mark. You of all people should remember the public's reaction to the last series of murders. We had to be sure."

"And you believed I was a liability?" The AD harrumphed.

"No. No, of course not."

Warren held up a hand. "We'll resolve this after we catch the killer. As it is, we look like a bunch of bumbling clowns in the public's eye. I need to know what you have that's new. And it had better be good." Warren leaned back in his seat and steepled his hands.

"We found a connection between the victims, at least some of the victims. We're still looking into the rest." He caught the AD's impending anger and plunged ahead. "Two of our previous victims had medical transplants. We've just learned Anna also had a heart transplant as a child."

"And the others. The new ones?" Warren barked his question.

"Rick's checking with their families now. I've ordered all the victims' medical records sent over."

Warren eyed him suspiciously before nodding. "It's a start. Go with it."

John got to his feet and headed for the door when Warren's next remark stopped him dead in his tracks.

"And Delaney, when this thing's over, I'm bringing you up on charges. I know that you and Sorenson kept information out of the files that might have prevented these new murders from happening. I intend to have a full inquiry into what you two were hiding. If you're dirty, you're going to pay for it. Sorenson's not here to keep your secrets any longer. You're on your way out, Delaney."

* * * * *

"Ready?" John appeared in the doorway. Something was wrong.

I stopped reading the most recent file and went to him. "What is it?"

I watched as the walls I'd seen in the past returned to stand between us. John no longer trusted me with his secrets. "Nothing. If you're ready, we should get going. We'll need to beat the traffic."

I gathered Jezzie and my meager possessions, the few things I'd been allowed to bring with me. Just enough clothes for a few days. Some toiletries. My purse. I followed him to the stairwell.

"We don't want to take any chances." He acknowledged my unasked question.

I was exhausted and I just wanted this thing to be done. I followed John to the employee parking area and his pickup truck, which I recognized right away.

John's father had owned the truck. They'd restored it together. It was a 1960 Ford and it was John's pride and joy.

"You're still driving this?"

He slanted a smile my way as he slammed the door hard just to get it to close. "Of course. It's a classic. They don't make them like this anymore."

We sat side by side as we had so many times in the past, Jezzie happily hanging her head out the cracked window.

It could have been a year ago. D.C. hadn't change all that much. Just a few more tourists. And a new president.

It never occurred to me to ask where we might be going until the lights of the city became distant.

"Where did you put Bev and Ed?"

John spared me a quick look before focusing on the light traffic leaving the nation's capital. "They've been moved to another state. North Carolina to be exact."

We weren't heading toward North Carolina. I turned in my seat so that I could get a better read on his expression. John was giving nothing away.

"Where exactly are you taking me." I clutched Jezzie closer for strength.

He actually smiled at the edge in my voice. He'd recognized the emotions powering it. "Relax, Anna." His tone dipped low and sultry. It slipped over me like a caress. "I'm taking you somewhere safe. Away from Beverly and Ed for their protection. Someplace where you and I can work the case in peace. I don't think your family needs to see all the gruesome details in those files, do you?"

In spite of his reassurances, John's answer did nothing to ease my worries. For the moment, I chose to let the subject drop. I still needed to get a look at Aaron's notes. I couldn't afford to tip John off.

The silence between us grew as the miles slipped by. We'd left Richmond then the city limits sign for Virginia Beach came into view.

"What's here?" A thousand different emotions zipped through my mind. I couldn't think about being alone with John and not remember the times spent in his arms. In his bed. I remembered Aaron mentioning once that John's father had left him a place on the beach.

He turned to me in the darkness. The small cab of the truck shrunk to nothing. "My dad left me this place. You'll be safe here. I made sure we weren't followed. Why so nervous, Anna? You've been alone with me before. Many times as I recall." The rough edges in his voice reminded me of all those other times. I could tell he, too, remembered the passion we'd shared together.

"In the past. That's over."

He didn't say a word, but his eyes spoke volumes. It wasn't over at all.

John got out of the truck, grabbed my bag and waited. After a moment, I climbed out next to him.

He unlocked the door of the tiny cabin and stepped inside, drawing me with him. In the tiny entrance his fingers tightened on my arm. "Wait here."

I stood frozen in place by myriad emotions. Fear. Need. Uncertainty.

John moved through each room, searching the place without turning on a single light.

"It's clear." His voice reached me in the darkness. He was close. Too close. I stepped back.

John flipped on the switch, flooding the room with light. I took my time examining the place, mostly because I needed to recover.

After a moment, he spoke. "Make yourself at home. There's not much to see. Just the living room, the kitchen, the bathroom's through there...and then the bedroom," he added softly.

My gaze ricocheted to his. Nothing showed in his face. No emotion. Was it just my imagination? If so, how could I stay here, be close to him, and not be constantly overacting to everything John said or did.

"I'm going to put the truck in the garage behind the house just as a precaution. You take the bedroom, I'll use the sofa."

He disappeared before I could manage an answer. With him gone, I could breathe again. Jezzie whimpered in my arms and I realized I'd been clutching her tight, almost to the point of cutting off air.

"I'm sorry, baby. You want to stretch your legs?" I sat her down at my feet and wandered through the tiny cabin with Jezzie trailing me. Furnished with the bare necessities, the rustic cabin, though functional, was not meant to encourage long stays inside. It said a lot about the person who came here. I knew John was an outdoorsman at heart. He'd shared his love of the outdoors with me in the past. The ocean was close, within walking distance of the cabin, allowing all sorts of outdoor activities. The cabin would be for eating and sleeping only.

I dropped my bag on the bed and left the room. Best not to think about the times John had slept in this bed. Would he have come here alone? Did he have a girlfriend? Did he ever think of me?

I scooped up Jezzie again and went back to the kitchen where a quick search of the pantry revealed it was remarkably well stocked. John had planned ahead. Had he expected the killer's latest move?

"Are you hungry?" I hadn't realized he'd returned until he spoke. John stood in the doorway watching me.

I thought about the last time I'd eaten anything substantial and couldn't remember. John took my silence for consent. He came behind me and gently pushed me into one of the chairs and took Jezzie from my arms. He found a bowl and poured dog food into it. He'd thought about my dog as well. I refused to be swept away by his consideration.

He took out eggs and ham. "How does an omelet sound?"

My stomach growled in appreciation and he grinned at me. "I'll take that for a yes. I'd offer coffee, but I think you've probably had enough of that for one day. How about wine instead?"

Alone in a remote cabin, with a man I'd shared a very intimate history with, wine was the last thing I needed.

"It might help you relax," he added when he correctly read my thoughts.

He took a bottle of white wine from the fridge and poured two glasses then handed me one. I watched him work in silence for a moment, then took the peppers from him and started to chop them. He smiled at me.

"When do you want to look at the files?" I was determined to keep the focus on the case.

"Not tonight. Anna. You have to be exhausted," he added when I would have argued the point. "You've been through one hell of a twenty-four hours. We'll start on them in the morning, after you've had a good night's rest."

I didn't want to wait another minute, much less until tomorrow. I needed to find out what clues Aaron might have unknowingly left in the files. "John, this thing can't wait that long."

"It can and it will," he insisted then glanced down at me. "Whatever you think you're going to find there, you can forget it."

I couldn't hold his gaze. "I don't know what you're talking about..."

"You do. You think that by getting a look at those files you'll somehow gain some magical insight into Aaron's mindset during those last days. I'm telling you it won't. Don't you think I've thought the same? There's nothing in there, Anna. Whatever secrets Aaron had, he took them with him to the grave."

I laid down the knife and faced him. "No. I can't accept that. I won't."

He watched me carefully. I could almost feel the tension in him. "It's true."

"No, it's not. He told you something, didn't he? Deny it, John."

He couldn't.

"I thought not. What was my husband keeping from me? Dammit, I have a right to know."

He shoved the skillet off the burner and took me by my arms. "I'm not having this conversation with you, Anna. I can't."

I pressed on. I knew John still wanted me. I pushed closer. "Why can't you? What are *you* keeping from me?"

"Dammit, Anna, don't do this."

"Then tell me the truth, John. Please, just tell me." I leaned in closer. Our bodies touching. My motives no longer clear. His resolve crumbling.

"Just tell me." He didn't. Instead, he dragged me closer, his eyes dark with anger. Desire. I had time for just a single ragged breath before his lips claimed mine and history repeated itself.

The heat. The passion that was always there between us, even when I was trying to deny it, charged back to life. For the moment, nothing else mattered but being in his arms. Touching him. Having him touch me.

He fingers tightened around my waist and put me a little away from him, searching my eyes. This was the man who made me feel so many unwelcome things. Anger. Hate. Need.

"Anna, I'm sorry. I didn't mean for that—"

I shook my head. I didn't want to hear his regrets. I touched my lips to his, felt him waver. "Make love to me, John. Please, I don't want to think about tomorrow, or the past. Make love to me now."

"Oh my God, yes." His lips claimed mine. Familiar. Strong. John.

Then he lifted me in his arms and carried me to the bedroom.

The only light in the room was from the moon outside. But it was enough to see the raw heat in his eyes. I knew the same desire would be reflected in mine as well. It was always like this for us. Whatever happened between us—no matter how much we might disagree about other parts of our life, about Aaron—the passion we felt for each other never faded.

John smiled down at me as if reading my thoughts. He pulled me against him, his lips moving slowly over mine, creating a familiar need deep inside me. I needed him. More than I'd ever needed Aaron.

Best not to go there. Not with the man who'd once been my husband's best friend, reading my every thought. I wanted John to make me feel alive again. If he thought of Aaron, he'd remember that friendship.

His hands slipped over my body slowly, touching me, reaching past the walls I'd erected to keep from living, moving beyond Aaron. I shuddered in response to his touch and felt his smile against my lips. Everything about John was seductive, including his smile.

Strong fingers molded my body, gliding across the edges of my breasts, down to the curve of my hips to cup my bottom, bringing me closer to his full erection.

I lifted my hands to touch his chest before letting one slide slowly lower. John grabbed my wrist, bringing my hand still further down, allowing me to feel his response through the strained material of his jeans. His eyes never left mine.

"Do you see what you do to me? What you've always done to me?"

Slowly he lifted me up. My legs circled his waist automatically. We fit together perfectly and yet I wanted to be closer.

Like those times in the past, I didn't feel close to him. Even when he was inside me, I still couldn't seem to reach the part of John no woman would ever be allowed to touch.

I closed my eyes tight as John carried me to the bed. His lips found mine once more as he lowered me back against the bed, our bodies still joined, never breaking the kiss.

Slowly he lifted my blouse above my head. The cool night air brushed across my heated skin. I felt John move away.

"No." I grabbed his arm. I didn't want to let him go.

"It's okay. I'm not going anywhere. I just want to... God, you're so beautiful," he whispered while looking down into my eyes.

Suddenly I was at a loss for words. So many secrets lay between us. The biggest of them all was the one I believed would mark the end of us. Did he feel this way too?

John lay next to me, his lips moving across mine once more before traveling down my throat and lower. He kissed each of my breasts to arousal through the filmy material of my pale pink bra then he unclasped the bra and tossed it aside. I drew in a shaky breath, which brought his eyes back to mine.

All the times we'd spent together like this in the past resurfaced. Our hunger for each other had seemed endless then and now. John unbuttoned my jeans then skillfully slid them from my body along with the wispy panties. I closed my eyes when I felt his lips trail warm kisses across my rib cage and down to my navel, dipping inside.

A shudder of raw desire pulsed through my body when John's lips moved lower, caressing my inner thigh before slowly drifting upward to stroke the soft warmth inside me, driving me wild with need.

My body arched against his lips as waves of pleasure rocketed through my innermost parts.

John stilled his touch, waiting until the climax passed, and then he stood and quickly undressed, his eyes never leaving mine.

He came back to me, his lips taking mine once again, gently forcing mine open. His tongue delved deep inside. As much as his touch thrilled me, I wanted to touch John in the same way.

"No," he told me in a controlled voice, as my fingers stroked the length of his full erection. John took my hands and held them above my head. He took his time touching me, kissing me, stroking my body until I begged him to enter me.

"Just a second..." He grabbed his jeans and fumbled through the pockets until he found the little packet. The question in my eyes was easy to read.

"I thought, well, it's more like I hoped really." He opened the condom and quickly sheathed himself and then I was in his arms once more and he moved between my legs, his eyes still locked with mine. The feeling of him, my every desire, sliding inside me with a single thrust was enough to send me orgasmic once again.

My reaction and John's were the same. It was as if the force of our bodies joining had the power to drive the breath from us. John waited for me to still once more before pushing deeper inside my body, slowly, until I was able to accept his full length. Then he began moving inside me.

Slowly, each thrust going deeper, harder, until nothing existed between us but sheer reaction. Just before I reached the edge once more, John slowed the rhythm of his thrusts, prolonging my pleasure and my agony.

"John..." My voice sounded weak. Wanton. Urging him on. He drove into me harder, deeper. Giving me what I needed.

The sound of my name torn from him sounded so different than before. John was as close as I was. He drove deeper, faster, until my body tightened around his, then convulsed again and again.

John held on until the moment passed and then I felt the warmth of him release inside me, and John, the man who'd finally brought me back to life, lost himself within me.

He collapsed against me, his heart racing as mine, matching its rhythm as the world around us splintered then spun out of control.

* * * * *

Everything looked the same and yet nothing would ever be as it was before he'd touched her again. He looked down at the woman in his arms.

Sound was magnified. His breathing roared against his ears. Renewed need coursed through his body like wildfire. Outside the door, the dog let out a worried whimper. And filtered moonlight 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 of his heart pounding in his ears.

"Yes." She sounded even more uncertain. Anna drew in a breath and tried to steady her voice. "Yes, I'm okay."

He wanted her again. His body hardened at her nearness. While he hesitated, arguing with himself, Anna took the decision out of his hands. She twisted in his arms until she sat on top of him, straddling his rock-hard cock.

His gaze slid over her slowly, his body reaching closer to the breaking point. Tension soon became the only barrier left between them.

"You're so sexy, John." Her arms circled his waist. She leaned close enough to touch her lips against his, her full breasts scraping his taut chest, robbing him of breath. His hands cupped her shoulders, prolonging the kiss, pressing her body closer.

"You feel so good. It's been so long." She lifted her head to look at him. "There's never been anyone since you, John."

God, it killed him that this piece of news thrilled him. His only regret was that he couldn't answer as honestly. His hands stroked over her silken flesh. He gripped her hips as she pressed her moist and ready body hard against his erection.

He didn't give her time to change her mind. She was wet and ready for him. His fingers stroked her pussy then slipped inside. Anna arched against his stroking, her eyes slitted.

John waited until the climax passed, his throbbing hard penis demanding retribution. He pushed inside her willing body then rolled her over on her back.

"It's always been good between us, hasn't it, Anna?" he whispered in her ear 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 can't get enough of you."

Anna trembled with each stroke, each kiss. Each word. Her legs circled his waist, her fingers digging into his shoulders, urging him on.

The last of John's control slipped away into a long, low groan. 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. John'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. Anna'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. A year was a long time to need someone.

Chapter Ten

There could be no stopping it now. No turning back. The deed was done. The note sent. Soon, the world would know their dirty secrets. A light had been shone into the darkness. The monster that lived within its recesses couldn't survive the warmth of the light. Once it was over, the world would see the terror she'd survived. They'd understand. They had to.

But would her family? Would God? She'd prayed. Her knees were as bloody as her body was bruised. She'd done everything she could for God's forgiveness. It was now up to him.

She'd been strong. She'd outsmarted him. He'd thought her simple, but she'd gotten the better of him.

The knife shook in her hand as she raised it high above her head. She'd waited until he slept to play out the final scene. For a moment, as she considered the consequences, her courage stumbled, but only for the length in time it took to say a tiny prayer then plunge the knife home with deadly accuracy, the first of many times.

A watery, bloody smile touched her lips. She'd won. God had answered her prayers after all. The monster had met his match.

* * * * *

I sat up in bed, gasping for air, I could feel the knife. Her fear. The pain. The terror the monster instilled in her.

"Anna? Are you all right?" John's strong arms tightened around me.

I struggled to remember it was just a dream. I wasn't her. "Yes, I'm okay."

He didn't believe me. "Are you sure? You're trembling. Come, lie back down. It was only a dream."

I let him gather me close and I clung to him because he was warm and real. And not part of the dream. John was real, the dream was just part of my...no, *her* troubled past.

* * * * *

I awoke sometime just before dawn, still wrapped in John's arms. The dream still fresh and real even with the dawning of a new day. And I'd betrayed Aaron's memory because I was weak. I'd needed John's strength. His body, his warmth, to make me feel human again.

Regrets were everywhere around me, making it impossible to remain in bed next to him.

For the life of me, I wanted to wake him up and make love to him again. It was always this physical between us, which was all the more reason why I couldn't stay in

bed with him. What I felt for John had nothing to do with love. Love wasn't this combustible. Love was gentle. Like the kind of love you shared with Aaron? my conscience mocked.

I gathered my scattered clothes, slipped into the tiny bathroom down the hall and then ignored the woman in the mirror. I showered and dressed then went in search of coffee.

I'd just started the pot when John found me. He'd dressed in jeans and nothing more. His bare chest hard and defined. Tempting.

"You're up early," he said from the doorway.

I turned away from the temptation he represented and poured coffee. "Would you like some?"

He read the gesture for what it was. An attempt at dodging the confrontation that was sure to follow.

John ignored my question. "What is it? Are you worried that what happened between us will get in the way of the case?"

I steeled myself to say the things I needed to say to him. I had to define our relationship, clarify the boundaries. I'd muddied them last night.

"John, what happened between us last night was great, but it was a mistake. You know it was." I hated the small hint of pleading in my tone. I turned back to him.

He left his position against the door and came to me, his eyes never leaving mine. "Mistake? What are you talking about? What happened between us last night was no mistake, even though you may want to deny it."

I shook my head. "No, that's not the truth. And even if it were it doesn't matter. It can't happen again."

The frustration he felt was clear in his tone. "Anna, why can't accept that we have something special. I care for you. It was the same back then. It still is. I know you care for me as well. Stop fighting it."

I couldn't look at him and not believe him. "No, whatever is between us, John, is just physical, residual feelings from the past. This case, seeing each other again, has brought it all back, but that's it."

John reached for me, but I backed away. "You don't believe that."

"I do. John, I do. We don't have a future together. Our lives are as different as we are." I saw his reaction and tried to soften the force of my words. "John, what happened last night was wonderful. We both needed it, but it's over. Let's just leave it at that and move on. We have a case to solve. Time is running out."

I saw how difficult this was for him to accept and part of me was thrilled. "All right. I guess I can't force you to admit how you feel, but, Anna, you do feel something. You can deny it all you want." He held up a hand when I would have argued. "Let's leave it for now. You're right, we need to get started on the case. I've had Rick send over the records for all the victims. We have a lot of work to do."

John disappeared for a moment and came back carrying a stack of files. "This is everything. All the case files. And the medical records."

He hesitated then sat down across from me. I needed space to think clearly without John's image invading every inch of my thoughts.

"John..."

"I know. You need me to leave, but I thought you might have questions."

I met his gaze. He knew what I wanted to know.

"It's not there, Anna. Whatever you think you're going to find out about Aaron's secrets aren't going to be found in these files."

I tried to read his thoughts. "Why? Did you take out his notes?"

The fact that I couldn't trust him didn't set well with John. He shook her head. "No, I didn't take anything out of the files. All of Aaron's notes are there. There's nothing. I know. I've gone over those notes a thousand times."

I dropped the file I'd been using as a shield to shut out his image. "Then why don't we just stop playing games and you tell me what I want to know."

That shot in the dark rewarded me the truth. He knew something. Even if he wasn't prepared to share it with me. "I don't know what you want me to say. If Aaron didn't want you to know what was going on in his life then what makes you think I can shed light on it?"

"John, dammit, you owe me."

He got to his feet. "Read the files, Anna. I've got work to do myself."

He turned and left me staring after him, more frustrated than ever before.

* * * * *

I'd been at it for hours without any luck. By early afternoon, I abandoned the files altogether. I had only a brief profile worked out of our killer. Not much to go on.

"Want some lunch?" John appeared in the doorway as if he'd known what I was thinking.

I accepted his peace offering. "Yes, but I need to stretch my legs more. It looks like a beautiful day out there. Can we walk? I know Jezzie's sick of being cooped up."

He hesitated then nodded. "Sure, I don't see why not. This place is secure enough." John reached for his weapon and followed me out the door.

The smell of the ocean reminded me of the house I'd left behind. While I pretended to enjoy my new life in Florida, the house wasn't a home. It was just somewhere to hide.

John and I walked in silence for a while, until the ocean came into view.

"You come here often?" I wasn't ready to discuss the case yet.

He understood that need. "Yes, as often as I can, that is. A few times a year. It helps clear the images away."

I nodded. Of all people, I could relate. "Aaron told me you inherited the place from your dad."

He smiled at that. "That's right. It's about the only thing my dad ever did right, well, except for the truck."

I remembered Aaron telling me that John and his dad never got along. He'd deserted his son and wife when John was a teenager and had drifted from one crazy get-rich scheme to another. I wondered why John still held onto the truck and house.

"Did Aaron ever come here?" I don't know why I insisted on opening that sore. While Aaron might be the one thing John and I truly had in common, it was not a good subject considering the night we'd spent together.

"No. Aaron wasn't really into fishing and I can't picture him here. Can you?"

That brought a smile to my lips. Aaron was smart. An intellectual. Roughing it wouldn't compute for him. "No, not really." After another few moments slipped by in silence, I found I wanted to talk about the case.

"You're looking for a while male, forty to fifty in age. He's got a deep connection to each of the victims. Or at least he believes he has a deep connection. The number of stab wounds seems to indicate rage, but I believe it's more than rage. I think he's extremely frustrated. He's looking for something or likely someone. Each new victim has been a disappointment. He hasn't found what he's looking for yet. John, this is personal for him. The last note he sent to me indicates he believes there's a romantic connection between us. Obviously, it has something to do with the transplants. I can only assume he relates to this in some way. Perhaps he's lost someone in such a manner. He's no doubt from the area, since all of the victims have been from this region. Do you have the transplant records yet?"

"No. We're still working the legal side of it. There's a certain belief of anonymity expected by the transplant donor's family. One that requires a judge's ruling."

"That won't be easy."

"No. You know we'll be getting yours as well, don't you?"

I did know. I'd expected no less. "Yes. I can give you my consent if it will make it easier for you?"

"It can't hurt. But the donor's family will be the main issue here. Anything else jump out at you?"

I'd carried Jezzie in my arms until we reached the shore then I turned her loose on her leash and let her prowl along the water's edge.

"No, I'm sorry, John, but without the transplant records we're operating under assumptions. Time is running out. I can feel it."

He understood my fear. He turned to me and took me in his arms. And I let him. "Anna, I won't let him hurt you. You're safe. I'd sooner die than let anything happen to you."

It hurt to hear him say those words. "Don't say that. I don't want anything to happen to you. That's not what I want."

His gaze slipped over me, so serious. "I mean it, Anna. I won't let him near you again."

Through all my fears and even now running for my life, I think the seriousness of what faced us both finally hit me. Just for the moment, I wanted to be close to him. The one thing from my past that had been good. Even if it hadn't been right.

We stood holding each other close for a long time until John's cell phone shrilled to life, breaking the spell. He released me and unclipped it from his belt. A cold breeze swept from the ocean between us. I shivered as he watched me while talking.

"How long?" he asked still not breaking my gaze.

Jezzie tugged against my hand, chasing some poor helpless crustacean out to sea.

"Okay. Thanks."

He flipped the phone closed. "Rick is confident they'll have all the legal roadblocks gone by end of day. We'll have the donors' records. We're almost there, Anna."

He took my hand and I let him. "Good. Because we don't have a hell of a lot of time left, John. He'll have figured out that I'm gone by now if he wasn't watching the house. It won't take him long to figure out the connection between you and me, if he hasn't already, and he'll be expecting you to stash me somewhere out of the way. It won't be a reach for him to find this place. He'll know where you've taken me soon. He's smart, John. Cunning. Don't sell him short. He probably has an IQ off the charts."

"Yes. What I don't understand is why he killed the two officers and desecrated Aaron's grave. That doesn't fit with his MO."

I stopped walking and faced him. "What are you talking about?"

John closed his eyes for a moment. "God, I forgot. I didn't want to tell you. Someone, the killer, visited Aaron's grave a few days ago. Trampled on it. Left a note."

Oh God, Aaron. "What did it say?"

"You don't want to know."

I forced him to meet my gaze. "I do. John, I want to know."

"That you belonged to him. That he was coming for you and nothing I could do would stop it."

I shook my head. "So he knows about us. I don't understand. How does he know so much about me?"

We'd reached the cabin again. John stepped inside and did a quick check of the place. I followed him into the kitchen.

"Anna, I don't think it's you he's after. It's the person he perceives you to be. It's the heart, Anna. He's after your heart. The person whose heart you have."

Chapter Eleven

Being close to Anna, having touched her again, made it almost impossible for John to keep his focus on the case.

Every time she came near him, he burned for her.

"How are Bev and Ed holding up?"

His face grew warm. He'd been remembering a time in the past. One of few times they'd shared an intimate meal like this. Aaron had refused to let him come along. He'd told him he'd been working a different angle of the case. John believed he'd actually been seeing Cheryl.

"I beg your pardon?"

A strange smile crossed her face, but she let it go. "Bev, how are Bev and Ed holding up? This is probably the most adventure Ed's had in a while."

He returned her smile. "He's a nice guy. Bev's lucky. They're both doing fine."

"Yes, you're right. She is lucky." He sensed her unhappiness. Her marriage to Aaron hadn't been so good. He wished a thousand times over he hadn't made that promise to his partner.

"Aaron loved you, Anna. More than what he could show in the end."

That hurt look returned to her eyes. She stared into space as if looking back into the past. "I didn't really know him. Not the person I thought he was. He changed, John. Radically. I barely recognized him anymore."

"Yes." He'd noticed the change in his partner long before Anna figured it out. Nothing prepared him for the reason behind it.

"I read something in his notes on the Larsen case..."

John's gaze flew to hers. Dear God, had she figured it out?

"He didn't tell you? He'd brought some of them home with him. I found them locked away in his desk, among other things. There was something almost personal when he mentioned her. As if..." She took a deep breath and asked the question he'd dreaded from the beginning. "John, was Aaron having an affair with her?"

He could see how hard it was for her to ask that question. But he'd made a promise and he couldn't see that breaking it now would serve any purpose.

"You'd have to ask Aaron."

She got to her feet, frustrated by his answer. "Aaron's dead. I can't ask him anything. I'm asking you!"

He did the same. "And I'm telling you I can't answer that question."

"Can't or won't."

"Does it matter?"

"Yes. How can you ask me that? Of course, it matters. I trusted you, John. I trusted you not to lie to me."

"Anna, what you want me to do is rewrite the past. I can't. Let it go. Get on with your life. Start living."

The tension between them strung to a breaking point. Without so much as another word, she turned and walked out of the room, leaving him full of regrets.

As he listened to the sound of her footsteps, for the first time he resented his partner.

To keep from going after her and telling her everything, he went about clearing away the remains of their meager lunch. Neither had much of an appetite. They'd thrown together a salad and called it lunch.

Outside, the peek-a-boo glimpses of blue ocean had begun to turn gray. A storm was coming. The local weathermen had been urging those located along the water to batten down the hatches.

John did a quick check for candles and emergency supplies. They'd be okay if the power went out. But protecting Anna against the unknown monster hunting her wouldn't be so easy. They needed answers soon.

As if reading his mind, the phone clipped to his belt belched out its ring tone.

"Delaney here." He recognized his partner's number right away.

"We've got the name of Anna's donor and her history."

"You do? Thank God. Give it to me." He glanced out at the dark clouds gathering. In the window's reflection, he saw Anna had joined him.

"Her name was Brenda Lewis."

It sounded so common. How could such a simple name be connected to such horror. "Brenda Lewis. Doesn't ring a bell."

"No reason why it should except that she died due to injuries she received at the hands of her husband. Jericho Lewis murdered his wife. He stabbed her more than—"

"Forty times," John finished the sentence. The pieces were all beginning to fit together now. "My God. Was he convicted?"

"In a way."

"What does 'in a way' mean?"

"He was found mentally unfit to stand trial and sentenced to twenty years in Brookhaven Mental Health Facility. He was released a little more than a year ago. Around the time of the first murder."

"Dammit. Who released the son of a bitch out into public?"

"A team of doctors apparently convinced the review board he was okay. As long as he stayed on his meds."

"Have you got a last-known address?"

"Yep. An abandoned building in downtown."

"Shit. Figures. Okay, I need someone here right away to stay with Anna."

Anna had been silently listening to the conversation until then. "No. I want to be part of this."

"Hang on," John told Rick. He turned to Anna. "I can't let you. I can't risk anything happening to you. I'd never forgive—"

"John, I am part of this. He wants me. At least the person he thinks I am. I am part of this."

"Anna, he's insane. A killer who will stop at nothing. I'm not putting you in his path. You can forget it."

He returned to the call. "I need Samson and Henderson here right away."

"They're on their way now. I'll wait for you at the office. I'll see if I can't get in touch with his psychiatrist. Maybe he knows something."

John glanced Anna's way. She was angry. She wouldn't go along with the plan easily. "Lewis has no family living?"

"None that came forward. There are a few on the wife's side though. I'll see what I can find out in the meantime."

"Great. Good job, Rick. Thanks." He snapped the phone shut and prepared for the battle to come. "It has to be this way, Anna."

"No it doesn't. I'm one of you. I'm still an agent."

"Who walked away from the job a year ago. Who's emotionally attached to this case—"

"So are you! Have you forgotten the partner you lost to this creep?"

"No," he said quietly. "And I haven't forgotten how much I care about you either. That's why I can't risk getting you further involved in this, Anna. I can't. I won't."

She shook her head. "You won't have a choice. He's good, John. He's managed to survive this long without us even having a clue about his identity until now. And he wants me. You're not going to have a choice and you know it."

Dear God, he hoped she was wrong. "Maybe. But for now I still have a choice. And until I have to make that decision, I'm not letting you get involved in this thing."

* * * * *

"Any news?" John asked the moment he arrived at the Hoover Building.

Both Rick and Ryan's gaze shot to the doorway. Neither had heard John arrive. Rick had been discussing something with Ryan.

Rick nodded to Ryan who left them alone. "Nothing good. Lewis' psychiatrist has refused to let us see his notes on the guy. Apparently he's seeing a lawsuit and is trying to cover his hide, but I did get someone from the hospital Lewis was incarcerated at to talk to us. I know you just got here, but we need to move on this."

"I'm ready." John dodged Rick's attempt at making eye contact as much as possible. He knew what his partner wanted to know but he wasn't going to discuss Anna, especially now.

John brought the briefcase carrying the case files and got in the passenger side of the Crown Vic. A move that clearly surprised his partner.

They were heading out of town toward Richmond when Rick finally voiced his curiosity. "You going to tell me what happened between you two?"

John spared Rick a glance. "I think you know the answer already."

"Yep, but I just thought I'd try. I love a good romance, you know."

"Then you've come to the wrong place. Our story has nothing to do with romance."

Rick's surprise reaction was clear, but he let the subject drop for the moment.

"Where exactly are we going and who's this person we're talking to."

Rick hesitated, which did little to reassure John.

"Lewis' former doctor."

"Former. Please tell me he quit."

Rick grinned at him. "I could tell you that, but it wouldn't be the truth. The guy was fired, okay? He says it was because he didn't go along with what was suggested."

"And that was..." John tried to squelch the sinking feeling he felt inside.

"Says the board of trustees at the nut house wanted him to medicate, treat and release, to allow for more patients, which meant more government funding. He warned them about Lewis. They didn't listen."

John nodded as they entered a quiet suburban section of Richmond. "You're kidding. Can he substantiate any of those accusations?"

Rick threw him an *oh please* look. "Nope. They covered their tracks too well. He had a long list of grievances against him by the time they fired him, I checked. The worst being he's a drug addict. He'd gotten caught prescribing drugs to himself. He's not exactly credible, but he is all we have. I'm hoping he can shed some light on Lewis' friends, hangouts, anything that might help us capture the creep."

"Great. This case just keeps getting better and better."

"Oh, that's nothing. The AD has been asking questions about you. He's grilling everyone who worked the original case for information."

John spun in his seat to focus on Rick. He knew his partner hadn't given anything away, but how much longer before Warren turned up the pressure on Rick? John had a decision to make. How badly did he want to keep his job? At the cost of Rick, possibly others, losing theirs? As much as he'd once loved this job, if he were being honest, since Aaron's death, and especially after losing Anna, well, the job had become more of a burden than anything. How many gruesome killings could any human being witness and not lose parts of their soul? He was at the end of it and had been for a while.

Chapter Twelve

Doctor Archibald Baldwin lived in an affluent section of Richmond known as Tanglewood.

"Not bad for a fired drug addict." Rick let out a low whistle as he pulled in front of the two-story red brick Georgian.

"Yeah, was he selling the scripts?"

"Not according to what information I could find. But then, that was sketchy at best."

John nodded then got out of the car and waited for Rick do the same. "Does he know we're coming?"

"Yep. I phoned ahead. After I struck out with the Brookhaven shrink."

They approached the small flagstone porch, Rick rang the doorbell, and they waited in silence. John found himself wondering what Anna would be doing. He hadn't wanted to leave her, but he couldn't make her part of this. Agreeing to let her look at the files had been hard enough, but he needed her help. His gut instinct told him to keep her as far away from the case as possible. He wondered how long it would be before Lewis found her. He couldn't think about that now and not go crazy.

The door opened and a slightly built man with glasses pushed high on his forehead as if they'd interrupted an afternoon perusing the paper, looked puzzled for the moment.

"Detective Garner?" Clearly confused, he addressed John.

Rick spoke up. "Agent Garner, actually. This is my partner, Agent Delaney. May we come in?"

The gray-haired man glanced from Rick to John for a moment. Something registered as he looked John over, but he stepped back and let them inside.

"I was just in the middle of reviewing some cases." John's puzzled gaze went to Rick's.

Doctor Baldwin saw it and grinned.

"I see you've heard the reason I was fired from Brookhaven. Well, I'm working in private practice now."

"I see." John wondered how the man had kept from losing his license.

"I'm in the process of suing Brookhaven for firing me." He showed them to a small office and indicated that they should have a seat.

"With all due respect, Doctor, if you didn't fight the charges against you when you were fired, how can you sue?" John had to ask the obvious.

"Because I wanted out of that hell hole. I'd seen things that no human being should see. When I brought it up to the board they told me I was overreacting."

"So you're saying they fired you to shut you up. Must have been one hell of a list," John challenged.

"It was. The list was long indeed. Patient abuse. Over-prescribing drugs. Falsifying patient records to make it look as if they were getting better when in truth that wasn't the case."

"Is that what happened with Jericho Lewis."

"Oh yes." The doctor nodded. "Although for a while, I had hope for him. I recommended him for work in the office for a bit."

Baldwin's assessment didn't sit well with John. "What can you tell us about Jericho Lewis?"

The doctor seemed to hesitate. "As I told Agent Garner, I can't be identified as the person who spoke to you concerning this patient. I'm filing a wrongful termination lawsuit against the institute. If they found out I talked to you..."

"Doctor, I need to know what you can tell us about Jericho Lewis. I don't give a damn about outing you to anyone. He's killed seven people already. And he won't stop until he's gotten the person he wants. I don't intend on letting that happen. But I need your help," John countered.

The doctor expelled a heavy sigh. "Those bastards. Those foolish, foolish bastards. I tried to tell them. And what did they do? Replaced me with an incompetent 'yes' man and drummed up false charges against me to make me seem disreputable."

He shook his head. "You see, I was the original psychiatrist assigned to Lewis' case when he arrived at the institute. From our first session together, I saw the potential for much evil in him. I warned the board if they let him free, he'd not only kill again, he'd do it repeatedly. The man is a sociopath without conscience."

Rick had been busy scribbling notes. "Obviously the courts agreed with you when he was sentenced to Brookhaven. I've read the court records. The judge recommended Jericho Lewis never be set free."

The doctor nodded. "Yes. They had to sedate him on high doses of Desyrel Trazodone for a month before I could even see him, much less get him to talk to me somewhat rationally. When he did, all he could talk about was his wife. He was like an injured animal. He spoke as if she were still alive. I tried to get him to accept the fact that he'd killed her, and hopefully come to some type of terms with it, but he insisted she was still alive. He said she talked to him."

If Lewis thought his wife was still alive then how did he explain her organs being used as transplant, John wondered. "So he never admitted he killed her. How do you think he found out about her organs being used to save other lives?"

The doctor smiled. "For a time, after several sessions, Lewis actually began to show improvement. As I said, so much so that I recommended he be allowed to help out in

the office. That is, until I discovered he'd been using my medical license to check out patient records. When I confronted him with this, he said he needed to find out where they'd taken his wife.

"Oh yes," he added to their skeptical exchange. "Well, needless to say, after that, he was no longer allowed in the office. Or at least on my shift. As a precaution I dug around in his background. I wanted to know what I was up against. Jericho Lewis worked as a carpenter for a living, but I found a record of where he'd applied to the Naval Academy. They did an IQ test and the man was a genius. You'd think most colleges would be anxious to recruit such a candidate but the Naval Academy rejected his application. Of course, his files were sealed but I was able to talk to the recruiter privately. He told me Lewis scared the hell out of him. He quit his job soon after. He'd started receiving threatening calls."

Rick glanced up from taking notes. "He believed Lewis was behind the calls."

"Yes, in his mind there was no doubt. He was so rattled that he later left the state. I lost touch with him soon after."

"Why'd he kill her?" John wondered aloud. "Clearly he adored her."

The doctor took a moment to answer. "He never expressed any reason for doing it. As I've said, he never admitted to the crime, and I often wondered if this wasn't some ploy cooked up by his legal team to get him off. After he was released, well, I feared the worst, although I never connected the killings to him. I should have, though. After all, Brenda was stabbed to death, her body discovered later in that same park. I found out through a family member of Brenda's that she was scared of him as well. His mental condition had been deteriorating for a while. She sent a note to the family. They received it after her death. She accused him of abusing her for years. Her medical records backed up those claims. In the note, she said she had finally gotten the courage up to do something about it. The family believed she was going to leave him. She'd hinted at someone new in her life, perhaps someone from the neighborhood, seeing as Brenda didn't work. My guess is that is what sent him into a rage and ultimately caused the murder."

As interesting as all of this was, John knew time was quickly running out on them and they still didn't have a clue where to find Lewis. "Doctor, we need to find him before he kills again. Can you tell us anything about where he might be hiding?"

The doctor considered this for a moment. "As I've said, he refused to talk about his wife's murder, or anything related to the crime. Most of our discussions were about abstract things like world conditions, sports. But I do remember he had a passion for movies. Not what you'd expect, he preferred westerns. The Duke was his idol. He'd seen every one of his movies and could recite them by heart. John Wayne's work was one of the few movies the institute allowed the patients to see. Jericho was in heaven. It's not much, I realize." The doctor picked up on the frustration in Rick and John. "I'm sorry. Really, I wish there were more, but as I've said, Lewis was an enigma. He kept his secrets close."

Resignation weighed heavy as John got to his feet, feeling as if they'd wasted precious time they didn't have. "Thank you for seeing us, Doctor."

"There is one more thing. I don't know if it will help you, but last year, Lewis checked himself back into the hospital. He said he felt as if he needed more treatment. Needless to say, his new doctor was thrilled. He thought it proved everything I said was wrong. I saw it as suspicious at best. Lewis hated his time at Brookhaven. He'd never come back without reason. I made my doubts known very vocally. I was fired. Shortly afterward, I found out someone had been accessing patient records again using my medical license. I couldn't prove it, but I was certain it was Jericho Lewis."

The doctor nodded, his glasses slipping from his forehead. He smiled briefly and positioned the glassed on his nose. "I wondered where these had gone."

Once they said their goodbyes, John took the keys from his partner who relinquished the control reluctantly. "Not much to go on, is it?"

John had to agree. "No, but I guess it's something. Call Ryan. Have him check all the theaters that show old movies. See if John Wayne's playing anywhere."

* * * * *

What did she see in him? He had nothing to offer her. He watched his rival pick through pieces of his past and wondered if he would beg for his life, or accept the inevitable. The thought of it pleased him. Their time would come.

The doctor was a more immediate problem. He'd served his purpose, even though it had required returning to that hellhole when his first attempts at finding her had failed. The last time had been more successful. The doctor's assistance would no longer be needed.

He'd take care of the good doctor along with the cop, but all in time. He needed the cop to tell him where he'd hidden her. She was still fighting him. She hadn't forgiven his past transgressions. He couldn't get a good read on her whereabouts although he felt her. She was close. She'd be his soon. First, he'd take care of the doctor and then had to decide if he wanted to be merciful to Agent Delaney. Or make him pay dearly for corrupting his beloved.

* * * * *

"The doctor mentioned a possible boyfriend. Have you found out anything more on him?" John couldn't seem to shake the feeling of being watched. He'd felt it many times over the past few hours. Even after they'd returned to the federal building.

He glanced down at the street below. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary. The case had his imagination playing tricks.

"Not so far. I'm going to call Brenda's sister. See what she knows. What do you see out there?"

John turned from the window. "Nothing. That's just it. Anything from Ryan yet on the movie search?"

"Nope. Apparently D.C. and surrounding areas are not great fans of the Duke." Rick stopped smiling when he caught sight of John's expression. "Hey, what is it?"

John shook his head. It was, after all, just a hunch. "Nothing. I don't know. I just have this gut feeling he's close."

"You think? Want me to have the locals canvass the area?"

John nodded. He knew Warren would have a fit when he heard there was no sound basis for such the search beyond John's gut, but he was already in hot water with Warren. What did one more indiscretion matter?

"Do it and get the sister on the phone for us. Let's see if we can find out what Jericho Lewis did to his wife's lover."

Even though Rick glanced at his watch and knew it was well after midnight, he didn't hesitate to follow through with John's request. Within minutes of his call to the local police precinct, a quiet search of the area had begun. And Sarah Templeton was on the phone, confused and angry at being woken from sleep at a quarter of one.

"Mrs. Templeton, I apologize for calling so late, but I'm Agent Garner and with me is Agent Delaney. We need your help desperately."

On speakerphone, everything appeared magnified. They could hear the sound of a light switched on and voices, more than Sarah's, probably her husband.

"What's this about? Can't it wait until morning? I have to be at work in six hours." Sarah asked at last.

"Ma'am, with all due respect it can't. This is about your sister."

The silence following Rick's response was long and filled with emotion.

"What about Brenda? She's dead. Why can't you people just let her be for once?"

John wondered what she meant by that. For the moment, it could wait. They needed to know about Brenda's boyfriend first.

"Mrs. Templeton, we believe your former brother-in-law may be responsible for more than a half dozen murders that we know of. I apologize for the time, but it can't wait. We need your help now."

The fear in her voice was palpable. "Dear God. What do you want to know?"

"Anything you might be able to tell us that might help."

"I've spent most of my life, in recent years, trying to forget the torture she suffered at that monster's hands and now you want me to relive it?"

"I know it's hard," Rick offered.

"You don't know anything about it." Sarah Templeton breathed the words to life. The weight of a lifetime of pain in them.

A noise followed and then a man's voice came on the line. "What do you need from us?"

John assumed the man was Sarah's husband. He took up the questioning from that point. "We need to know what you can tell us about Brenda's boyfriend. I need to talk to him."

The silence that followed was overwhelming. "That's impossible. He died before Brenda. Don't you people talk to each other?"

John's gaze collided with Rick's. "He was murdered? Lewis wasn't charged for the murder."

The man's angry laugh followed. "No, because the bastard was too smart for the local people. Oh, they knew he did it, even the DA prosecuting Brenda's case knew he killed that poor man, but there wasn't enough evidence, and they just wanted to lock him away from society before he could hurt anyone else. You see how well that worked out."

"He hasn't tried to reach you or your wife."

"You think he'll come after us?" Fear laced tension through the man's tone with that realization.

"I don't know. At this point, we know very little about him. For the time being until we're sure, I'd like to take you both into protective custody."

"Dammit, we have lives. How much longer are we going to have to surrender them because my sister-in-law made a mistake?"

John wished he had a definite answer for the man. "I don't know. Let's hope it won't be too much longer. I'd rather have you in custody than out there in plain sight for him to hunt down."

"Fine. Do what you have to do, but this time do us and the world a favor and kill the sonofabitch."

After they hung up from the Templetons, Rick voiced his doubts. "You think he'll come after them?"

"No. I think he wants Anna. Or at least what Anna has—Brenda's heart. And I think he'll stop at nothing to get her."

Rick's cell phone buzzed and he answered it. "Yes. Okay. Thanks."

He flipped the phone shut. "The search turned up nothing. If he was out there, he's gone now."

"How are Bev and Ed holding up?"

"As well as can be expected, I guess. They're worried sick about Anna."

John nodded. "I'm assuming the search on Anna's home turned up nothing."

"Not a thing. Why don't you call her?"

John didn't need to ask whom he was referring to. "And tell her what?"

"That you miss her. That you're doing everything you can to solve this thing. That once it's over, you two need to talk."

In spite of the gravity of the situation, John smiled at Rick's attempt at matchmaking. "You've got it all worked out. You call her."

"Yeah, well, I'm not the one in love with her. Why don't you do something even better? Why don't you go there? You know you want to."

John shook his head. He didn't need to be reminded. The desire to be with her now was almost physical. "I need to be here. There's too much hinging on us catching this guy and soon."

"Which is why you need to be there. Go. Ryan and I'll keep digging. Go be with her."

Chapter Thirteen

The night just seemed to drag by. With John gone and the two agents protecting me standing stone-faced in the presence of any of my attempts at making conversation, refusing my request to take Jezzie for a walk, I found myself with too much time on my hands to think.

As always, John dominated my thoughts like an addiction. I couldn't be near him and not act on the attraction we'd shared from the beginning, even before my marriage to Aaron turned sour. In my heart I knew. It didn't seem to matter how I tried to dress it up, what I felt for John went much deeper than mere physical attraction.

I finally abandoned any attempt at conversation with the two agents and retreated to the bedroom I'd shared briefly with John. Sleep would be impossible. The bed held too many memories for sleep. Instead, I curled up in the corner of the room as far away from the window as possible and listened to the men talking quietly in the next room.

They hadn't said more than a handful of words in my presence, but with me gone, and presumably sleeping, I could hear bits of information about the case, along with innuendos.

John's special treatment toward me was getting some unwelcome attention. Samson and Henderson were new to the division. I hadn't recognized either of them. They'd obviously heard about the case and me.

There'd been rumors about John and my relationship even before Aaron's death. Afterward, no one dared mention and sully Aaron's name. Then, of course, I'd left. It seemed as if the rumors hadn't died away in my absence.

Somehow, I managed to fall asleep because somewhere in the early morning hours I was jarred awake by Jezzie's low, fearful growl.

"What is it, girl?" I glanced around. Nothing moved in the darkness. Beyond the room, I could hear the sound of voices still. Then lights flashed across the room. Someone was coming up the dead-end drive.

"Wait here, girl." I dropped Jezzie on the bed and cracked the door. Samson and Henderson weren't anywhere in sight.

I tiptoed to the living room. The door stood open. The two agents were standing on what passed for a front porch.

Samson noticed me first. "It's okay, ma'am. It's just Agent Delaney."

Even though I was still groggy, it took only a minute to understand the implication. John's return meant something had happened. Something important enough for him not to trust my safety to anyone else.

"You should go back inside, ma'am," Henderson encouraged, which I ignored. I needed to see John. Needed to see his face.

He got out of the truck and covered the space in just a few strides. While he spoke to the agents, his eyes were for me alone. It was like drowning in a vortex of emotions.

"Something's happened?" I forced myself to ask, and he was quick to reassure me.

"No. Nothing has happened, Anna. I just wanted..." He caught himself before the words were out. I saw Samson and Henderson exchange a sneering look. They hadn't missed the electrical sparks passing between John and me.

John turned to Henderson, the senior officer. "Dave, I need you back in D.C. with Rick. Take the car. Thomas and I will stay with Anna."

"Of course. Anything I need to know?"

John's gaze slid my way before answering. "We'll talk outside."

Henderson followed John, and I was stuck inside with the junior officer Thomas Samson, who'd turned back into stone man.

It took only a few minutes before the sound of the nondescript car the two agents had arrived in only a few short hours earlier drove away.

John returned to the house, the silence between us lengthening. I could see he wanted to tell me something, but with the stone man watching our every move, John kept his silence.

I heard a yelp from the bedroom and remembered Jezzie. I freed her from her prison. Jezzie wouldn't even look at me. She all but jumped into John's arms, further increasing Samson's curiosity.

John chose to ignore Samson's thinly veiled smirks. "How old is that coffee?"

"Old. I'll make some fresh. I, for one, could use some."

John came with me into the kitchen where we at least had some measure of privacy.

"Tell me what's happened," I whispered urgently.

"Nothing. At least, nothing of any importance. I just wanted to be here with you, okay? There's nothing I can do in D.C. I wanted to be close to you."

My hands shook as I made coffee. I was barely hanging on. I couldn't deal with this softer side of John.

He moved closer. His hands hovered above my shoulders. "Don't. He'll see. He suspects something already. I can't do this now."

His hands dropped to his sides. "Okay. But when this thing is over, Anna, we need to talk."

I knew I would never have that conversation with John.

If the hours with Henderson and Samson had seemed to stand still, the hours with John before dawn finally broke were even worse. I was aware of every little move he made. Every look. Every word spoken. John abandoned reasoning with me completely and began to work the phone. From the scraps of conversation I managed to pick up, I

discovered the name of my stalker was Jericho Lewis and that they hadn't found any real clue as to where he might be hiding. Which meant he could be anywhere.

Even on the isolated strip of oceanfront.

When I couldn't handle the silence and waiting any longer, I turned to John. He seemed to read my thoughts.

"Let's go for a walk," he told me.

"You think that's wise, Agent Delaney?" Samson voiced the obvious.

"Probably not. But I'll keep my eyes open and we won't go far. If you need me, use the walkie-talkie feature on the phone." He didn't give Samson time to argue.

John and I walked in silence for a long time. But it was okay. It was wonderful breathing the fresh air.

He touched my arm to stop me. "This is far enough."

"Tell me about Bev and Ed. How are they holding up?"

"They're okay. They're worried sick about you, but other than that, they're fine."

I closed my eyes. "Dammit, I hate that I've gotten them involved in this thing."

"Anna, this is not your fault. You didn't ask for this thing to happen."

My smile held bitterness. "Isn't it, John? I'd say it's my fault and yours."

"You don't believe that." The anger in his tone was undeniable. "The only thing we're guilty of is acting on what we felt for each other."

"You mean acting on our desire."

"No, that's not what I mean at all. It's more than that and you know it. You're just determined to punish yourself because of the way Aaron died."

I turned on him, my anger, fueled by frustration, matching his. "What we did was wrong. There's no way to dress it up as anything but what it was. Aaron trusted us. We cheated on him. He deserved better."

After a moment he said, "Did he? I doubt that."

His answer was like a kick in the gut. It threatened to confirm my worst nightmares.

I forced him to look at me. "What do you mean?"

John regretted his outburst immediately. "Nothing. I meant nothing." He scooped up Jezzie and turned away. "We should head back. It's not safe out here."

I reached for his arm. "No. I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what you mean by that."

He glanced down at my hand. "Let it go, Anna. Once and for all, let it go."

"I can't. I won't. Tell me! I have to know, John."

He looked into my eyes and ended my illusions. "Why? Will it make you feel better knowing Aaron was unfaithful?"

The truth I'd always expected, coming after so long, threatened to buckle my knees. "Was it Cheryl Larsen?" I watched John hesitate and hated the pity in his gaze that never left mine.

Slowly he nodded.

"How long? Was she the only one?"

John's voice flatlined. "I'm not sure how long or if there were others."

I turned away from the tenderness I saw in his eyes. "Oh God, oh God," I swallowed the bile gathering in my throat. "Did he love her? Did he know about us?" For reasons I couldn't begin to explain I needed to know the truth. As much as I hated living with Aaron knowing about John's and my affair, I needed to clear away all doubts.

"I don't know what he felt for her. And I'm not sure, but I think he knew about us."

I let go of the breath I'd been clutching inside me. It was something to hold onto. Our marriage hadn't been a complete lie.

"Anna, he loved you."

John reached for my hand but I yanked it free. "Don't even try. Don't you even try to make me feel better. I trusted him. I certainly trusted you."

Tears filled my eyes. I couldn't stop them from spilling over. "I trusted you, John. When I no longer knew my husband, I trusted you."

"I wanted to tell you for so long because I believed Aaron needed both of our help. I couldn't. I'd made a promise." His tone pleaded for understanding.

I finally forced myself to look at him. "And afterward? All those times I begged you to tell me the truth?"

He shook his head. "I didn't think it would serve any purpose at that point. I wanted you to keep your sweet memories of Aaron. I wanted you to remember the person he was before those last few months."

When the tears finally stopped, I realized I was shaking from a fury that reached down to my very core. With John, but mostly with Aaron. Why hadn't Aaron talked to me about whatever problem he believed existed between us? Why had my husband made me feel guilty when he shared in the same crime?

Aaron was gone, I couldn't confront him. I took all of my anger out on John. "Why? It was all a lie. All of it."

"Oh, Anna, that's not true. He loved you."

I started for the cabin, some long unimportant memory resurfacing. When Aaron and I had first started dating, he'd been romantically involved with another one of his students. He'd told me it was just a fling. She meant nothing. Now I wondered if I'd been just the fling. Did our marriage mean so little to him? Even though I wasn't thinking rationally, and I'd been just as guilty as Aaron, on some deeper level, I never expected to feel this betrayed by knowing the truth.

"Anna, wait!" I didn't. At that moment, I hated John. Hated Aaron. But most of all I hated the lies.

I'd almost reached the clearing next to the cabin when the walkie-talkie feature on John's phone squawked to life.

"John, John, where are you!" I barely recognized the frantic sound of Samson's voice.

John clicked the volume to silent, grabbed my arm, and dragged me back down the path away from the cabin. When we were tucked into a thicket of Cypress trees and undergrowth, he attempted to respond to Samson.

"What's happened?"

"I'm hurt...badly. He came at me from out of nowhere. I don't think he's still in the cabin. The location is compromised. Get out of here."

John handed me the cell phone. "There's a cabin down at the end of the pier. Head that way and don't stop until you get there. Hurry. Call Rick. Tell him to get the local PD here immediately and send for as much backup as he can mobilize."

He gave me a quick shove but I didn't budge. "You can't go in there. He'll be waiting for you."

"I have to. I have a man down. Samson needs my help. I'll be fine. Go." He unholstered his Glock and headed for the cabin without another look my way.

I forced myself to do as he asked, but kept a close eye over my shoulder for some glimpse of John or Jericho Lewis.

The thick undergrowth tugged at my clothes and hair, as well as Jezzie's. I held her tight against my body and listened to silence on the phone. I wondered if Samson was still alive. Was John?

I tried to reach Agent Garner but the service in the thicket was nonexistent. I kept hitting redial until I realized it was pointless. I'd need to reach a clearing for any hope of a signal.

Jezzie continued her frightening growling, while I tried to reassure her with more confidence than I felt. "It's okay, baby. We're almost there."

Up ahead, I could see the path clearing. I ran into the opening and redialed the phone. This time the call went through.

"Agent Garner here."

"This is Anna Sorenson, listen to me. There's been an attack at the cabin. Agent Samson is injured. Agent Delaney has gone back after him. We need immediate assistance."

"Where are you, Anna? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I'm almost to the neighboring cabin. Hurry."

"I'm sending help right away. I'll have someone come get you."

I closed the phone without answering. The sound of gunfire pierced the solitude. The police would never make it in time to help John.

I pulled out the weapon I'd tucked inside my jacket that John had no idea I still possessed. I sat Jezzie on the ground. "Wait here, baby. Don't move. I have to help him."

Jezzie didn't like my command, but she obeyed. With a final glance her way, I followed the beach to where I guessed the backside of John's cabin to be.

I'd almost believed I'd misjudged the distance until the back of the cabin came into view. I slipped quietly along the house until I found a window that I could see inside although the early morning shadows made it next to impossible to. Someone had taken out the light, presumably John.

I tried the window. It was secured. I moved to the next. This time I found it unlocked. This would be how Jericho Lewis entered the house.

I secured my weapon in the band of my jeans and hoisted myself up through the open window.

The house was eerily silent. I waited, as my eyes grew accustomed to the filmy darkness still clinging to the inside of the house. I was in the bedroom I'd once slept in. I tried not to think about what waited for me beyond the walls of this room.

I drew my weapon and made my way to the door. Luckily it stood slightly ajar.

I peered through the crack and froze. A silhouetted figure of a man stood over another.

I slipped through the door and realized it wasn't John but a stranger standing over the now still body of the man I still loved. Jericho Lewis straightened, picking up my faint footsteps.

And then he turned on me.

I'd never seen the man before, and yet something deep inside stirred at the sight of him as if the heart responded.

"Brenda?" Jericho Lewis held the bloodied knife in his hand.

I froze. A new fear crept inside me that had nothing to do with the present circumstances. This part of me that had once belonged to Brenda was reacting to the man.

I forced her fear aside. I had to be strong. Only the tiniest of movements from John was enough to tell me he was still alive, if only just barely.

I needed to think rationally. Needed to reach out to Lewis in the only way I could. As Brenda. John's life depended on it.

"Yes, it's me. You've found me at last."

His face crumpled with emotion. "I didn't mean to do it." I barely recognized the voice as human. It sounded animalistic.

It was as if seeing him again had brought all of Brenda's memories to life. In the last moments of her life she'd won back some of its control. Her death had come at her own hands and had been of her own choosing. Jericho Lewis hadn't murdered his wife. "I know. It's okay. I'm here now. It wasn't your fault. You didn't kill me. I took my own life. It's okay now."

He stepped closer, the knife he still clutched in his hand nicking agitatedly at his pants leg. He seemed unaware that he'd drawn blood. "I never told anyone. I let them believe I took your life. I did it for you, Brenda. Because you deserved better. They tried to tell me you were gone, but I didn't believe it. Through all those years in that terrible place, I didn't believe. I knew I'd find you again. I knew we'd be together."

"Yes." In the distance I could hear the sound of vehicles advancing on the cabin rapidly.

I glanced John's way and saw that his eyes had open. He was aware of me. What was happening around him, but his injuries were severe.

Lewis seemed to have been caught up in a daze at the sight of me, but suddenly he snapped out of it as he became aware of the approaching vehicles. He glanced outside then back to me. I knew he understood I'd been the one responsible for bringing them here.

"You're not my Brenda. My Brenda would never have betrayed me in such a way." He raised the knife and lunged for me. I barely had time to get off two shots before he reached my side. The first glanced along the side of his left ear. The second hit its mark dead-on. Straight through the heart of a killer.

Jericho Lewis fell to ground like a rock mere inches from me. The agent in me kicked the knife from his reach, checked for a pulse, knowing I wouldn't find one. Then I rushed to John.

His eyes were open, but he couldn't speak. His throat had been slashed and he'd lost a lot blood.

I reached for his hand and squeezed it, my eyes filling with tears. "Hang in there. Help is on the way. They'll be here in a moment. Don't try to speak, just hang in there."

And for the life of me, I thought I felt him squeeze my hand in answer.

Chapter Fourteen

"The doctor believes he'll make it." Rick found me, sitting in the waiting room of the same hospital where I'd lost my husband and child. I'd been sitting in this same chair for hours, since I'd arrived at the hospital with John, covered in his blood.

I closed my eyes and said a silent prayer of thanks. "Thank you, God. Oh thank you."

Rick managed a weak smile. "He's awake and asking for you. Want to see him?"

I nodded because I couldn't speak over the lump that had formed in my throat.

I followed Rick inside the stark walls of the hospital room. The sight of John threatened to crack my fragile resolve.

I went to him, took his hand, and kissed his cheek. "I was so worried."

He squeezed my hand as he had at the cabin. His eyes never left mine. I realized we were alone. John's neck was bandaged, a thin red line of blood oozed through the white gauze.

"I'm okay," he croaked.

"Don't talk. You need to rest."

"Then don't you leave again."

As hard as I tried, I couldn't make that promise to him. "I'm not leaving any time soon."

But he knew in time I would.

Over the next twenty-four hours, John drifted in and out of consciousness while bits and pieces of the case fell into place slowly. With each new victim, Jericho Lewis' frustration had grown. He was searching for Brenda—Brenda's heart. The women he'd killed were all transplant patients around the same time Brenda's vital organs were harvested. With the exception of Cheryl Larsen. Lewis had screwed up the name. A Sharyl Larson had received a liver transplant around that time. Cheryl was just unlucky. An innocent victim of a madman.

And Jericho Lewis was one sick human being. That he'd ever been released from Brookhaven was unbelievable. There would be lawsuits to follow from the families of the victims who didn't have to die, but that didn't concern me. Nor did the fact that I'd taken Lewis' life. I'd made peace with it, knowing I'd saved John's life, my life and countless others. Samson was not so lucky. He'd died due to his injuries. He never stood a chance.

We'd learned a few days after Lewis' death that he'd killed his former psychiatrist. A patient found Doctor Archibald Baldwin's body. He'd been stabbed dozens of times. The list of victims continued to grow.

AD Warren assured me that Peterson would never see the light of day. He might not have been responsible for the deaths of all of the victims once laid at his feet, but he'd been convicted for murdering a federal agent. He'd pay with his life for taking Aaron's.

Once I knew John would be okay, I knew it was time to leave D.C. for good. But letting go of John and the memories of our past wasn't so easy.

I'd started tapering my visits to the hospital. When he was released, I decided it was time to leave. Bev and Ed were going to accompany me to Florida where I'd take care of some pressing things first then go and spend a few weeks with them in New York.

The night before we were scheduled to fly to Florida, John came to see me at my hotel.

He looked almost like himself again. The bandage was barely visible by now.

I opened the door and let him in. "You look much better."

"And you've been ignoring my calls," he said without preamble.

"Yes."

The pain in his eyes had nothing to do with his wounds. His question took me by surprise.

"How'd he know where to find you? It was almost as if..." He shook his head. John was a cold, hard facts man. He couldn't accept that there might have been a connection left between Jericho and his wife. I could tell this had been troubling him.

I smiled. He just needed a little push to believe. "You know."

He shook his head.

"I dreamed about him, you know. At the time, well, I thought I was going crazy. It was Brenda's dreams, though. I understand that now."

I took a deep breath and told him everything. "I think sometimes, well, maybe our connection to people doesn't end with death, not when we're those closest to them. Not when they die so violently. Like Brenda. And Aaron," I added, reluctant to bring the past and my failures up again. "I dreamed of him as well. I think Aaron was trying to tell me we'd gotten the wrong person. He can rest now. Jericho's gone."

"Anna..."

"And we can too. We can get on with our lives now, John. We couldn't before. We, we were frozen in time, but now we can move on," I told him gently.

He spotted my packed suitcases next to the door. "You're leaving."

I never would have associated so much pain with John.

"Yes. I have to, John."

"Dammit, Anna, don't. Don't throw us away like this."

He came to me and reached for my arms. I tried to pull away but he wouldn't let me go. "I'm not throwing us away. There's no 'us' to throw away, John, and you know it."

He drew me closer, and for a moment, I welcomed the strength and warmth of his body. "There is. You're just too damn determined to blame yourself for Aaron's death to accept it. Let it go, Anna. We all made mistakes, including Aaron. He wasn't the saint you'd made him out to be."

"Don't talk about him like that." I yanked free. "Just go."

"Anna, don't do this. Give us a chance."

The anger left me at the pleading in his eyes. "John, it wouldn't work. Don't you see, there would always be the past, Aaron, the baby, Cheryl, Jericho and all the terrible things you and I have seen and done standing there between us. The secrets we've kept from each other, ourselves...for Aaron. To move forward and make a fresh start, to have some hope for a future beyond all this horror, we have to let go of the past. Of us. *You* have to let it go. Please, just let me go. Get on with your life. Let me go. Fall in love."

I saw the hopelessness in him before he headed for the door. "Too late. I already have."

* * * * *

It took everything inside him not to follow her to Florida, or the ends of the earth. Not to force her to admit the truth, but in the end it was what she'd said that kept him moving away.

Too much stood between them. Part of it was true. The biggest part was the unknown. It was time to put an end to the nameless past once and for all.

But first he had one final piece of Bureau business to complete. John parked his truck in the parking garage and took the stairs to his floor. It'd been weeks since he'd last darkened these once hallowed walls. The night the truth came out. Today was different. The weight of the world had left him and he had a purpose in mind.

His partner all but met him at the door. "Where've you been? He's been screaming for you for days. I thought you were coming back last Monday?"

John held up a hand. "It's okay. I'm on my way there now. I just have one final thing to do."

John found a box and dumped his personal possessions into it while Rick watched in disbelief.

"What are you doing?"

"Beating Warren to the punch."

"John, you have to fight this thing."

John turned to him and smiled. "No, I don't. I'm all fought out. I can't do this anymore."

"Is this because of her...or him?" Rick asked quietly.

"Both, maybe. Yeah, both, but mostly it's because of me." John hoisted the box under his arm.

"What are you going to do?" Rick followed him to the elevator.

"What I've wanted to do for a long time now." He turned to his partner and shook his hand. "Learn how it feels to be normal again. Stay out of trouble. Keep your eyes open. And know when to walk away. Don't let this job consume you and make you do things you won't be able to live with. Know when to let it go. In the end, it's just a job."

* * * * *

For the first time in over a year, there were no shadows following me and yet I couldn't seem to let the past go.

The house was just as I'd left it. The fear was gone. In its place was an emptiness I'd never experienced before. Not even after Aaron's death.

Bev was such a help. She and Ed kept me sane through the packing. Helping me make the right decisions, what to keep. What to throw away. Which real estate agent would best suit my needs when it came to selling the house and the store.

"You know it's beautiful here. I could see us retiring here in a few years," Ed told his wife one evening while we all walked along the beach.

Bev looked wistfully out at the ocean. "Yeah. It is."

I rolled my eyes. "If you guys want the place, it's yours. You just have to make the payments."

Ed looked at Bev. "What do you think?"

"I think let's retire now. Don't wait. Life's too short."

At times, their happiness was hard to take, but I was trying. Still, I wondered how long I'd last this time before I moved on. Tried to outrun the memories.

* * * * *

The house was packed. All of my possessions were en route to New York. There were no regrets, surely. I'd made my peace with the reasons I'd come here. I wouldn't miss Pensacola all that much, and if I did, Bev and Ed would gladly let me visit the place.

Jezzie and I were loaded into the rental car. And I couldn't help but believe I was about to make the worst mistake of my life.

We reached the state line leading in to Georgia when I told Ed, who was driving, to stop.

"Wait. Ed, just for a minute. Stop the car."

He glanced in the rearview mirror, and seeing my expression, pulled over to the side of the road.

Ed's worried gaze slipped to his Bev's. "Anna, what is it?"

I couldn't answer. I got out of the car. Catching my breath was hard.

Bev quickly followed on my heels while Ed came at a slower pace. He suspected I needed a heart-to-heart with Bev. "Sis, what's wrong? You're not regretting selling the house or the store are you?"

I closed my eyes and turned to them, my mind made up. "No. It's not the house or the business. I have to go back to D.C."

Bev knew exactly what I had planned. "For John. You love him, don't you?" I nodded and she smiled at me. "Then do it. Don't let this chance at happiness go, Anna. You don't know how many more you'll have."

"Yes, that's true." I gave her a hug. "Thank you."

In typical Bev humility, she asked, "What for?"

"For not letting me go crazy. For letting me. For everything, Bev. For everything."

* * * * *

When I reached the outskirts of D.C., suddenly I wasn't so sure. What if John had taken my advice and moved on with his life?

It had been several weeks since I'd told him to leave.

There was only one way to find out and I had come this far. I couldn't turn back now.

I picked up my cell phone and dialed his office extension. It wasn't John who answered, but his partner.

"Rick, it's Anna Sorenson. Is John there?" The silence following my question could not have been less encouraging or more frightening.

When I couldn't stand the awkwardness any longer, Rick answered. "Anna, I really don't know how to tell you this, but he's no longer working for the Bureau."

I almost dropped the phone. "What?" I couldn't believe I'd heard him correctly. "What do you mean?"

"He resigned his position shortly after you left town."

My pulse thudded a crazy beat. I was too late. The pain of that thought was crippling. I closed my eyes and knew I'd do whatever I had to find him and beg his forgiveness. "Where is he, Rick? I need to talk to him. Please." I wondered if he would be as good at keeping his partner's secrets as John had been with Aaron's.

Rick weighed his answer for an eternity, forcing me to guess. "Is he at the cabin?"

The long heavy sigh did little to encourage me. "He left D.C. He's selling the house and cabin."

My heart plummeted at those words.

"Please, I have to tell him how I feel about him."

Rick didn't seem all that moved by my plea. "I love him, Rick. I've made a terrible mistake because I was so scared."

I could hear the amusement in his tone. "All right, you had me with I love him. I'm a sucker for a good romance. I'll tell you where he's at under one, no, two conditions."

"Anything. Just tell me."

"First, you'd better share all the details of this story with me when you find him, and second, you'd better not tell him I told you how to find him."

I'd started to cry, but I laughed just the same. "I think he'll figure out the last one."

"Probably. He is the best damn detective I know."

"Yes."

"He's decided to become a cowboy."

Nothing prepared me for this revelation. "I beg your pardon?" I managed at last.

"He's moved to Montana and bought a spread up there. Near Big Sky. You can't miss it. He's just outside a little hole-in-the-wall town called Freemont."

John had moved to Montana. "Thank you! I'll tell you all about it the second I know he'll forgive me."

Rick was quick to reassure. "Oh, he'll forgive you. He's crazy about you."

I could only hope Rick knew his partner's secrets and that was still how John felt.

* * * * *

If he could have pictured his life a little more than a year ago at the end of Aaron's and the loss of his child and Anna, he would never have imagined living on a ranch in Montana. Never believed this type of peace would exist for him again.

Of course, he'd need both the money from the sale of house and the cabin just to pay for the place, but it was worth it.

There was something therapeutic about wide-open spaces. He wasn't sure what his future plans were beyond fixing the fence in the east pasture. He'd figure the rest out in time.

Here at the foothills of the mountains, the temperature had already dropped to below freezing at night. Snow was soon to follow according to the locals and he welcomed it. Nothing sounded more appealing than being snowed in to this rugged paradise.

In the time he'd been here, the only visitor he'd had was the real estate agent who'd sold him the place, and then only because he needed his final signature on something.

The house was old and in need of lots of care and hard work, but it had a good roof and it was warm. He had the whole winter to fix what was needed.

The fence had been flattened by the weight of last year's snow. The previous owner hadn't wanted to mess with it since he was selling out.

John spent the day digging fence posts and resetting them. It was almost dark when he returned home. Out front of the house on the gravel drive, a small rental car sat parked. John slowed the truck's speed. The past was always close at hand, no matter how hard he fought against it. He had to shake himself to accept it was no longer part of his life here.

He parked the truck. No one was inside the car. Fear pricked along the base of his spine. John reached for the shotgun he carried behind the seat of the truck to keep the coyotes at a distance.

Then he saw her. She sat swinging on his rickety old porch swing. Anna!

He couldn't move for a long time. Couldn't draw in air. He forced back the tiniest bit of hope, got out of the truck, and took the steps two at a time to stand in front of her.

She didn't seem nearly as rattled by his presence as he was by hers.

"John." Her smile was sweet. Infectious. Reminding him of the old Anna.

He quirked a responding grin. "Anna. This is a surprise."

She got to her feet and came to him. "Really?" Her arms circled his neck. He drew her close. Letting a little bit more of the hope free.

"Really. What brings you to Montana?"

"I want to see if that offer still stands."

Her lips brushed his invitingly.

It was hard not to return her kiss, but he needed to know. "What offer was that again?"

"The one to give us a chance."

His answer? A ragged breath and then he drew her up into his arms, shouldered the front door open, and headed for the bedroom. He needed her. Needed to be inside her. Needed to believe this was real. He couldn't survive another wet dream of her.

He took his time and convinced them both that there was such a thing as second chances.

* * * * *

"I'm glad you came." He kissed the top of my head and drew me closer.

"I'm glad you did too..." I added when his expression turned just a bit frustrated, "and I'm glad you're glad I'm here. I'm sorry. You were right. I was holding onto my guilt like a weapon."

"It's okay. None of that matters now. Will you stay?"

I twisted in his arms so that I could see his face. "Only if you'll have me. Only forever."

He gathered me into the circle of his arms and showed me in all the ways I'd long since stopped believing possible how much he wanted me. Forever.

Now that the threat had passed and he knew I wasn't leaving, there were still some things about the case that clearly troubled him.

"What is it?" I glanced up at him, sensing something was wrong.

He tried to dismiss them. "Nothing."

"No, something's bothering you. It's about the case, isn't it?"

He smiled, not really surprised that I'd guessed. "Yes. I know this is probably the last thing you want to talk about now, but why'd she do it?"

I'd struggled since Lewis' death to put aside Brenda's terrifying memories of that monster. They'd become little more than fragmented pieces that made me think the small part of her that still existed in me understood the threat that had been Jericho Lewis had passed.

"Why'd she kill herself?"

He nodded.

"I think she believed it was her only way out. She was terrified he'd kill her. In the end, she took the matter out of his hands. She reclaimed some control over her life."

John didn't buy it. He knew there was more. "And that's it?"

After a moment, I shook my head. "No. By killing herself the way she did, Brenda was certain her death would get blamed on Jericho. She'd obviously researched it very thoroughly. All the statistics say most women never take their lives by violent means. Brenda was smart. Much smarter than her husband gave her credit for. But she was also desperate to keep him from hurting anyone else. She knew he would if he remained free. In her mind, this was the only way to prevent that from happening. She knew if he were locked away in prison somewhere, even though she couldn't save herself, she could save Jericho's next victim. Or so she thought. I guess the outcome wasn't quite as she'd planned."

He held me closer. "No one could have predicted the jury's verdict in finding him mentally incompetent to stand trial. Brenda played it right. She did her part by planting the seed of abuse in her family's minds. Her sister told us that she'd sent her a letter. She was certain he'd kill her. Brenda told her that if anything happened to her, Jericho was to blame."

Some of Brenda's pain crept back into my memory. I shivered at the vivid images of horror she'd endured. I closed my eyes and held John closer, while silently hoping that perhaps, with Jericho Lewis' death, Brenda could finally find some amount of peace in hers.

Chapter Fifteen

"I have something to tell you." John seemed distracted as we made breakfast together the following morning.

My heart did a little fearful flip. I put down the toast I'd been nibbling. "What is it? Please tell me you haven't changed your mind about us."

John rushed to reassure me. "God no. I can't live without you. But I have a confession to make and I need you to listen."

It was hard hearing my own voice over my staccato heartbeat. "What is it?"

"After Aaron's death, I cleaned out his desk and boxed his things away. I couldn't even bring myself to look at them. I never opened the box. Then once we'd caught Jericho, and with the move here, well I figured it was time to lay the past to rest for good. I opened Aaron's things and found a couple of letters in one of his notebooks. One was for me and one for you."

John got to his feet and went over to the desk in the living room. He opened a drawer and brought back a small envelope with my name scribbled in Aaron's writing across the front.

I didn't open it right away. My eyes held his. "What is it? Is it bad?"

He took my hand and squeezed it. "No. No, Anna it's not, well, not really. In a way, it's good. But you should read it alone. I have to check on the generator anyway. I think I have some work to do on it before we go grocery shopping."

Even after he'd left, it was a long time before I could tear the envelope open and read Aaron's final words to me. But when I did, so many things about my husband's strange behavior fell into place.

I was still sitting at the table a few hours later when John found me.

"You've read it?" he asked quietly from the doorway.

"Yes."

He pushed away from his place leaning against the doorframe and came and sat next to me. "He was sick, Anna. That explains his behavior. He couldn't help himself."

"No. I understand that now. I just wish..."

"I know. Me too. But this helps. For someone like Aaron to learn he had the early onset of Alzheimer's had to be terrifying. He was so intelligent."

"Do you think he wanted to die, John? Did he go into the building that night after Peterson to die?"

I wished John could have denied those terrible thoughts, but he couldn't.

"I don't know." He knelt in front of me. "But, Anna, he wasn't himself. Whatever he did, that wasn't Aaron. It was the illness."

John stared into space, looking back into the past. "He told me something once, right before his death. It's always troubled me. He said that within every person there is the root of evil. It was up to the person how they chose to deal with the root. They could accept it and give life to it, or they could ignore it, and let it naturally wither away."

John looked at me. "I think he was talking about himself. Aaron was afraid he was going to turn into the same type of monster he hunted."

I remembered Aaron's manuscript. The one I'd destroyed. That was one piece of the past John didn't need to know about. I wanted him to keep some of his fond memories of Aaron. Hearing those dark, disturbing thoughts written by a man I knew now had been mentally ill, would destroy those memories. I had to live with that. John didn't.

For me, the thought of Aaron keeping such terrifying fears to himself was impossible to understand. I wished that he could have trusted me. John. Someone. Perhaps he'd found that confidant in Cheryl Larsen. The thought no longer hurt as much.

With all the secrets John and I had laid to rest, there was still one final piece to bury. It was the hardest of them all. "The baby...John, the baby was yours." I forced the words out. "I'm sorry I denied you that right for so long."

The unmerited forgiveness in his eyes was hard to take. "I know."

He'd always been so certain. I had to know why. "Did Aaron say something?"

John smiled and squeezed my hand then drew it to his lips and kissed it. "No. It's what he didn't say. Aaron never mentioned your pregnancy. He didn't know, did he? How long had it been since the two of you were intimate?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. Long before you and I made love that first time." I freed my hand and stroked his cheek. "I'm so sorry that I denied you the right to grieve. That I wasn't there for you when you needed me to be."

He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. There'll be more children. We'll fill this house with them."

I'd once believed there was a part of John that no woman would ever be allowed to touch. Now I understood how wrong I'd been. It hadn't been John keeping me at a distance. It was me...my doubts. My fears. My uncertainties, not his. Looking at the love in John now, I'd never felt closer to him.

In answer, my eyes filled with tears. He was more than I ever imagined and more than I deserved. I wanted all of those things with him. I went into his arms with a quick nod of my head. "Yes, and we'll be happy every day of our lives. Because we've gotten a second chance."

He didn't answer. He didn't need to. I saw the love in his eyes that had always been there through the dark times, the good times, and would be there for all the uncertain times to come in our future...together. And I knew it would always be enough.

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 can't 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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