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MARY ALICE PRITCHARD



See How They Die

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by Mary Alice Pritchard

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Prologue

He was methodical in his work, making sure the knots were secure despite the rotting ropes he used. Each metal hook was carefully driven into the floor in a precise location. He pulled the rope tight so the girl's arm stretched out away from her body and above her head. This last knot left her spread eagled like a giant letter X. The fear in her eyes, punctuated by her whimpers, didn't bother him while he worked. He rather enjoyed them.

She was to have been his perfect angel, but she'd fallen from grace when she touched the boy. The rage built again as he thought of her betrayal. His gold necklace glinted around her neck with the locket hidden against her breasts, yet she'd chosen to defile herself with the heathen next to her. He would make it right, and cleanse them both of their sins with the ceremony.

The boy beside her remained unconscious. It had been necessary to subdue him in order to prepare him for the ceremony. The girl had fainted, giving him time to secure the boy before turning his attention to her. Once he had the girl's ankles tied, it hadn't mattered when she came to again. He wanted them both awake. Their screams couldn't be heard from the remote cabin in the woods. After all, that's why they'd chosen it for their first night together, so no one would know.

Pleased with his results, he smiled down at the two teenagers, then pulled a hunting knife from his bag.

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Anticipation built within him. Briefly, the excitement broke through his control as, with quivering hands, he bent over the girl to begin his task. The knife glinted in the dim light, its reflection sparking new terror in the girl's eyes. She struggled desperately, her screams turning shrill as he slipped the knife beneath the hem of her dress and ripped upward in one long, steady movement until he reached the band of her bra. He let it rest briefly against the soft flesh between her trembling young breasts before jerking upward in one quick movement. The severed bra slid to either side. She screamed until he stopped her.

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Chapter One

Rhiannon woke up screaming, her body wet with sweat and her breath coming in quick gasps. Another dream, this one more vivid than the last. He'd killed them. She knew instinctively they were dead. It was too late for them. She was always too late to save them.

She threw back the covers, sliding out of bed till her bare toes found the rug. She'd known they would die a week before, when the dreams first started, but she didn't know who they were or where they lived. Only that they were connected to her somehow. Despite her desperate efforts to avoid physical contact with anyone, she'd still managed to create a bond that connected her with one or both of these victims. The connection forced her to watch them die over and over again. Rhi was helpless to prevent their deaths despite her best efforts. Nothing she'd tried in the past had been successful and she never knew when or why the dreams would suddenly stop.

Intent on a hot shower to wash away the stale sweat and tense muscles from the nightmares, she thought she caught the faint twinge of something different about the dream this time. Unable to grasp what it was, she let it slip away and concentrated on allowing the pulsing jets to work out the tension in her muscles.

Flashing red and blue lights of the Izard County Sheriff's Department and local ambulance service bounced off dark tree trunks that hugged the edges of the clearing surrounding

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the cabin. Artificial lights shining from within pierced the night's thick blackness. Nothing penetrated beyond that inner circle. Sounds generated by the click of the revolving lights and low whispers of shocked men became trapped there, echoing inside the clearing, trapped by the solid night. A reluctant audience balked at stepping beyond the circle and into the night, yet was also unwilling to cross the cabin threshold to view the scene inside.

Doc Landers' beat up Dodge Ram and Buddy Holden's Ford were the only civilian trucks in sight. The aging physician handled coroner calls for the county, investigating all questionable deaths. Buddy Holden and Darrell Kelly were the two poor souls who had found them—something neither of the men would ever be able to forget.

Buddy and Darrell, along with two other local hunters, owned the cabin, using it as their deer camp and general getaway spot. Only now it had been used for something much worse than their suspicious wives could ever have imagined. The cabin was now a theater complete with lights, actors and a supporting cast, forming a grizzly opening act.

Darrell's first view of the carnage had stopped him in the door, causing Buddy to run into him. His mind couldn't get around what his eyes told him. The two bodies lying on the floor in front of the fireplace couldn't be real, could they? Blood congealed around each body, almost black in the waning light. It was the smell that finally got through to them.

Neither remembered backing out nor running for the truck. How could this have happened in their community? Who could

be so twisted, so evil, yet hide it so well that no one saw him for the monster he was? Now they would look at their neighbors and friends, wondering if they really knew them.

Sheriff Matthew 'Matt' Brady shook his head as he rose from a crouch to his full height of six feet. This was not something he had expected to deal with in Arkansas. He'd chosen the state for its serenity and beauty. He never expected this type of brutality when he'd moved his wife there five years earlier. Matt had experienced enough violence and blood lust when he was in the Army. He figured backwoods life would suit him just fine. The reality had a way of finding you even when you thought you had all the bases covered. It brought him right back to the horror he'd left behind nearly eight years before—a place he'd never wanted to go and sure as hell didn't want to revisit.

When Matt first arrived on scene, he'd entered the cabin before anyone else and before the auxiliary lights were set up, so he could get a feel for the crime scene as the murderer had left it. Dim light shining from a solitary lamp across the room had dampened his initial shock when his gaze first landed on the macabre display in front of the fireplace. The odor of death made light unnecessary. The metallic tinge that clung inside his nose and on his tongue spoke of spilled blood. Its sickening smell, mixed with the putrid odor of bowel, hung heavy in the air along with the scent of fear—fear too raw and primal to dissipate in such a short time.

Now he stood looking at the same crime scene with the harsh lights brought in to expose every gory detail, attempting to illuminate darkness far blacker than the

blackest of nights. Signaling the Crime Scene Investigation team hovering just outside the cabin door, Matt shoved his pen and pad back into his shirt pocket. He would leave them to start their job of gathering evidence and clues. *God, let there be clues.*

Matt cleared his throat as he crossed the porch, and Doc Landers turned toward him, his hands deep in the pockets of his denim jacket. The lines on his face seemed deeper than usual. Matt wasn't sure if it was a trick of the light or the result of the bloody scene inside the cabin. Maybe both.

"Doc, I know this isn't what you normally deal with, but is there anything you can tell me at first look?" Matt followed the older man's lead and stared out toward the edge of the woods where color bled from grey to black, avoiding eye contact. As long as he didn't see the horror reflected in the other's eyes, he could handle it.

"Son, right now, about all I can tell you is that they are well and truly dead." Shifting his feet, Doc leaned against the rough wood post of the porch.

"I ain't ever seen something like this that wasn't from an act of God like that tornado we had back in '02. We lost a couple of trailers full of people. I nearly gave it up over that one. This might just do the trick. I delivered both those kids in there. Now I got to put 'em back together for their mommas to bury."

"Yeah, Doc, I know. I left the Army looking for a spot where I wouldn't have to see something like this again. But here it is and we both have jobs to do." Looking down at his

scarred boots, Matt frowned before continuing. "I need some help on this and I don't mind saying it."

Doc Landers didn't answer right away, but ran a shaking hand over his face. "I'm gonna call Little Rock and ask for a hand, Matt. I'm not the man to work this one." He turned to face Matt. "You need the State boys, someone who knows more about what to look for than this old country doctor. I expect they'll want 'em transported there. If they do, I'll set it up myself and ride with 'em to be sure protocol is followed. I sure hope they can send someone down, though, since there are two of them—at least for the prelims." He shoved his hands deeper into his pockets. "Matt, what killed those two kids wasn't human. Not on the inside he wasn't."

Matt watched the country doc climb down the porch steps to bark directions to the EMTs who would transport the bodies once the crime scene techs were finished. He quietly agreed. "No, sir, that's not what was in that cabin, not nearly." Thinking back to what he'd witnessed inside not twenty feet from where he stood, he added almost to himself, "Not even close."

Matt's cell phone rang as they started loading the bodies into the ambulance. He checked the number and, seeing it was Gail at the sheriff's office, answered it.

"Yeah."

"Sheriff, just thought you might want to know about this since you have that situation out there. Dorothy and Pete Reynolds reported their daughter, Carol Ann, missing. She was a no show for school today and didn't come home this

afternoon. They notified city and city passed the info on to us."

Matt bit back a curse before asking the obvious. "It's nearly six at night. Why are they just now reporting her missing?"

"She normally has play practice after school from three to four-thirty, so they weren't worried till she didn't show up after five." Gail's voice was steady despite the message.

"Gail, the school calls when a kid doesn't show up for class. My wife talks about that all the time. Parents sometimes forget to notify the school when the kid is sick or going to be late from a dentist's appointment. Drives her crazy." Matt cradled the phone to his ear, pulling out his pad and pen to take notes as Gail talked.

"The school called Carol Ann's mom at work when she didn't show up for her second period class. Dorothy was working at the branch bank today instead of the main one and didn't get the message left on her machine."

"City knows what's going on out here?"

"Yeah, that's why they called here when you didn't answer your cell. Figured you were busy. They didn't say anything to the Reynolds, but said it would only be a matter of time 'til someone leaks what you got to the press. You might want to rule Carol Ann out and let them know before someone beats you to it."

When Matt didn't say anything right off, Gail whispered "shit" under her breath.

"Thanks, Gail. Keep a lid on this out here as long as you can while we tie things up so we don't get the news hounds

mucking up the area." He shoved the pen and pad back into his pocket once again before running his hand through his hair. He needed a haircut.

"Will do, Matt. Detective Dawson of the city police department is primary if you need to contact him." She passed on the phone number before hanging up.

Matt headed in the direction where Buddy still sat slumped on the bumper of his truck, the rubber tailgate supporting his weight. Sitting next to the man, Matt leaned against the rubber gate as well.

"Buddy, I know you've gone over and over this, but I need to ask a few more questions, okay?" When Buddy only nodded in agreement, he continued. "What was the first thing you noticed when you drove up?"

Buddy drew in a deep breath before clearing his throat, "Um, I guess it was the light in the window. Darrell and I were talking and we both noticed it about the same time." He rubbed his hand up and down his left leg, the movement eliciting a squeak from the clasps holding the rubber gate in place.

"Darrell made it to the door before I did, since he was on that side of the truck, but I was right behind him. He just stopped all of a sudden like, inside the door, and I ran right into him."

Matt nodded quietly and when Buddy didn't continue, prompted him. "When you stepped inside, do you remember hearing anything? Maybe even before you opened the door?"

Buddy just shook his head, never shifting his eyes from some distant spot ahead of him. When he didn't stop shaking

his head, Matt knew he wouldn't be able to get anything more out of the man that night.

"Buddy, why don't you find Darrell and you two go on home. I don't want you talking to anyone about this, you hear?" Matt touched his arm lightly, drawing Buddy's attention. "We have two families we still have to notify and I'd like it if we can do that in a quiet way and not have them hear about this from some reporter. Okay?" Matt stood up, moving in front of Buddy to be sure the man registered what he was saying.

"Yeah, Matt, I understand." Looking Matt in the eyes for the first time, Buddy continued, "You know, my son Ricky was Tommy's best friend. I don't know what..." He all but choked on the last word as it finally hit him. Lurching to the side of the truck, Buddy slid off the bumper, vomiting in the grass as the rubber tailgate snapped back with a muted thump. Matt turned his head, looking in the other direction, his mouth a tight line holding back his emotions, understanding the grim realization that had finally hit Buddy. It could have been his son he'd walked in and found mutilated in that cabin.

Matt waited until he was basically alone at the scene to pull his phone out. He hesitated to punch in the number, but knew if he wanted to catch the killer he was going to need help. Someone who knew more about reading into a crime scene what went on in the head of the killer. He needed Gavin. The question wasn't if he'd come, because Matt knew without a doubt he'd come. The question was, could Matt deal with seeing him again? Could he handle remembering the life he left behind?

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Gavin 'Ghost' Farinelli was the only person Matt knew he could trust with his life. Gavin had kept his ass out of hot water and a cold grave on more than one occasion during their ten years of Army hell. The last five of those years had been spent in Special Forces, Green Berets. They'd been part of the 75th Ranger Regiment and the two were known to get things done when anything less was not an option.

"Damn!" Before he changed his mind, Matt angrily punched in the number he knew like his own, but hadn't called in the five years he'd been out of the service. The phone rang six times before a canned recording with the voice of a surly girl asked him to leave his name and number so the "dude" could get back to him "when he damn well felt like it".

Smiling at how Gavin-like it was, Matt left his message. "Ghost, Snake here. You have my numbers. Call me."

Snapping the phone closed a little too hard, he shoved it back in his pocket to survey the innocent-looking cabin, dark and nearly consumed by shadows. The carnage behind that door would haunt him for the rest of his life. Unless they found the bastard and stopped him soon, there'd be more and he knew it. Shaking his head, Matt turned to head for his truck, his jaw already aching with the pressure he'd exerted on it to maintain control. Before he reached the truck, his phone rang. Checking the number, he saw that it was Gavin. Swallowing past the lump in his throat, he answered.

"Yeah?"

"Snake?" the deep voice from his past asked on the other end. "Didn't realize the temperature dropped that low in hell, man."

Matt smiled despite his reservations and leaned back against the truck door, feeling the immediate tensing in his muscles. "Yeah, looks like snow any day now." Running a hand through his hair, he sighed and plowed right in.

"I know I don't have a right to ask, Gavin," he hesitated, reluctant to continue, "but I could use some help here." It was quiet on the other end for almost a full thirty seconds. Matt realized he was holding his breath, wondering if he'd been wrong about Gavin after all.

"Don't ever think you owe me anything, Matt. You don't." Gavin's dark voice admonished him. "What we used to do was killing you. I didn't feel things like you did. There just wasn't anything inside of me to kill, is all." Matt didn't respond, couldn't respond to this. Gavin's sigh echoed over the phone.

"How do you get to this backwoods town of yours, anyway?"

Matt gave him directions to Casper and the Sheriff's office before hanging up. Despite his misgivings over bringing Gavin in, he felt a weight lift from his shoulders. He could count on Gavin to do whatever needed doing. Now he just had to figure out how to deal with his own demons.

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Chapter Two

The dream nagged at Rhi as she folded the last towel out of the dryer, adding it to the stack in the laundry basket. She'd found herself pulled back to it over and over during the day. The eerie feeling that something was different wouldn't leave her alone. Neither of the two teens seemed familiar to her and she always had a physical connection to her victims. Why couldn't she remember what the connection was?

Changing the sheets from the washer to the dryer, she searched her memory for anything familiar about them. Though she didn't have a clear picture of their faces, she should be able to recall something about at least one of them. Biting her lip in exasperation as she tossed the last pillow case into the dryer, Rhi rubbed her eyes. It normally took more than a brief touch to form a bond where she became connected to them in their deaths. *Normally...* Her mouth twisted at the thought; what was normal about watching someone die in the most horrible ways over and over again?

Rhi moved automatically through the steps of doing laundry, when her attention was snagged by the lack of music on the radio. Before she reached the counter and the radio, the announcer's report stopped her in mid-stride, the words turning her stomach.

"Authorities are not releasing the names of the two teenage victims pending notification of the next of kin, but sources say they were found in a cabin west of Casper, Arkansas about three-thirty this afternoon."

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Grabbing the radio with both hands, she fumbled to turn it off and ended up jerking the plug from the wall in panic. *Here!* Her dream was reality and in her own back yard! Sinking into a chair at the kitchen table, Rhi dropped her head onto her crossed arms in defeat. Odds were she should have had more victims from her dreams close to her, but she'd avoided contact with anyone near her since she'd moved to Arkansas. She knew deep down that one day it would happen. She only dreamed about the violent deaths of people she had physical contact with at some point in her life. Now, despite all her precautions, the dreams forced a decision from her. Run again or stay and fight back.

Rhi's life since waking up in the hospital all those years before had been one of solitude and fear. Fear of the dreams, fear of seeing someone she knew die a terrible death. Fear she would one day see her own impending death. Now that fear was a new reality about to slap her in the face. She had already felt something different about the dreams this time; now it appeared she might actually live close to these two kids. She'd moved so many times in the past. How could she turn her back on this one?

How could she become involved? Always when she tried, no one believed her or, worse, thought she was crazy. Occasionally, she'd been investigated as a potential suspect. She didn't recognize the two teenagers in the dreams, but she saw so little of their faces this time. Most of the others were people she worked with or patients she had touched as a nurse. If they had been from one of the hospitals she'd worked in the past, she could have understood the possible

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connection. Maybe they were part of a family of a patient she'd taken care of. But they were from Casper, so where had she touched one or both of them? It would drive her insane trying to remember—needing to remember.

She'd stopped working full time anywhere close to her home. Instead, she became a travel nurse and worked as far from where she lived as possible. Wearing gloves at work cut down on the connections, so she worked mostly in the Emergency Departments where she only pulled gloves off to put another pair on. Still, the occasional contact at the grocery or a gas station happened.

Maybe that was where the contact with the murdered teens had happened. The contact had formed a bond, so that when something violent was about to occur in their lives, she began the series of dreams foreseeing their deaths, over and over again. They would stop once it had come to pass. Sometimes she read about it in the newspapers and sometimes she never knew more at all.

Rhi ran her hands through her hair, pulling on it, needing to feel something besides the terror building inside her. Propping her head up with her hands, she struggled to regain control even as tears slid down her face. *Control? When had she ever been in control?* Crying didn't help anything. Neither did sitting still. She couldn't ignore this one. Not just because she lived less than thirty minutes from Casper, but also because of that *something* nagging her in the back of her mind. It was different this time and she needed to know what was different and why.

There was another reason, as well. She didn't want to think about it, but she was intimately familiar with violent death of all types and flavors. She knew some of the most dark and sickening work of every sort of killer imaginable. In an effort to help the authorities when she had the dreams, Rhi had studied everything she could on the subject of murder and violent deaths. This one had all the signs, like organization and ritual. Signs of a serial killer. One who was practiced and proficient in his work. Someone located very close to where she lived. And Rhi knew without a doubt, he would kill again. He had to. It was who he was and what he did.

Her one consolation in the knowledge was that the odds of her having a bond with his next victims would be extremely low. She rarely visited Casper or the closer community of Larkin. This meant she would probably not have another dream, but it wouldn't stop the killer from killing again. She had options. She would need to think about them. Stopping a serial killer wasn't an easy task for trained law enforcement agencies. It would be even more difficult for a small town department with limited resources. They wouldn't be overly enthusiastic to have interference from a reclusive psychic who dreamed about deaths before they occurred.

"Shit." Rhi stood and stretched, picking up the laundry basket as she did. "Can't sit here all night."

She headed to the bathroom to put the towels up, and then to her office. She needed to get to work. She needed time to let her subconscious puzzle through the dreams, but time was something she didn't have. Right now, she would

find out who was in charge of the investigation and see what her options were for providing some clues. Once she knew who they were.

Logging onto her computer and then to the Internet, Rhi began the arduous task of gathering information. She opened her preferred search engine and typed in the first search words that came to mind. It only took twenty minutes to determine Sheriff Matthew Brady of the Izard County Sheriff's Office was in charge. He would be her contact once she decided how to approach the man.

Nearly an hour later, she had little more information on the man than when she'd first started. Most of her contacts came up empty. Sheriff Brady, discharged with commendations from Special Forces five years earlier, settled in Casper, Arkansas with his wife, Sandy, who taught at the local high school. Not much except that he seemed to be an honorable man. Maybe that was all she needed to know. At any rate, it would have to do.

A soft *thump thump* alerted Rhi of Toby's arrival. The light grey and white tomcat drifted into the office and glared in her direction.

"Hungry, I suppose." Shaking her head at the massive bulk of the cat, she couldn't understand how he could be hungry. "You're out mighty late, Toby." Glancing at her watch, she realized it was after two in the morning. "Make that early." Sighing, she followed the cat back to the kitchen and fed him before calling it a night. Sometime before she dozed off, the thought crossed her mind that she could simply pick up and leave. Again.

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Chapter Three

Matt tilted his chair back, drumming the tips of his fingers against his desk. Ever since he had made it back to his office in Casper, he'd puzzled over his notes and the initial crime scene photos he had taken. This wasn't an opportunistic murder. There had been planning involved and the SOB probably spent time watching either one or both of the teenagers. The scene felt like it was staged, the victims posed.

Matt figured the killer brought everything he had needed with him. Including the rope and knife, though he might have found the old rope there at the cabin and the knife could have come from the kitchen. He didn't think that was the case, though. He was fairly positive the autopsy would indicate the knife was a hunting knife. He was sure the strange hooks anchored in the floor weren't just lying around, either.

Picking up one of the newly created folders, he glanced through the initial information again. The color photos splayed across his desk drew his gaze to the grim reminder of the scene back at the cabin. He needed the damn forensics results fast. Hell, all the evidence would be sent off to Little Rock and that would take time. Time was something they didn't have. He knew that as soon as he stepped into that cabin. The monster responsible for those two kids' deaths wasn't new to killing.

Doc Landers had someone coming from Little Rock to do the initial posts. They would transport the bodies back to

Little Rock for full autopsies. He'd have a preliminary report in the morning, but anything more would take several days. They had died sometime between twelve thirty and one thirty Friday morning based on temperatures and rigor. The only other thing Landers could give him was they had suffered before they'd died.

His gut told him this was the work of a serial killer. Something no one in law enforcement said lightly and never after only one death. But Matt had other experience and knew the work of someone who was organized when he saw it. This was someone who planned the smallest detail. Someone who had killed before and would do it again. Matt would stake his badge on that. He wanted him stopped before he did.

Slamming the folder back on the desk, Matt wondered if he had made the right decision to call in Gavin, but another look at the first of the crime scene photos on his desk pushed any further doubts to the back of his mind.

"Shit." Sliding the photo under the folder with the tip of his finger, he admitted there wasn't anything he wouldn't do to stop this bastard and put his ass in a cell. Asking for help from Gavin really wasn't the issue. No, it wasn't asking for his help that had Matt hesitating. It would be seeing Gavin's empty eyes again. They would remind him of who he had been and what he'd done when they were back in Special Forces. Those empty eyes would bring up all the old feelings from when he and Sandy first got married.

Matt had depended on those cold eyes for a long time, nearly nine years. Gavin was the reason he'd been able to walk away from that life five years before without nearly as

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much baggage as most of the group he'd served with. Gavin took as much of the shit onto himself as he could, when he could. He did whatever needed to be done and let Matt pretend it wasn't real, but at what price? Matt always wondered.

At the time, he hadn't let himself think about it, but when he decided not to re-enlist, he started feeling some of what Gavin had shielded from him. The first few months out were tough on him, so he knew they had to have been tougher on Gavin, but he never could bring himself to make the phone call. He'd been able to deal with those eyes on a daily basis while in the service, but outside the Army, in mainstream society, Matt couldn't look in those eyes on a regular basis without wondering. What did a man like Gavin do without the Army to give him that environment to work in? Matt really didn't want to know, but he had a feeling he was about to find out.

Hanging up, he gathered the crime scene photos along with the newly created folders of Tommy and Carol Ann's murders and shoved them in his desk drawer, out of sight of anyone who didn't need to see them. If only he could close that drawer in his mind as easily. Slapping the desk top with his open hands, he stood and began locking up the office to head home. It was late and he'd forgotten to tell Sandy not to bother fixing supper.

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Chapter Four

"Damn! There's nothing new about the murders!"

Slamming the newspaper down on her desk, Rhi logged back on the Internet to do another search. She'd risked driving into Larkin early that morning for a paper in hopes there would be pictures or names available by now. It still bothered her that she didn't recognize either of the teens. As she scanned the news sections once again, one article caught her attention.

"Casper Teens Found Mutilated in Remote Cabin." Reading the story, she was both excited and heartbroken to see two school pictures attached at the bottom of the story. Rhi pulled them up, eager to finally see who they were. When she didn't recognize them, her heart sped up, thumping hard in her chest.

"Carol Ann Ketchings and Tommy Sanders," she read out loud. How could she dream about them without having some contact with them? She should remember one of them!

Her lungs constricted and her heart pounded as if she'd been running. This wasn't right! She needed something to drink. It was becoming harder to breathe. Staggering to the kitchen, Rhi nearly stumbled over Toby lying on the floor near the sink. He jumped up and scooted out of the way just in time to avoid another stomp on his tail.

"Sorry, Toby," she managed to wheeze. Her voice sounded far away. Filling a glass with water from the tap, she swallowed convulsively, her hands trembling, spilling it down her face. The cold water ran down her neck, dripping to her

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blouse. She didn't remember stumbling to the chair in the den, but relief poured over her as she sank into the chair, the cushion soft under her legs. What was wrong with her? Was she having a panic attack?

Darkness engulfed her and she felt as if she were sinking in cold mud. It sucked at her, drawing her deeper until she knew she would suffocate and die. Desperation replaced the panic as she struggled to move her arms or legs to find a way out, but they didn't seem to exist anymore. There was nothing but the feeling of thick cold mud pushing against her until she couldn't expand her lungs even one more time.

And just as suddenly, the feeling was gone and she could see again. Standing just inside the cabin she recognized from her previous dreams, Rhi could barely make out the two bodies in front of the fireplace. The only light in the room came from the lamp behind her lying on the floor. The smell of fear and death overpowered the other scents in the room...musty damp cloth and the ashy stale smell of smoke from the fireplace. Why was she there again?

A sound startled her and she turned away from the grizzly scene to find herself standing in a schoolyard. Teenagers walked past her, chatting about boys and homework or the football game next week. Confused, Rhi tried turning back around, but the cabin was no longer there. Her pulse sped up as two girls walked by and she recognized the shorter blond as Carol Ann, the murdered girl from the paper.

"Come on, Carol Ann, don't try and tell me you haven't screwed Tommy yet." The dark brunette laughed, making a

face. "Tommy's hot for you and he isn't going to wait around forever." She drew out the last word suggestively.

"Margo! Don't talk like that!" Carol Ann nervously looked around them, swinging her blond hair in her face. "I'm just not ready yet. I want to wait till school's out and we can spend some time together. That's all." Carol Ann glanced behind her, obviously afraid someone had overheard Margo's outburst.

By the red creeping into her cheeks, Rhi was sure the girl was a virgin and petrified someone would find out. Her entire body language screamed it. Why was she seeing this? She'd never gone back once the victims were dead. It was something she had never experienced before. Dear God, what was going on? Surely the dreams weren't changing after all this time?

The girls passed by, still chattering and laughing, and despite wanting to follow them, she turned instead toward the back of the school. Shouting and grunts followed by the shrill sound of a whistle suggested football practice was in full swing. As she drew closer to the practice scrimmage going on ahead of her, she saw Tommy jog across the field to drop sprawling on the ground next to two other sweaty teens. He followed suit and began stretching his legs.

"Hey, Tommy, when you going to take Carol Ann out to the cabin?" one of the two other boys asked as he stretched forward, touching his toes.

"Next Wednesday if she can get her parents to let her spend the night with Margo," he managed to say despite his rapid breathing. "Her folks are strict with school nights."

"Dad's going to start cleaning it up for hunting season soon, so you better make it next week for sure."

The sound of the whistle had the three boys jumping up to run back out on the field, where the coach issued orders to the others in short, clipped sentences. Rhi shook her head, trying to make sense of it, but couldn't. Why was she here? Nothing made sense, which had her anxiety level creeping even higher now.

The sound of something familiar—yet not—caught her attention, but before she could identify it, a sharp pain in her hand drew her back into herself. Once again she was back in her den, in the chair with Toby sitting on the chair arm. Glancing down at her hands lying limp in her lap, she saw that her left hand was bleeding from two very distinct teeth marks between her thumb and forefinger.

"You bit me, Toby! You've never done that before." Still sluggish, Rhi held pressure where she bled and stared curiously at the fat cat. He didn't budge...just continued to sit motionless, looking back at her.

"What is it?" What was going on? Had she fallen into The Twilight Zone somehow? Had Toby bitten her to pull her back? She felt a trickle down her throat and realized her nose was bleeding. She'd rarely had nosebleeds with her dreams, but then she'd never had a vision with them before, either. Caught between holding her hand or her nose, she felt the urge to laugh at the absurdity of it all. Toby leaned forward and patted her mouth with his paw before jumping down and heading into the kitchen.

"Probably sitting by your food bowl now. You're hungry and I wasn't paying any attention; go figure." Sighing at her overactive imagination and slim escape from hysteria, Rhi struggled to stand and found she was weak and shaky. Her head hurt, a dull ache that threatened to evolve into full-fledged pain. This was getting worse by the minute.

Once she managed to stumble to the kitchen, she found Toby sitting by his food bowl. A scowl and sharp flicks of his tail confirmed her theory. Shrugging, she topped off his crunchies and watched him nibble before she washed the blood from her hand and poured a generous amount of peroxide from her first aid kit over the wounds. Toby was a hunter and spent most of the time outside. No use asking for more trouble by allowing it to become infected. Her nose had stopped bleeding on its own, thank goodness, but she needed something to wash away the metallic taste from her mouth and throat. Something for her head wouldn't be a bad idea, either.

She let her mind roam as she applied antiseptic and a bandage. None of this was her usual routine when it came to the dreams. This last episode seemed more like a vision than a dream and it was from before the murders occurred. Something important had occurred in that little excerpt she'd seen, but what? How could she figure any of this out when it was all new to her?

She had researched everything she could find on psychic premonitions and dreams, but there was actually very little authenticated information available. Most of what Rhi had learned came from experience and trial and error. Now she

seemed to be in a new learning curve and the unknown terrified her. It took her back to before her dreams, before waking up in the hospital to when she had been married and living her own personal nightmare. She had never known from one day to the next what *he* would do to her. Sometimes it would be days before he touched her and sometimes she couldn't tell when one day ended and another began. It wasn't the humiliation or even the pain that frightened her the most. It was not knowing what to expect or when to expect it. She feared the unknown more than she feared anything else in her life.

That settled it. She would take the chance and try to help the investigation however she could. She had packed what she might need in case she had to run, but until then she would figure a way to help. Anonymous emails had worked in the past. She would try that to start. First she would need to set up a re-mail account. Then she'd figure out what to say in order to catch their attention without sounding like a nut case. Something only the killer and the sheriff would know, along with something that might help them figure out who he was.

Rhi returned to her office to put everything she remembered into words and down on paper. There was something there, she was sure, that could help identify the bastard who had carved up those teenagers. Once she had it all in black and white, she would look until she found it. Then she would pass it on to the sheriff and hope he'd take it seriously. That was the most she could hope for. That and no more dreams.

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His breath quickened when he saw her standing alone by the auditorium door. The dark brown of her eyes reminded him of a doe awakening from sleep—liquid brown and large, almost too large for her face. Though he knew she waited for the tall blond inside, he could almost believe she waited for him. She was still pure and untouched and his

He nearly went to her then, but caught himself as the blond walked out into the sun to stand next to his little doe. They talked and laughed over some nonsense the blond said. She was stupid and flaunted her body like the whore she was. How anyone would see her as special or pretty was beyond him. He only saw the ugliness of her soul. That was how he knew what she was inside. He could see the dark places already forming in her soul

It was how he knew that his little doe was pure and sweet. Her soul had no smudges or shadows. That she could talk to and help the other without corruption swelled his heart. She had to be the one, so strong in her purity. The blond girl used her like a servant, spending just enough time around her to keep her grades up and never paying attention to her outside of school. It angered him, but he would not interfere...yet. His little doe would prove to be worthy and he would claim her. Then none of the others would matter to him or to her.

He watched from the trees as the two walked back toward the main building. His fingers tingled to touch her hair, but he kept them shoved deep in his pockets. It wouldn't do for anyone to notice how his power shone when he was around her. Licking his lips with the tip of his tongue, it didn't bother

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him when some of the saliva dripped to his chin. The nectar of his madness manifested, but no one saw. They never did.

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Chapter Five

Running his hand through his hair in frustration, Matt stood up abruptly, his desk chair rolling backwards. He paced back and forth in front of the window that looked out on Church Street. The normal morning traffic associated with Casper's prosperous business section continued unaffected by the fact that a deranged killer had taken the lives of two of their teenagers. Matt knew it was unfair to think that, but his own anger at having nothing to work with in the case needed an outlet. One he could control and manage without losing his own fragile hold on sanity.

Unable to sleep, he had spent most of the early morning hours digging through reports from his deputies on their interviews with the families and friends of Carol Ann and Tommy. He'd personally accompanied Police Chief Donald Eggers to both Carol Ann's house and Tommy's to break the news to their families the night before. Matt had hoped to learn something useful during the interviews, but nothing of significance stood out. He had also gone because Carol Ann's mom and his wife were old college roommates. Tommy's mom raised her two children alone, working as a waitress at the local truck stop and taking in sewing for extra money. Neither interview had been productive, but they rarely were.

None of the reports from his deputies provided much more information, either. Carol Ann was dropped off by her mom and dad at Margo's house about five-forty-five Wednesday night on their way to church. They rarely missed Sunday

morning or Wednesday night worship, but allowed Carol Ann to miss this one in order to study for a test and practice her lines for the school play. She had the leading role, according to her mom. The two girls often stayed over at each other's houses for study dates and sleepovers, so Carol Ann's parents hadn't thought twice about the request.

Evidently, sometime about ten that night, after the girls were supposed to be in bed, Carol Ann had snuck out of the window to meet Tommy at the end of the drive. She was supposed to be at school the next morning as if she'd gone with Margo. No one would have been the wiser.

Matt's attention was snagged by the arrival of Gail, one of the shared emergency response dispatchers and his office manager for the Izard County Sheriff's Department.

All of the area's emergency agencies, fire, ambulance, police, sheriff and various on-call officials shared one main dispatch unit that covered the entire Izard County area and included the neighboring towns and communities within a sixty-some-odd mile radius. Matt's crew consisted of Gail, four full-time deputies and two part-time deputies and was responsible for the entire rural area of Izard County, Arkansas.

Since he had taken the Sheriff's position almost five years earlier, Matt had fostered a mutual assistance type of relationship with most of the area's police and fire departments. It opened communications so they could share information in hopes it would cut down on violent crimes and wasted resources. So far it had proved to be both helpful and lucrative for the participating communities' budgets—

something he had secretly hoped would assure continuing support for the project.

Letting Gail get in the door and settle into her work routine before he appeared was something Matt had to learn to do in order to escape a day of pure Gail hell. Never being one to play office politics or cater to idiosyncrasies in others, it took Matt longer to figure out the benefits than it should have. His wife seemed to enjoy the show, offering suggestions that he had quickly vetoed. But, he had finally learned and Gail became his most prized employee and a good friend.

It surprised him when she only dropped her purse into her desk drawer before heading directly to his office. Something was urgent, for her to deviate from her normal routine.

"Gail? What's up?" Matt immediately met her at the door.

"Messages I took on the way over I thought you might need right away." Handing him a couple of scraps of paper, she hesitated as if to add something, but before he could ask, she just shook her head and headed back to the front.

Matt took the message scraps to his desk and sat down to return the calls—the first one a call from Doc Landers concerning the preliminary autopsy results—in hopes there would be something useful. The second call would be to Donny Eggers, the police chief. Neither man had had anything of value to add to his pitifully thin folders. The twenty-four hour mark since the deaths had passed and now it was coming up to twenty-four hours since they'd found the bodies. He almost growled his frustration.

So far, their reports stated that neither of the teens had complained to anyone they'd interviewed of anyone bothering

them, following them or just looking at them oddly. Everything in the reports looked normal on the surface. Both teens had the usual peer pressures and school-associated activities as well as the occasional parent/child relationship issues, but nothing that pointed to murder and certainly not the type of scene he'd found in that cabin. If it hadn't been for the crime scene itself, Matt could almost see it as a random double murder...almost.

Kicking his chair towards the desk, Matt turned it back around and sat down and pulled up his email to see if anything new had come in on his request for reports of similar crimes. Nothing popped at first as he scrolled through the messages, but on going back through them, his attention was caught by one highlighted by his spam program as an anonymous email. His curiosity piqued, Matt sent it through his virus software and, when it proved clear, opened it.

"He watched her at school. She was supposed to be pure, his. But she went with the boy instead. He's already looking for another."

Matt read it two more times to be sure he had it right, but knew from the feeling in his gut it wasn't a prank. He looked at the message for a clue where it had come from or who sent it, but it was blank of anything but the message and the mailer address. He was familiar with re-mailers and knew that there was little chance he could track it without some weird computer whiz to sift through all the junctions it probably traveled through. He hit the print screen key and immediately the email vanished.

"What the?" Scrolling quickly back through the mail and then on to his deleted mail, Matt couldn't find the email anywhere in his program or on his computer, for that matter. He had never had that happen before. Well, not while he had been a civilian, anyway. They had used auto delete programs in Special Forces when needed, but Matt had never run across them outside of the Army. Whoever sent that email *really* didn't want to be traced. Could be the killer himself.

Grabbing paper and pen, he quickly wrote down what had been on the mail before he forgot it. He had an excellent memory, but didn't want to take the chance he'd forget or substitute even one 'the'. Whoever this was, they knew something about the murders and quite possibly the murderer, and he wanted to find out what they knew and who they were. Maybe Gavin could help with this part, as well.

If the note turned out to be genuine, then someone had seen this guy watching Carol Ann. Damn, he hated having nothing to go on and being reduced to looking at anonymous emails! He could be wasting time even thinking about it, but if he ignored it and it was genuine... They checked out every phone call no matter how silly. Email wasn't really any different. He couldn't ignore it.

Frustrated by the jagged pieces of information he had to work with, Matt bit his lower lip and decided maybe coffee would help clear his head. It was nearing ten in the morning and he'd been there since almost four. Matt never made it to the break room. His internal warning system went off, and he stiffened, automatically readying himself for a fight.

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Gavin was there. Matt changed directions and headed to the front office. When he reached the doorway from the hall, he hesitated before stepping through. He wasn't sure what to expect after five years, but the tall mountain of a man standing by Gail's desk hadn't changed at all. He still had the same dark eyes and tanned skin that looked stretched beyond endurance over muscled arms and shoulders. Nothing about his face looked different unless you counted a fresh new scar at the edge of his right eyebrow. The old sayings from when they'd been out in the field came back to him. Two words described Ghost: bald and dangerous.

The air in the room felt thick with something that Matt had never been able to put his finger on, but it felt like energy—pure energy sizzling and waiting to be discharged. It hung around Gavin nearly all the time, but was especially thick in unknown situations. Two of Matt's deputies still in the office walked up to Gail's desk, standing a bit closer to her than normal. They recognized danger and power when they felt it and with a stranger showing up right after a particularly brutal murder, they weren't in a mood to be friendly. They postured, aiming their own auras toward the stranger. *We know you're tough, but we aren't letting you past us.*

Gail found her voice, making an obvious effort to erase her shocked expression. "Afternoon, sir, what can I do for you?" The slight quaver in her voice didn't go unnoticed by any of them. Gail didn't flap easily.

"I'm here to see Matt," Gavin said, indicating that Matt stood at the door to the hall. "He's expecting me."

Without another word, he walked past all three of them. Their gaze followed him the entire length of the room. Matt nodded at his deputies to assure them it was okay. Centering his attention on the man approaching him, Matt cocked his head with his hands on his hips and made eye contact with his ex-partner.

"Didn't expect you till this afternoon."

Gavin's eyebrows lifted slightly. "I made good time on the bike. Let's see what you got." Walking through the door into Matt's office, he took the seat across from the desk. Crossing his legs, he waited as Matt asked Gail to hold his calls before closing the office door and turning to greet him.

"Gavin, thanks for coming." Matt didn't offer his hand. You didn't do that with Gavin. He tended to avoid physical contact when he could. "I've got everything we have so far in here." Matt tapped the folders on his desk. "But we'll go out to the cabin to look around, as well."

His friend's dark eyes looked around the office as Matt slid a folder across the desk to him. Leaning against the front of his desk, he looked hard at his old friend. Gavin still kept his head neatly shaved but his angular face, scarred in more than one place, looked scruffy, as if he'd forgotten to shave that morning. Gavin was easily 6'3", but his self-assured demeanor made him appear much taller. He was always aware of everything and everyone around him and missed nothing. His hands were huge and callused as if he did hard manual labor for a living. Matt knew the big man had his own personal training routine that most men wouldn't attempt and probably wouldn't be able to handle. Didn't look like he'd

given up the routine since they'd left. Gavin's body was as close to a machine as man would ever get and Gavin kept his well oiled. There was always that calm look on his face, but underneath he was coiled tight, ready to spring at the slightest hint of danger.

Gavin looked dangerous, Matt admitted, but it wasn't until you looked into his eyes and saw...nothing, absolutely nothing, that you knew he *was* dangerous. You could almost doubt he was human. He rarely showed emotions or normal facial expressions. Still, Matt knew, if the need was there, he could pull off any type of persona needed. Matt made it a habit not to watch his partner's face when he changed from one to another. It made him a little more nervous than he was comfortable feeling when they worked together behind enemy lines. Drawing in a deep breath, he knew this was going to be a tough ride. He hoped he was up for it.

Gavin closed the folder and handed it back to Matt. He watched his ex-partner slam the folder down on the desk, his mouth curled into a scowl. Matt ran his hand through his hair, massaging the back of his neck for a minute, and then rounded the desk to open another drawer.

"We haven't got a shred of evidence to work with so far," Matt growled, pulling out a stack of pictures—crime scene photos, Gavin figured—and passing them to him across the desk. "He has to have done this before somewhere, but so far nothing has hit VICAP."

Gavin took the photos and looked through them, stopping occasionally to study one, going back to another every once in a while. He could tell the killer had a great deal of control

as well as experience. He knew what he was doing. Gavin ran his finger over one picture depicting just the face of the girl. Her hair, carefully arranged, maybe even brushed, gave her the appearance of merely being asleep, not dead. None of the blood evident in all the other photos marred her face. He felt Matt's impatience radiating from the other side of the desk.

Gavin stood and laid the photos out on Matt's desk. He arranged them in order of importance based on what he learned about the killer. The killer was in control and had planned well. Switching one here and another one there, he decided the place hadn't been of the killer's choosing. Gavin looked at Matt for a moment and then walked over to the map hanging behind the desk to study it.

"Show me where the cabin is on the map." He turned back to Matt.

Matt pulled out a box of colored push pins from the center drawer of his desk and joined him in front of the map. Gavin watched him mark the cabin's location with a green pin. Then, after a few seconds, he added two more pins to the map, followed by a third.

"This is the high school where both of the teens went." Matt indicated the last pin he had placed. "They lived here and here." Gavin nodded.

After studying the location of the pins and their relationship to each other, Gavin returned to Matt's desk to stare for a long while at the pictures he'd arranged before looking up at the map again. The scene was staged. The two victims were close enough to almost touch if they'd been able to move, but were kept apart by their restraints. The killer

had them dead center of the fireplace, giving the impression that the fireplace meant something. The way they were tied down and the fact that their clothes had been completely removed meant something, too, but he didn't know at that moment what it was. Rotating his head to release some of the stiffness from riding his bike all night, Gavin tried to see what the killer was telling them.

The boy's face was covered with blood and his expression left no doubt he'd been tortured. The picture of the girl's head and neck bothered him. Without the rest of the body in the photo, it was hard to tell she was dead or even brutally murdered. The killer had gone to a lot of trouble to make sure her face looked normal. No blood or smudges on her face to indicate what he'd done to her. Why? Gavin licked his upper lip and thought about motive and need. This was about the girl. Not the boy and not the couple, just the girl. He hadn't made any mistakes or left any evidence behind that they had found so far. That meant not only planning and control, but also experience—a lot of experience.

"Yeah, he's done this before." He looked up at Matt. "This is about the girl, so let's narrow it down some. Try the search for female victims, same general age group, no hair color definition, with stab wounds to the lower abdomen." He tapped one of the pictures with a pencil eraser.

"So Tommy was just in the wrong place at the wrong time?" Matt's eyebrows drew together as he made notes.

"Not exactly." Gavin drew in a deep breath and continued. "He's the catalyst, I think, but I need to see the cabin first to be sure."

"The bastard was focused on Carol Ann and Tommy got in the way."

"Try the same search again, but with the heart angle. I think the first will pop you some matches, but I don't think the heart was originally part of the killer's MO. I think this is new." Gavin rolled his shoulders and looked back at the crime scene photos again. "This is the first or maybe the second time he's taken the hearts. Maybe he's stabbed them in the chest before, but his technique is too amateurish in relation to the rest of the crime scene for the heart to be anything but new."

Gavin fingered the pictures as he thought about the crime. "He's changing, evolving." He stared down at the photos he'd arranged on the desk, their gruesome images reminding him of other similar images from his past. Maybe not the teenagers and the elaborate staging, but similar in the nature of the deaths. How long had it been? Six, seven years? Did it even matter how long? Swallowing the thoughts down, he looked back at Matt, knowing what his old friend was thinking.

"You're right, though. He's going to kill again."

Matt swore softly and logged into VICAP. Gavin watched him set up new search strings using the criteria he'd suggested. He knew what would come next. Matt would want to know what sort of animal did that to teenagers and he'd have to lie to him. Give him the facts, but tell him what he wanted to hear when it came to who or what could do that to another human being. Because the truth would be too much for him. The truth was he was the kind of man who could do

that to another human being. Gavin looked out the window of Matt's office to the front office where the lady who had greeted him earlier sat at her desk, typing. She looked up to find him staring at her and blanched quickly, looking back down again. Well, at least *he* was that kind of man, he amended.

"Who are we looking for, Gavin? What kind of monster is living in my town?" Matt interrupted his thoughts, catching him a little off guard.

Gavin closed the door to the past, wishing for about the thousandth time since had had mustered out behind Matt that he could lock it. Giving Matt his full attention, he told him what he'd come up with.

"He's an organized killer. As I said before, he's evolving and the removal of the hearts is a step in whatever direction he's going. Without a little more to work with, I'm not sure what else except that he's probably a white male between the ages of about twenty-eight to forty. I might be able to give you more after we look at the cabin." Gavin was ready to head out whenever Matt was.

Nodding in agreement, Matt stood up and covered the photos on his desk with his blotter. Gavin watched as he shut down the computer and grabbed his shoulder holster, hat and coat, jerking his head towards the front.

"I'll meet you at my truck. Need to talk to Gail and leave a note for one of my deputies to check on something for me." Matt locked the door behind them.

Gavin headed for the outside door, reaching the front desk as Gail raised her head. He made the effort to smile at her

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before reaching the door. He knew by the way his neck burned in the back she didn't buy his smile one bit. Closing the door behind him, Gavin figured she was a damn good judge of character. Chuckling at the irony in the whole situation, he discreetly unlocked Matt's truck and climbed in. It wouldn't surprise the man one bit and Gavin figured he'd expect it.

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Chapter Six

Gavin remained silent during the drive out to the cabin. He hadn't realized just how difficult it was going to be. Not the murder and finding the bastard responsible, but facing Matt and their past without digging it all up again. His ex-partner had a new life and didn't deserve being reminded of that time in their lives. He knew seeing him would stir it all up again for Matt. Gavin couldn't hide who he was. He couldn't disguise the lack of emotion or the emptiness he knew showed in his eyes. It had been so long since he felt much of anything that he sometimes forgot what others saw when they looked at him. Matt knew him too well to try and hide behind a *face*, as he called it when he slipped into a role.

He thought about just how much he was like the monsters he had helped track down and remove over the years. What made him different, if he *was* different? Was it just a matter of choice? He *chose* not to murder innocent people. Or, was it deeper than that? Did he have some morsel of humanity left inside of him the others didn't? What would it take to destroy that morsel and who would stop him if it happened? Shaking his head, Gavin closed his eyes.

Once they arrived at the cabin, Gavin didn't move to get out of the truck right away. Instead, he looked out the window toward the cabin and the surrounding area. The woods crowded in close to the cabin, so there wasn't much of a clearing in front. Made for good surveillance cover, he thought to himself. It would have been easy for the killer to

follow the kids to the cabin and then watch without their being aware of it. Especially considering they were teenagers and probably in the throes of young lust. Why there and then?

"This was an opportunity for him," Gavin finally said, turning to look at Matt. "He took advantage of the place because the event forced him to, but it was still opportunity."

Matt frowned at him, "What do you mean, the event?"

"He was watching her, obsessed with her. Seeing them together was too much for him." Gavin rubbed his chin and looked back at Matt. "He's been watching her. I don't know why yet, but when she came to the cabin with Tommy, he was forced by the circumstances to act."

"You said before it was about her and not him," Matt added.

"He pretty much tortured Tommy, though I doubt he saw it as torture. There didn't seem to be the same amount of anger or rage in the way he killed Carol Ann." Gavin shook his head slightly, thinking about the pictures.

"He probably knew from watching Carol Ann that she was coming out here with Tommy that night. He probably didn't know where exactly and followed them, but he must have overheard her or Tommy and knew their plans. He came prepared, but I still don't think he wanted to kill them initially." He continued looking out the window for a few more minutes before getting out of the truck and heading toward the cabin.

He heard Matt close his door on the other side of the truck and knew he'd be close by. The good thing about working

with someone you knew was they knew how you worked. He could count on Matt to give him plenty of room. He hadn't had much luck working with anyone since he'd been on the outside. 'Course, he didn't often take a job where he needed help. It hit him as he reached the front porch of the cabin—why did kids go down deserted dirt roads? To make out, of course. Why would they go to a deserted cabin? For sex. More than likely, the first time. If Tommy really cared about her, he wouldn't want their first time to be in his truck. It was too cold for a blanket in the truck bed and awkward in the front seat, especially if it was a stick shift.

Turning around, he quickly puzzled through the possibilities as Matt watched him without saying anything.

"What?" Matt finally asked, prodding him quietly.

"Was Tommy's truck an automatic or a manual?"

Matt answered him without asking why. "Stick shift."

Nodding his head. "Did he kill them before they had sex or afterwards?"

Gavin stepped up onto the porch, ducking under the yellow crime scene tape wrapped around the posts. He walked over to the window to the right of the cabin door. Through that window, the couch was easily visible.

"Before. Doc said she was a virgin. We had one of the forensic guys come from Little Rock to do the initial posts before they shipped them off." Matt joined Gavin on the porch, but stayed out of his way.

"Said there was no sign of sexual assault to either of them, no sodomy and no evidence the killer masturbated over them unless he used a condom and took it with him."

Gavin peered through the window without getting too close. The crime scene photos of the overturned lamp and the blanket bunched up on the couch flashed into his head.

"The trigger for him must have been her decision to have sex with Tommy. He waited to be sure she would go through with it before he acted. Tommy would have laid the blanket over the couch to protect Carol Ann. In the photos, it was bunched up at the end of the couch." Gavin searched around the porch near the window and then searched the window itself. "He had to stop them before Tommy fucked her."

Gavin turned back to Matt. "He can't let them have sex. She's supposed to be his." When Matt started at this, Gavin knew he'd hit something Matt hadn't told him about. *I wonder why*, he asked himself, but pushed it back to think about later. Jerking his head back towards the window, he asked, "Did you get anything off them?"

"Some smudges on the sill, but nothing that turned out to be prints." Matt walked over to it, pointing to the still-evident black dusting.

"He probably stood close to it once they were inside to see what they were doing. With the lamp on inside by the couch, the light would keep them from seeing him unless they got up close to the window."

Matt nodded. "He'd want to be sure before he made the decision to act."

Gavin pointed to the smudges on the glass. "He probably had his face touching the glass at some point. So those may be the smudges you found. If they're from sweat or he put his tongue or lips against the glass, there might have been a

chance of lifting DNA to match once you find him." Shrugging, he shook his head. "But if they didn't get samples before they dusted...it was probably too late by the time they were discovered, anyway."

Matt cursed under his breath. "I should have thought about that." He scrubbed his face with one hand and huffed out a breath.

"You came here to lose that part of yourself, Matt. Don't wish it back so quick."

Using his shirt sleeve, Gavin opened the cabin door, pushing it further inward with the toe of his boot. Once again ducking under yellow tape, he walked inside directly to where evidence of the crimes committed stained the floor in front of the stone fireplace. Circling around the blood stains and where the now-missing hooks had been driven into the floor, he crouched next to where the hook that held Carol Ann's right hand had left a gaping hole in the wood. Gavin turned his attention to the fireplace without immediately getting up. The smell of acrid smoke still hung around the brick and stone.

"Ashes?"

"Yeah, and a residue of some kind." Matt replied. "Sent it off to the crime lab for analysis." Gavin, nodded looking back at Matt, and then checked the opening, nearly pristine compliments of the forensic vacuums used to collect trace.

"Ritual," he stated, staring into the empty space. "A ceremony, maybe." He turned back to where Matt stood across the room. "This is ritualistic."

"You mean like satanic? A cult sacrifice?"

"No, nothing like that." Gavin pressed his lips together, considering how to word his answer. "The ceremony means something to him. It's important to him and probably wouldn't even make sense to anyone else. It might have evolved over time, with each kill."

"How many times?" Matt asked, bitterness seeping into his voice. "How many people has he murdered?"

"More than these two, that's for damn sure." Gavin stood up and stretched. "This son of a bitch is too good to be new at this. He's too advanced in his methods and very clean." Looking back at the floor, Gavin shook his head. "There may be a lot more who've suffered and died by his hand."

Matt dropped his head, and with his hands on his hips, took a deep breath. One soft heartfelt "Shit" issued from him and Gavin echoed that thought in his head.

With one last look at the fireplace, couch, and the overturned lamp on the floor, he headed for the door. As he ducked once more under the tape and crossed the porch, his boots thumped loudly on the wood steps.

Matt followed him out to the truck, climbing behind the wheel and slamming his door. Gavin understood how frustrated and worried his ex-partner was over the case. Things like this weren't supposed to happen in a small community like Casper.

After silently sitting behind the wheel for a few seconds, Matt started the engine and turned the truck around to head back to town. It didn't surprise Gavin that Matt was struggling with the brutality of the case. Mostly because it was in his town, but also because it brought back memories of some of

the atrocities they'd seen overseas. He needed something to distract him. With a small smile, he gave Matt that something he needed.

"We need to find out who sent that email you got. They know a lot more than what they gave you." Gavin continued to gaze out the passenger window as they bumped down the gravel road toward the highway leading back to Casper. Biting his lip to keep the tiny smile under control when he felt Matt suddenly let off the gas, he knew he'd scored a hit.

"How the hell do you know about that? I never mentioned it when we were in the office." Gavin didn't answer him. "Why do you think they know more than they're telling or that it's not just a wild guess, for that matter?"

"Just do, Matt, just do." He didn't turn his head from the passenger window. *Let him stew on that for awhile. It'll keep his mind occupied.*

* * * *

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Chapter Seven

A shiver ran through Rhiannon as she re-read her notes describing the murders. The details were extremely important, but also extremely disturbing. As much as she wanted to water them down, she knew she couldn't. Details would help catch this killer. Rubbing her eyes, she forced herself to focus. Rhi knew little things like how he'd tied a knot or what type of knife he'd used to kill them could be the clue that exposed him for the monster he was. She couldn't omit one sickening detail, no matter how deeply it cut her or how painfully it burned inside.

Straining to recall how he held the knife when he cut their clothes off wasn't a trivial matter. By remembering, she determined he was right-handed...not much of a clue, but together with whatever else she uncovered, it could prove to be important. She thought about the sound he'd made as he ran his hands through the girl's hair. An almost passionate sound that made her nauseous to remember. She had the disconcerted feeling he had closed his eyes as he combed out her hair using his fingers. The imagery set her skin crawling.

Rhi searched her memory, trying to see what his hands looked like when he ran them down her abdomen; were his nails clean and manicured or dirty and ragged? But he wore gloves and she couldn't see them through the gloves. Did he touch the girl anywhere other than her hair and her stomach? Details, she needed as many as she could remember. She

had little choice if she was going to see this through. And she *had* to see it through now.

Drawing in a ragged breath, she remembered how he'd shown so much more anger—or maybe it was rage—when he focused on the boy, castrating him viciously. She had felt the killer lose control as he mutilated the boy; images of hot metal and roaring fires filled her mind when she strained to learn more about the monster's reasons or need behind the boy's murder.

Strangely enough, it disturbed her even more to see the almost tender way the monster touched the girl before slicing into her abdomen. First he'd cut her clothes off, enjoying the fear he created, letting it build until she'd passed out and then starting all over when she regained consciousness. Only seconds later, he gently caressed her face, drawing his hand down her neck between her breasts and over her abdomen. He didn't touch her sexually, fondle her breasts or touch her between her legs. Rhi didn't understand what he was doing or why, but then he was a crazed killer and nothing he did would make sense to anyone but him.

She couldn't banish the image of the knife plunging into the girl's belly over and over. It would haunt her for as long as she lived. *God, the memory of her blood and her screams won't go away.* She swallowed back the bile threatening to choke her as she added another detail to her notes.

Darkness would be falling soon and she still needed to go back over the notes from her vision earlier that day. She hadn't thought of anything else to call it other than a vision, though it was the first she'd had in the ten years since the

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dreams started. She wondered absently as she located her notes what might have happened if Toby hadn't bitten her and pulled out when he did. Would she have learned more without his interference? She didn't have an answer and decided being alone as she was, having Toby as a watch cat might not be such a bad idea if she was going to have the visions now and then.

Not much scared Rhi by then except the unknown. Once again, the unknown threatened her with the promise of more changes and revelations. She had become complacent with the dreams, believing she was in control and they were predictable. Now she realized they would never be predictable and she'd never truly been in control.

In the back of her mind, the seed of a thought kept pushing to grow and blossom into awareness, but she struggled to hold it back. She had far too much to deal with already. Instinct warned her this would prove to be something even more difficult to deal with than the realization she was now having visions along with her dreams. For now, she would keep it locked away until she felt strong enough to bring it out and examine it. She could only pray it wouldn't prove to be more than she could handle and that it wouldn't affect how she dealt with her latest dreams.

Wrapped in one of her handmade quilts, Rhi joined Toby on the back porch to enjoy the crisp fall air. She enjoyed the cooler air as long as she was well insulated, and the first hints of the night always calmed her. The portly gray cat lay stretched on the top step of the porch, taking in the last rays of the sun. His posture mimicked the great sphinx sporting a

middle age spread. Laughing for the first time in days, she held off reading the papers in her hand to enjoy the feeling for a few more minutes. Every smile was a treasure to her. She wouldn't waste even one.

They made the trip back to Casper in silence and Gavin had no qualms leaving Matt to stew over how he knew about the note or why he thought the note's author knew more than they were sharing. The cool air quickly fell to a much colder temperature as the sun sank behind the mountains, casting the last few miles in shadow. Gavin tried to remember the last time he had been so far south and realized he had avoided the deep southern states since he'd been out. Probably because it would have put him too close to Mike and Sandy. They had been the closest thing Gavin had ever had to a family and his greatest weakness. If he'd strayed too close...

"How are you with tracking email, ISPs, routers and stuff? 'Cause whoever sent that email was damn careful." Frustration distorted Matt's voice as he interrupted Gavin's musings. When Gavin cocked an eyebrow towards him, Matt chuckled dryly. "Yeah, I know, stupid question."

"I've picked up a few new skills along the way. I'll see what I can do."

Matt didn't comment about this and Gavin stifled the urge to curse. His ex-partner wasn't comfortable with what he did or used to do back when they ran ops together. Now that he was on the outside, Matt didn't know what it was he did. Shit, probably didn't want to know. It had been fine when they worked together on a mission...whatever it took to get the

job done and their asses back to base in one piece. Stateside had a different set of rules and, in Matt's eyes, he didn't belong. It pissed him off that Matt still wasn't sure of him. He'd asked for his help knowing full well who he was. Murder, especially what had gone down in that cabin, was wrong! He might walk a thin line, but he didn't murder kids.

Gavin worried the back of his neck with one hand. When they worked together in Special Forces, it had never bothered Matt how he operated. Matt didn't really use his old skills that much as the Sheriff of IZARD County. Gavin figured he maintained his sniper skills, but not much else. Matt had probably figured he didn't need to keep up his other *talents* outside of the Army. Maybe he regretted that now. Maybe he would finally realize you couldn't run from the world.

Matt pulled up in front of the Sheriff's Department, parking directly in front of the door. Both men jumped out of the truck with Gavin following Matt inside.

"I'll mess around with that email if you'll let me use your computer."

"Yeah, I'll log on for you and give you the—"

Gavin pulled out a folded piece of paper as they entered the office. Chuckling, he snatched the paper from Gavin's hand.

"You son of a bitch."

Grinning, Gavin followed him past Gail's desk to Matt's office, flashing a quick wink at Gail on the way by. "Couldn't help it. It was so easy." He drew out the word to make his point.

Matt threw the paper back at him. "Here, have at it. I've got some calls to make, anyway." Matt deftly pulled up his computer, logging onto his email. "Although I'm not so sure leaving you alone with my computer is a good idea."

Gavin snarled and threw a pen at Matt's departing back. He loved a good challenge and the world of computers had offered him one once he returned from the Army. If Matt ever asked what he did on the outside, the computer was a safe answer for both of them. Not that he did anything all that questionable any more. He'd taken a few assignments from one of the many government pseudo-departments over the years, infiltrating the odd cult or rogue militia, but he'd spent more time doing his infiltration using the computer. It proved to be an entirely different sort of game that appealed to Gavin's preference for anonymity.

Gavin searched Matt's computer for the trail the email had to have left unless the sender was brighter than he thought. Most auto delete programs didn't remove the entire message. A good hacker or computer expert could find the *shadow* file and trace it to the ISP server. The real problem began once you hit the ISP server, because re-mailers could hit any number of servers and sites all over the world to conceal the real sender. He found the shadow file without any problem, but it took him longer than he would have liked to trace the false trails. He finally managed to narrow them down to three, maybe four possible servers. He would need another message and a trap to zoom in on the actual sender.

Taking his time, he set up a neat little program of his own design to lay the trap for the next time an anonymous e-mail

came through. He knew there would be another one. They wouldn't be able to stop with just one. If it was the actual killer, he'd need to toy with them, flaunt his superiority. If it was someone honestly trying to help but afraid to come forward in person, they would continue until one of them got caught...either the killer or them.

He checked his own e-mail while he was online and then closed the computer down to see what Matt had next on the agenda. When he first started searching for the shadow file, he noticed Matt and Gail involved in an intense conversation. Gavin was fairly sure she wanted to know who he was and what he was doing working on the case. It would be interesting to see how she reacted to him now that Matt had filled her in. Well, he would know where he stood with her and with Matt by the way she treated him.

Matt shook his head as he stopped by Gail's desk to pick up his messages. He wouldn't be a bit surprised if Gavin didn't leave some sort of booby trap for him on the blasted thing. Before he turned to go, he noticed the look on Gail's face.

"What?"

Arms crossed, Gail gave him her best 'don't try it with me' look. "Just who is he, Matt? You haven't introduced him to any of us and now you're out showing him around crime scenes. The boys are a little uneasy," she lectured, nodding over at the empty desks across the office.

Quelling the urge to tell her it wasn't anyone's damn business, Matt sighed. It really was their business. He pulled

the visitor's chair closer to her desk and sat down, running his hands through his hair. *Damn, he needed a haircut.*

"I'm sorry, Gail. You're right. Honestly, I don't know what to tell y'all, but you do need to know." Sitting back, he took a deep breath and looked at Gavin sitting in his office, already deep into the computer.

"Gavin Farinelli and I were in the Army together. We were assigned to the same unit for ten years and were partners for the last five of those years. Rangers. Special Ops." Matt leaned closer to Gail. "We need help on this, Gail. It's real bad. The FBI won't step in at this point and any profile they send us will be weeks away. Plus, it'll be generic at best. I don't want to wait for another murder to get serious about this." Gail started to say something, but Matt held up his hand.

"He's going to kill again, Gail. I know that for sure. I want to catch him before he does, but that might not be possible and it definitely won't happen if we don't find some leads, and soon."

"So, what does he do that you can't?" she demanded. "I mean, you were both in the same unit, partners. Why do you need him? You have good men here and he's an outsider. That doesn't sit well with your deputies." Gail shook her head and Matt realized he wasn't getting his point across. He needed her on his side to help him convince his deputies. He'd already messed up by not filling them in ahead of the fact.

"You've been the sheriff here for five years and done a damn good job. Don't screw up what you've worked so hard to accomplish, Matt. What's so special about *him*?"

Matt scrubbed his jaw with one hand. Hell, *he* didn't even know what it was about Gavin that set him apart from anyone he'd ever met. It, whatever *it* was, earned him the code name Ghost for a reason. Matt didn't have a clue what to tell Gail that wouldn't either shock her or make her suspicious.

"Gail, I'm not sure I can explain that one to you. My job was not the same as his. We worked as a team, but we each had a different assignment on that team. He's a lot like a profiler, but he works more on profiling the situation from the inside out."

Gail sat back in her chair, uncrossing her arms. She looked back toward Matt's office where Gavin still sat hunched over the computer. Matt could tell she was thinking about what he said and the fact that she had uncrossed her arms and relaxed somewhat made him feel optimistic he'd made his point.

"He can look at it as how he would set it up. That's what you're telling me, isn't it, Matt?" She had a very serious look on her face and Matt knew she was a lot smarter than he had given her credit for. It unnerved him to realize she knew exactly what Gavin could do.

"Yeah, that's about right." Looking directly into her eyes, he didn't blink. "He's very good at this and we need him." Seeing an edge of unease return as a shadow in her eyes, he quickly added, "I trust him with my life."

Gail was silent for a minute as he watched a plethora of expressions cross her face before she spoke again. With a sigh, she nodded.

"You say we need him, then we need him. We're glad he's here, but you better have a talk with the guys and let them in on this." Gail picked up a stack of files and stood. "Sandy called while you were out. I put the note on your desk, but it just says that the teachers would be in a meeting till four-thirty this afternoon and she would have supper ready by six-thirty unless you needed it held off for later." Gail didn't smile; instead she turned to the file cabinet, leaving Matt no doubt he was dismissed.

Shaking his head, Matt realized once again that he would never understand the female psyche. Using one of the empty desks, he answered his messages, made the usual phone calls checking for progress on forensics and generally harassing everyone he could reach to get some results. Then he called Sandy at home. It was closing in on six and Matt wanted to let her know Gavin was there and they planned to be home for supper.

"So, how are you two doing?" she asked.

"Um, fine, I guess. He's no different than he was five years ago." Matt wasn't sure what to tell her. Hell, he was still trying to figure it all himself. "I haven't really talked to him other than to fill him in on the case." Lame, he chided himself.

"It'll take time, Matt. I can tell from your voice you don't want to talk about it right now, anyway. Just give yourself some time, okay?" He smiled, enjoying the soft husky voice

on the other end. How she always knew what was going on inside him, even from across an ocean when he had been in Saudi Arabia, made him love her even more.

"Yeah, I know." Hoping she would hear the smile in his voice, he added, "See you in a little while, honey."

Looking toward his office, he wasn't surprised to see Gavin looking at him. Matt couldn't see his eyes, but he was sure Gavin knew he'd been talking about him. The guy was really creepy, Matt thought, and then grinned like an idiot as he walked to his office. He needed to wrap it up or they would be late for super and one thing he knew about Gavin—he didn't like missing meals.

"Got it nailed down to three switch routes," Gavin announced before Matt could get in a word. "Need another email to find the one that actually did the sending." Pushing back from the desk, he stretched and walked around it to the door, leaving Matt staring after him. "What's for supper?"

"Man, you're really creepy. You know that, don't you?"

"Yeah, you used to tell me that about once a week, I think," Gavin threw over his shoulder. "So, what's for supper?"

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Chapter Eight

Stale air thick with dust filled her nostrils, causing her to gag. Darkness, thick and suffocating, closed in around her until she wanted to scream. Where was she? How had she gotten here? Rhi strained to see something, anything, in the dim light from above her. Against her will, Rhi crossed the room as her eyes adjusted. The room was small with a low ceiling and an earthen floor. A cellar or storm shelter came to mind and she prayed there would be a door out.

A low, scarred wooden table stood to one side with a small bench next to it. Rhi found herself sitting on the bench and realized at last it was another dream. Would it be from before the murder or was this something entirely new? *Dear God, not a new dream so soon!* She couldn't bear to watch someone else die. She fought desperately to wake up, force herself out of the dream, but to no avail.

A pale hand reached out and turned on a small battery-operated lamp on the table. It wasn't her hand and it didn't belong to either of the teenagers from the cabin. Whose hand was it? Definitely male, with long thin fingers ending in clean-cut, square nails. Not exactly manicured, but obviously well cared for. There was nothing at all familiar about the hand. She could only hope something more useful would show up, like a scar or tattoo.

Two hands reached back into the shadows on the table, pulling an old cardboard cigar box toward her and into the light. They opened the lid, letting it fall back against the table

with a soft plop. Dust flew up, but Rhi's eyes were already on the contents, searching for answers. Who was this? Why was she here? What was in the box?

The hands removed several objects, setting them aside before pushing the box back into the shadows. Several old photos, a handful of newspaper clippings and a gold locket lay atop the dirty table. The locket seemed familiar to her, similar to the one from her first dream, but not quite right. Among the clippings, Rhi saw what looked to be some sort of program. Maybe one from a graduation or a ceremony; she wasn't sure.

The man picked up the first picture from the pile, lightly drawing his fingers down the photo over the face of a pretty teenage girl. Her shy sweet smile lit up her face, making you sure her eyes sparkled if the photo could only show it, but the colors were faded, leaving the picture blurry. Rhi could make out a locket on a chain around the girl's neck, but wasn't sure if it was the same one lying on the table in front of her. It was too small in the picture to see clearly.

He dropped this photo next to the locket and took another from the pile. This one, crumpled and in bad shape, showed two people, and though the picture's condition made the faces difficult to make out, Rhi recognized the same sweet face of the girl from the previous photo. Gone was the shy look and in its place was the face of a young woman, obviously happy and comfortable, sitting in the lap of a handsome teenage boy. Was this the face of the killer in the photo, perhaps twenty years younger? Rhi's instincts balked at the idea.

There were several other photos on the table that she couldn't quite see. From under these, the slender fingers pulled out a clipping from a newspaper, tattered around the edges and brown with age. Opening the folded paper, he laid it on the table close to the lamp and Rhi quickly read the headlines, afraid he'd move on before she was ready.

Ole Miss Freshman Basketball Center, Jason Miles, Found Dead. Under his picture it read, 'just outside of Oxford, MS in an abandoned farmhouse'. She frantically tried to read more of the article before he folded it up, but was only able to catch that Jason had been murdered and an investigation was under way. The picture in the paper was that of the same young man from the crumpled photo with the pretty girl sitting in his lap.

The hand rested on top of the folded paper for a few seconds, the fingers tapping lightly against the dry paper, eliciting a soft crackle with each tap. While he was preoccupied, Rhi strained to see what more lay on the table that might give her clues to what the dream was about. It was all too dim for her to make out any details, no matter how hard she tried to focus. Intent on the items still on the table, she was startled when the hand suddenly slapped the table hard enough to overturn the lamp.

Without bothering to right the lamp, the man's fingers lightly touched the locket lying on the table. The tip of his index finger slowly moved across the top, tracing the etchings on the outside, pushing it around the table. Picking it up at last, he lowered it back into the box by the chain without opening it. He added the pictures and other newspaper

clippings to the box, but his hands trembled as he hesitated over the program before opening it.

It was for a play, but Rhiannon wasn't able to catch the entire title on the front. She caught most of the list of cast members and quickly attempted to commit as many to memory as she could; Sandra Taylor, Scott Foster, Leslie Perkins, Martha Owens, and Teddy Roberts were all she could read before he closed the program and returned it to the box.

He laid it on top of the other items in the cigar box and Rhi caught a quick glimpse of the front of the program before he closed the lid. A few of the words from the title jumped out, *Sending* and *Flowers*, but she could only be sure of the last word, *Flowers*. Fairly certain it was a school play, Rhi figured it had been one popular about fifteen to twenty years before. Surely there couldn't be that many plays with the word "Flowers" in the title.

Relief poured through her at finding something that might help to identify the killer. Just as she was feeling triumphant in her discovery, the hand disappeared into his pants pocket and withdrew another necklace. Rhi drew in a sharp breath, her heart pounding so loudly she didn't hear the wisp it made when he let the chain curl onto the tabletop. This one appeared shiner, much newer than the one from the cigar box. It was also a little larger than the first. Now she understood why the locket had seemed so familiar to her. This one she recognized. She was absolutely positive this dream was about the murders that had occurred in Casper. She wasn't sure in what sequence it fell, but she knew it couldn't be a new dream. The locket was the connection.

She had seen it several times in her dreams over the last few weeks. The smear of blood across the front only confirmed her fear. This was the locket she had seen around the neck of Carol Ann. The blood would be hers, Rhi was certain. She watched as the slender fingers opened the locket, revealing two pictures: one of Tommy and the other of Carol Ann. Fingers dug angrily at the tiny picture of Tommy, tearing it from the locket before closing the case with Carol Ann's picture still inside. The soft snap jarred Rhi, alerting her to how deeply her mind had connected with this dream.

As one hand held the dangling chain and locket, the other lifted the lid of an old coffee can. Holding the locket by its chain, the man slowly lowered it to rest on top of several others already occupying the can. He replaced the lid with a soft snap. Rhi watched as two fingers held the torn picture of Tommy by the edge over an ashtray where he set it on fire and let it fall to burn. Now the reason for her sense of unease and the nagging feeling something was different about her dreams hit her full in the face. She was connected to the killer, the monster who had killed many times before and would continue to kill until he was caught. It was a connection that both sickened her and frightened Rhiannon more than any other connection she had formed in the years since the dreams had begun.

Until this madman was stopped, she would continue to experience every murder he committed. And, if her newly developed ability to see visions was connected to him, she would continue to experience his sick needs almost every day. Rhi couldn't accept this. No way! She had to stop him

now for more than one reason. Her very life would depend on it. Many more dreams or visions close together and the nosebleeds, headaches and weakness would eventually kill her.

The bright glint of metal reflecting the glow of the battery-powered light caught her attention once more. Her focus on what the killer was doing temporarily slowed her heartbeat until she recognized the metal as the hunting knife he'd used on Carol Ann and Tommy. The killer brought it toward his face, her face, and sniffed the dried blood still evident on the blade. Rhi screamed over and over again in her head until she woke sitting up in bed, panting, head pounding with pain. She felt the blood dripping from her nose and held it as she panted, trying to control the panic threatening to take over. Looking down at her arm, she saw the now-familiar puncture wounds Toby made when he bit her. They weren't especially deep, but worked to pull her from the dream. Toby sat at the foot of her bed, watching her with his strangely intelligent-looking cat's eyes.

Her pulse raced, feeding her nosebleed and headache. Rhi knew she was far too weak to make it from her bed to the bathroom. Holding her nose and lying back on the pillows, Rhi struggled to calm down and relax. The painful throbbing in her head blurred her vision. For the first time in a long time, she was worried about being alone out in the middle of nowhere. Her body wouldn't be able to take much more of this abuse.

As soon as she could safely stand, Rhi knew she needed to type everything she could remember into her computer

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before the memory faded. Then she would rest and focus her attention on what to send to the sheriff. He had to take this seriously and use her clues. The monster was already looking at a new victim. She prayed he hadn't moved from the Casper area to a new hunting ground or she might never again know where he was. There wasn't much time.

It was over an hour before she felt rested enough to sit up for a while and type. She made a detour by the kitchen for something to drink and peanut butter nabs for energy before easing down the hall to her office. Rhi put down every detail, every feeling she remembered, and then headed back to her bedroom to try to rest a while longer. She would focus her attention on creating a new anonymous email to Sheriff Brady later. Praying there wouldn't be another dream, she drifted off with Toby resting on the pillow next to her, his slow-blinking eyes watching her intently.

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Chapter Nine

The next morning, Gavin returned from his morning run to find Matt pouring a cup of the coffee Gavin had made on his way out. Matt scowled at him as he walked past, heading for the shower.

"Don't look at me like that. I run during the week. I don't do anything remotely like work on the weekends and today is Saturday."

"Still the same old grouch before you've had your first cup of coffee, I see." Gavin didn't stop in the doorway, but waited until he was well out of reach to deliver his final dig. "It may be Saturday, but we have a killer to catch. Be ready in ten." The sound of a wet dishcloth hitting the doorframe with a *swack* gave him a silent chuckle until he heard Sandy's voice.

"Matt! I just got out of the shower!" Oops, Gavin thought, she must have walked around the corner just as Matt threw it.

Glad he was already in the bathroom so he didn't have to listen to the fallout and resulting nuzzling that would inevitably follow, Gavin decided it would be a good time to shave again. He doubted Matt would be ready in ten now.

When Matt and Gavin arrived at the office nearly thirty minutes later, Matt was still denying it was his fault they were twenty minutes later than planned.

"So who are you blaming? Sandy? 'Cause if you are, I'm sure she'd like to know so she could defend herself." Gavin bit

his lips to prevent the smile that threatened when Matt screwed up his mouth and shook his head in defeat.

"You play low-ball, Gavin. You know that?"

"It's the only way I know how to play."

Sam, one of Matt's deputies, glanced up from the reports he was working when they walked through the door. Nodding towards them, he resumed what he was doing and Gavin glanced over at Matt with raised eyebrows. The other man grimaced.

"Sam, anything of interest?" Matt asked and Gavin followed him to the deputy's desk.

"No, sir, nothing that stands out yet. No strangers hanging around or anyone who looked out of place—so far." Sam spread his hands and looked pointedly toward Gavin.

Matt took the opening and introduced him to Sam. "Gavin and I were in the Service together, so I asked him for some help on this." Matt sat on the edge of the desk and sighed.

"You, Terry, Ross, and Rick are already stretched keeping up with our normal caseload. Rick's only supposed to be part-time till he retires. This is going to be a mess, no two ways about it, which means I'm going to need all of you working on both this case and your normal duties. I figure we can all use the help and he's working for room and board."

"Huh?" Gavin grunted, looking at Matt. "You didn't say anything about this being a freebie, man." Matt shrugged, giving him an innocent look. "You know I don't consult for free, Matt."

Sam grinned, shaking his head, and went back to his reports as Matt pushed Gavin ahead of him toward his office.

Gavin stopped his forward momentum by grabbing hold of either side of the doorframe leading into the hall.

"I mean it, Matt. I don't come cheap."

Matt gave him a solid push with his shoulder and Gavin released his hold on the doorframe to allow himself to be shoved into Matt's office.

"You know I usually stay in nice three and four-star hotels when I'm on a case," Gavin continued, settling in the visitor's chair across from Matt.

Turning his chair around, Matt reached for the faxes waiting on the machine—then, spinning back around, slid them across his desk toward Gavin. "Yeah, yeah, I know. Just don't forget Sandy's an excellent cook and you eat like you don't have a bottom to that gut of yours."

Gavin watched Matt run the tip of his tongue along his top lip as he logged on the computer. His partner's facial expressions and body language revealed when he was worried, agitated, or just deep in thought. They'd always amused Gavin. He doubted he had any to indicate his own moods. He'd schooled himself as a child to hide his feelings. It was what kept him alive until he was old enough to blend in with the masses and make his own way.

What interested him even more about Matt's little signs was that Matt never used them out in the field. Most men continued those little oddities no matter where they were. Matt didn't. The object of his musings looked up to find him lounging in the chair, watching. Huffing in exaggerated annoyance, Matt tapped the faxes he'd slid across the desk earlier.

"Make yourself useful, since your time is so damn expensive, and check out these faxes. See if we have any results back from Little Rock yet."

Gavin lazily rolled his shoulders, relegating the sour memory of his past back to the recesses of his mind, and gave Matt the bored look he knew he expected.

Sitting up in the chair, Gavin slipped on his game face and picked up the stack of papers, sifting through them. He'd only skimmed a couple of the pages when Matt's soft whistle interrupted him. Matt's serious expression and the tight line of his mouth suggested he wasn't happy.

"You get something?" Gavin dropped the stack of faxes into his lap and leaned forward.

"You were right about the stab wounds centered on the abdomen." Matt continued reading whatever was on his computer screen, rubbing the back of his neck. "These are the results from that revised request I submitted to VICAP yesterday." He printed off the list, handing it to Gavin.

"We can probably rule out some of these, like the ones that involve rape. Still, looking through the list, I think we might have as many as twenty hits."

"You have a preliminary forensics and trace report here." Gavin passed it across to Matt. Pilfering a pen from the cup on Matt's desk, he scanned the print-out from VICAP, scrawling notes beside some of the names. Several immediately caught his eye and he starred their names. His mind wandered for a moment to the mysterious email Matt had received the day before. His instincts told him the person behind it would prove to be crucial to the case. Even more, it

felt important to him on a personal level. Dismissing the idea almost immediately, he rolled his head, feeling satisfying cracks in his neck, and concentrated instead on the names and dates in front of him.

Matt's chair creaked and Gavin looked back up as Matt leaned forward to prop his elbows on the desk. "OK, Carol Ann was alive when she was stabbed in the abdomen, but she was dead by the time her heart was removed." Gavin eyed Matt over the list of names. A tenseness in the other man's voice indicated there was more and it was bad.

Matt leaned back in his chair, looking up at the ceiling for a minute before he continued. "There were some minor defensive wounds on her, but none on Tommy. He'd been hit in the back of the head with something, so he probably came to already tied down on the floor." Matt suddenly sat back up in his chair, making notes on his note pad.

"Logical to immobilize him first; he'd be the most difficult to control," Gavin pointed out, returning to his list. He furtively watched Matt, aware that his partner had to work to keep his emotions under control.

"Tommy was alive when he was castrated." Gavin watched Matt swallow convulsively before he continued. "And when his heart was removed—though I doubt he would have been conscious for it, thank God." Matt gripped the arm of his chair so tightly that his knuckles bled white.

"Shit!" Matt breathed in through his nose, running a hand through his hair before adding to the notes on his pad. "The blood loss from the castration had to be massive, based on the estimation of what was on the floor. Guess the fact there

was blood around the chest wound and in the surrounding tissues proves his heart was beating when the son of a bitch cut into his chest." Anger radiated off Matt, feeding Gavin's own anger, but he kept it under tight control, giving Matt his full attention.

"The ashes in the fireplace were consistent with human remains, newspaper and an accelerant, probably gasoline."

Gavin grimaced, knowing what that meant. "So, more than likely, he burned the hearts in the fireplace afterwards."

"Yeah, and the silver ring we found in the ashes was a class ring. I expect we'll find out it's Tommy's." Matt dropped the fax on his desk, scrubbing his chin with his hand.

Gavin returned to the list of names, building his own list, vaguely aware of Matt digging through the papers on his desk, mumbling about an interview he'd read over. Gavin wrote in the dates of each murder beside the names. Then he numbered them in sequential order from the oldest to the newest. The murders stretched over eighteen years or so and spanned several different states. Interestingly, they bordered each other. Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, Texas, Tennessee, and Missouri all had a spot on the list. *What of the other bordering states that weren't on the list?* What about Louisiana, Georgia, maybe Oklahoma, as well? Why not those states? Especially Louisiana. It bordered Arkansas, Texas, and Mississippi.

"In one of the interviews with Tommy's mom, she stated he'd given his class ring to Carol Ann about two weeks ago." Gavin grunted in response as Matt rummaged around his desk through the piles of reports.

"Here it is." Matt tapped his finger against the form he was holding, bearing the logo of the Casper police department. "This is the interview from when the Reynolds identified Carol Ann's body. They listed the jewelry she wore as Tommy's class ring and a gold locket."

Gavin looked up, his interest piqued now. "You didn't find a gold locket on her body, though."

"No, we didn't." Matt picked up the forensics report again. "The class ring was silver- plated nickel, but there isn't any mention of gold in the ash. I'll check with the Reynolds to confirm whether the locket was gold."

"If there aren't any trace metals suggestive of gold, the killer took it with him, a trophy to preserve the moment for him. Most serial killers take trophies of some type." Gavin stared off at a spot above Matt's head, adding this bit of information to his mental file. "When you catch him, his trophies will help solidify your case against him."

They looked at each other across the desk separating them. Gavin knew what Matt was thinking. He was remembering their last five years where they spent most of their missions in either South America or Cuba. Some of the other units working in tandem with them took trophies a lot like back in 'Nam. Matt ignored the practice, but from the way his lip always curled when the others bragged, showing off their 'racks', Gavin knew his partner not only didn't approve, but thought less of his fellow Rangers. Gavin never let Matt know he understood their compulsion on a gut level. He didn't want to see that dark look in his partner's eyes. Matt already dealt with enough odd crap concerning him. Dropping his

gaze first, Matt seemed to wipe the memory from his thoughts and continued reading from the report. "There weren't any fingerprints and nothing under either of the teens' nails. The ropes he used to bind them were old and nearly rotten, suggesting they'd been stored in a damp place."

"Means you can't trace the rope, but once you find him, there'll be fibers anywhere it touched," Gavin reminded him. "Remember Locard's Exchange Principle. 'Whenever two objects come into contact, a transfer of material *will* occur.'"

Matt's frustration over the lack of usable information wasn't lost on Gavin. He didn't like the situation, either. Standing up, he stretched, working loose the kinks from sitting for so long. As he fluttered the paper over Matt's head, the other man looked up, a look of hope in his eyes.

"Got something?"

"Yeah, it looks like there are twelve matches to our female vic." Gavin dropped the reworked list into Matt's hand. "You've got twelve females between the ages of sixteen and eighteen with multiple stab wounds to the abdomen, but no sign of rape prior to the murder. Ten of them were virgins, but the other two are so similar that I don't want to rule them out just yet."

Gavin opened a bottle of water he'd grabbed earlier, taking a long swig. "He stayed close to one general area."

Matt nodded, his brow furrowed with a puzzled expression. "You're right, but why not Louisiana? I mean, Georgia may have just been out of his range to the east and Oklahoma to

the north, but what about Louisiana? Why skip over that state?"

"Not sure. We need a little more than what we have right now." Gavin took another drink of water before continuing. "Could be we just didn't get a hit because the body was never found. Or he had a near miss, so it didn't show up, since the girl wasn't killed."

Gavin pulled back his chair so he could stretch his legs in front of him as he sat down. "We need a map that includes those areas so we can tag them and see what we get that way. Identify them in order they happened and see if there's a pattern to how he ended up here."

Matt pushed up from his desk, both hands flat on the wood. "Let me see what we have here for the hell of it, but I doubt there's anything besides Arkansas state maps. If I don't find anything, I'll get Sam to check with city."

Gavin leaned back into the chair and ran what he knew so far around in his head. The bastard was smart and careful. He'd moved after each murder, escaping detection. Serial killers might cross state lines, moving from place to place, but they killed more frequently, drawing attention to themselves—eventually escalating until they were killing close enough together that the authorities could track them. How had this one managed such tight control over his urges? His need would drive him to kill. *Shit, what was he missing?*

Matt returned a few minutes later, empty-handed, shaking his head. "Nothing that included all of what we needed. Sam's going to check with City and pull something together for us."

Dropping back into his chair, Matt laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back.

"I told him to let them know I want to meet tomorrow afternoon about one to go over what we have so far and compare notes."

"Tomorrow's Sunday, bud." Gavin cocked his head, staring at Matt across the desk. "Think they'll show up just 'cause you schedule a meeting?"

"I know it's Sunday." Matt scowled back at him. "This is a twenty-four-hour, seven-day a week job and these murders prove it. They'll show up."

Gavin sat up straight in the chair again and leaned forward, rustling through the papers strewn on Matt's desk. "Where's that fax I gave back to you? Since you're going to meet with them tomorrow to get their help making phone calls, I can think of some more questions we need answered."

Matt slapped Gavin's hand. "Hey, stop screwing up my piles." Grabbing the papers Gavin wanted, he thrust them at him. "Here."

Gavin snatched the proffered papers from Matt's hand with a snort, relaxing back in his chair. Propping the ankle of one leg across the knee of the other, he leaned the reports against his boot to study them again. Turning up the bottled water with two fingers to finish it, he studied the list of questions Matt had written on one of the papers. He'd covered most of the questions Gavin had, but one thing Gavin did add to the list was to make sure the reports he was requesting of the other cases included personal effects and

anything left on the victim or taken from the victim, like jewelry.

If it wasn't for his gut instinct that Tommy hadn't been part of the original plan, they might have missed the similarities between the other girls. There hadn't been any matches for male and female vics with their type of injuries when Matt ran it that way. Either Tommy was a miscalculation or he was a new twist in the killer's M.O., not a good sign, he thought. Gavin worried there might be something else they were taking for granted. He wasn't sure, but he had a bad feeling there was.

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Chapter Ten

Matt worked through his email, printing off the ones pertinent to the case and saving some of the others for later. He'd nearly finished when one near the very bottom caught his attention. It had an anonymous listing much like the one from the day before, but not exactly. Matt stared at it on the computer screen for a full minute. He took his hands off the keyboard and rolled his chair away from the desk a few inches. He'd let Gavin at it instead. More than likely, it would have some sort of auto-terminate program attached to it like the first one. He didn't want to trigger anything without Gavin having a chance at it first.

"Hey, Gavin?"

"Nothing yet. I'm still looking."

"I have another email like the one I showed you yesterday. Thought you might want to check it out, see if you can trace..." Matt hadn't finished his sentence before Gavin was standing over him, impatiently waiting for him to vacate the chair.

"I'll just leave you to it and make a few phone calls about some of these questions." Matt didn't expect an answer. Ghost had already disappeared into his own world. Picking up his list of questions, Matt backed away and headed for Sam's desk to make the phone calls. It would be easier to watch both the front entrance and his office door from there. The deputy had left some time before, though Matt didn't remember when.

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Several of the calls from his list netted him some solid information. He found out the necklace had been fourteen-karat gold and held a picture of Carol Ann on one side and Tommy on the other. Typical. The interesting part was that Carol Ann's mom didn't know where it had come from. She assumed Tommy gave it to her daughter, but Carol Ann had never really said so. She knew it was fourteen-karat because when Carol Ann had shown it to her one day, she had read the marking on the back. They had checked with Tommy's mom and some of his friends to be sure it came from him.

Next, he called Little Rock and left a message for the lab manager about the gold necklace. He doubted there was even anyone in the building unless there was something major going on in Little Rock. They wouldn't get back with him before Monday, regardless. Last, after checking his watch to be sure they'd still be open, he called a friend at the Casper Hardware Store to ask some general questions about rope and how it aged.

About the time he finished his phone calls, Gavin called out from Matt's office, "Got it!" Matt didn't run, but he didn't walk back to his office, either. This could be the break they needed.

Gavin didn't move out of his chair, Matt noticed, amused. Leaning over his partner's shoulder, Matt frowned, disappointed that nothing on the screen looked even vaguely familiar. Hell, he wasn't even sure it was English. Scowling down at the big man leaning back in *his* chair, Matt nudged him in the back.

"What? Where is the message? Who sent it?" Gavin grinned, his eyes actually mirroring the emotion for the first time since he'd arrived. Matt almost commented on it, but pressed his lips together instead. The enigma turned back to the computer, grinning smugly. He entered some commands and the screen went blank, but the printer stirred to life with a whirr and a single page emerged.

"I traced this email back and found the pattern matched the initial e-mail's pattern." Matt shook his head and waited as Gavin explained. "The original email had a timer to erase it from your inbox, but it didn't erase the entire pattern for where it came from. They both went through the same junctions, so I'm sure they came from the same original email address even though the actual addresses were different."

Matt gave him one of his 'get to the point' looks, but Gavin laughed, ignoring him. "I was able to use the IPS labels from both of them to cross-reference what site they used." Gavin pulled up a re-mailer site called Shifty Business. It boasted they sent e-mail through at least four junctions, one being foreign, to keep a trace from finding the sending computer.

"I hacked into their site and found their routing patterns. The amateurs don't use a random number generator to select routes. I'm sure their clientele would be a bit unhappy to find that out." Gavin's brief laugh caught Matt off guard, but he managed to hide his surprise at his buddy's amusement. Matt knew he enjoyed the hunt and was having even more fun explaining the process.

"So, did you locate where this came from or not?" Matt finally asked, tired of the explanation and eager to find out what the final verdict was.

"Hey, have some appreciation for my work here," Gavin said, spreading his hands palm up. "You don't get this type service from just anyone, you know."

"Yeah, yeah," Matt said impatiently, moving his hands in a 'come on and give' gesture. "What do you have?"

Sighing loudly, his shoulders drooping, Gavin handed him the sheet of paper off the printer. "Your email message with the original email address at the top. Now you just have to get the ISP server to give you the owner's name and address."

Matt whooped loudly, "You're a genius!" He grabbed his phone book and looked up Internet companies to find the phone number.

"Couldn't you just hack in and get it?" he asked as he rapidly flipped through the phone book. "I'll probably have to get a judge to issue a subpoena for the name and address of whoever this belongs to."

"Well, yeah, you could do that, but it would be a waste of your time because I already have that information for you." Gavin's normally closed face held a smug smile as he relaxed, leaning back in Matt's chair.

This had to be the most animated Matt had ever seen his partner. But he recognized when he was being strung along. Dropping the phone book in Gavin's lap with a deliberate push, Matt held his hand out, a pained expression on his face. "Come on, give it to me."

"Hey, you should have have known I'd have it. You could've asked me for it to begin with," Gavin protested as he pulled a folded slip of paper out of his shirt pocket, holding it up. Then, in a more serious voice, he added, "You need to read the second email, Matt."

Matt felt the gravity of the situation roll back over him when he met Gavin's cold eyes, a blank expression replacing his earlier smugness. Nodding in resignation, he picked up the email to read it.

He has killed before and will again, soon. Fifteen to twenty years ago, he killed a freshman basketball player from Ole Miss in Oxford, by the name of Jason Miles. He keeps the gold lockets he takes from the girls. They betrayed him and weren't worthy. He has to be stopped.

Matt whistled. "You were right. Whoever this is knows more than they're telling us." Shaking his head, he read through it once more. Gavin was right about the bastard taking trophies if this email proved to be accurate. And they had a name to check into as well, if he believed the email. Right then, it was all they had.

"This person has to know who it is. They even say he has to be stopped, so why aren't they just giving us his name and address?" Matt threw the email on his desk and paced over to the door and back, exasperated. "This is some sort of game, and I'm not playing."

Gavin tossed the phone book back on Matt's desk and stood up. "Could be they're related or even married to this guy and are afraid of him." Gavin leaned against the desk.

"Or, it could be the actual killer and he's getting his rocks off poking us."

"No, my gut instinct says this isn't our killer." Matt shook his head.

Nodding in agreement, Gavin tossed another empty water bottle across the room into the trash next to Matt's desk before heading out the door. "Let's go. It'll take about thirty minutes to get there from Casper, according to the map I looked at."

Matt made a face at Gavin's back, but followed him out to his truck. Looked like Gavin was driving, since he hadn't printed out a map of where they were heading. He'd have memorized it, Matt knew, and that left him riding shotgun—something he didn't mind doing alongside Gavin, but wouldn't let him know if it killed him.

"So, are you going to tell me who this mystery person is or is it a big surprise?" Matt asked as he climbed into the passenger side of his own truck. "I mean, I *am* the sheriff here and would really like to appear like I know what the hell I'm doing."

Gavin didn't say anything or change his expression as he started the truck and backed out of the parking space. Once they were on the road, he pulled another slip of paper from his pocket, handing it to Matt. The name at the top of the paper read Rhiannon McBryde. She lived about thirty minutes north of Casper and was listed as single. Gavin had even managed to locate her phone number and date of birth along with the fact she was a nurse and writer, but that was all he had on the paper. Matt figured there was more, but doubted

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he would get it out of Gavin unless it proved to be important to the case—another one of his partner's weird quirks or rules. Information was vital, but only vital information got passed on. Matt just smiled and shook his head as they cruised up the highway toward Ms. McBride's home.

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Chapter Eleven

The back of Rhi's neck tingled as she rinsed the dishes from her early lunch. Someone was coming. She heard the familiar sound of tires crunching gravel that usually meant a car heading down her drive. The gravel always alerted her when someone approached her house. During the summer months, when the weather had been dry, she could tell by the dust when they first pulled off the highway onto her drive. It was a great alarm system and one of the attractions when she bought the house.

Drying her hands, she checked the calendar just to be sure she hadn't forgotten a delivery she had scheduled, but it was Saturday and most of her deliveries came on Tuesdays, Wednesdays or Thursdays. The only vehicles that came were from UPS or Fed Ex. She never had company. Besides, something was off about this particular vehicle. It didn't sound like one of the delivery vans.

She stood on the front porch by the time the truck drove out of the trees. Seeing the sheriff's department insignia on the door of the truck had her pulse racing before they'd pulled up next to the walkway. It felt like little frogs jumping around in her stomach and she had to catch hold of the porch post for support. Rhi knew she was busted. She hoped she had everything she needed outside of Toby's things, packed and ready for a quick getaway as soon as the men left.

How had they found her? She'd been very careful, but something had gone wrong. That they found her frightened

her, but at the same time, it relieved her of some of the burden she carried. All that mattered was dealing with them now and then moving on. Bracing herself for what she knew would be a difficult interview at best, she stepped down to the walkway and met them where it ended by the drive. Two very tall men climbed out of the Sheriff's truck, but neither of them wore a uniform.

"Ms. Rhiannon McBryde?" the shorter of the two asked, closing his door and removing his cap.

"Yes, what can I do for you?" Standing her ground, she looked him in the eyes without blinking.

"We'd like to ask you some questions if you don't mind. I'm Sheriff Matt Brady and this is Gavin Farinelli." Sheriff Brady held his hand out to shake hers.

"If you don't mind, can I see your badge? You're not in uniform." Her voice shook slightly and the frogs jumping around in her stomach hadn't calmed down much.

The man doing the talking smiled and pulled out his wallet, opening it before handing it to her. She took the wallet without touching his hand and confirmed he was indeed who he claimed to be. Handing it back to him, she avoided looking at the taller one. Something about him was unsettling. It was almost as if she felt energy coming from him.

"Please, come in." Rhi turned, walking back to the house without seeing if they followed. She knew they did from the way the hair at the nape of her neck prickled. Opening the screen door, she indicated they should follow.

Gavin and Matt walked into what appeared to be a living room complete with a sofa and several comfortable-looking

chairs. The kitchen was visible through the living room doorway and possibly there was a hall to the right.

"Please have a seat. Would either of you care for tea or coffee?" Rhi asked as she closed the front door.

"No, thank you, Ms. McBryde." Matt took a seat on the couch. "We don't want to take up more of your time than necessary, but we have some questions."

"Of course. What would this be about?" Rhi sat across from him in one of the chairs.

Gavin figured Matt could handle the questions. He was the official one, after all. He drifted over to a curio cabinet in the far corner, studying the contents, but covertly watching the way the woman reacted to Matt and his questions. Something felt very different about her. He could sense her unease despite the calm expression on her face. The way she sat stiffly on the edge of the chair said she wasn't comfortable with them being in her house.

"I'm sure you're aware of the two teenagers who were murdered over in Casper this last week." At her nod, Matt continued. "We've received several e-mails from someone who seems to know something about these murders." He paused briefly before continuing. "Those e-mails originated from your e-mail account, Ms. McBryde."

When she didn't appear surprised, Matt looked to be at a loss. Gavin figured he'd expected her to protest or deny any knowledge of the e-mails. Instead, she only nodded her head. Then, as if realizing they would expect her to say something, if not protest, she rubbed her hands down her jean-clad thighs.

"Please call me Rhi." Sighing, she capitulated. "Yes, they came from my account." Without saying anything more, she stood up and quietly left the room.

Gavin, already standing, followed after her, flashing an amused grin at Matt. His partner's face was picture-worthy, to say the least. The look of disbelief and annoyance had his mouth open and his brows arched high over his eyes.

"Um, Rhi?" Matt called after her, falling in behind Gavin. "Where are you going?" Reaching around Gavin, he made a grab for her arm as she headed into another room. Just as his hand grabbed her arm, she jerked it from his grasp, crying out in alarm and shrinking against the wall.

"No!" It came out in a strangled cry. "Please, don't touch me." Her eyes, wide and wild with fear, filled her face. She all but melted into the wall at her back. *A frightened kitten*, Gavin thought to himself, feisty and willing to fight, but unsure of how to do it.

She took a couple of deep breaths, one hand against her chest as if she held her heart in. She eased further down the hall, still pressed tightly against the wall. "I'm sorry. I don't like to be touched." Her breath came in small gasps while she struggled to regain control. "I'm just getting my journal for you to read. Maybe it will explain a little better than I can how I know so much about the murders." Her back still pressed against the wall, she inched sideways, keeping her eyes on them as she moved further into the room.

"Okay, we'd like to see the journal, of course." Matt raised his eyebrows when Gavin looked back at him. Gavin shrugged and they followed her into the room.

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Gavin and Matt waited just inside the room for Rhi to obtain the journal. She picked up a loose-leaf notebook from the computer desk and passed it to Matt. Her careful attempt at preventing contact wasn't lost on Gavin, and judging from the annoyed expression on Matt's face, he hadn't missed it, either.

"This is everything I know at this point. I don't expect you to believe how I came into the information, but you'll know that it's correct and it should help you find the killer. I hope it will, anyway, because the sooner you catch him, the sooner I can go on with my life." Easing past them, she walked down the hall and into the kitchen.

Gavin followed close behind her. Looking back, he watched as Matt ran a hand through his shaggy hair before shaking his head, a thoroughly confused look replacing the annoyed one from earlier. He looked up at Gavin and drew in a deep breath through his nose before following them.

Holding the notebook in one hand as if it would bite him, Matt stopped just inside the doorway of the kitchen. "What do you mean, we won't believe how you got this?"

Rhi stood with her back to them, looking out the window of the back door. She hugged herself, her hands slowly rubbing up and down her arms. Gavin wondered why she was hugging herself so tightly. Was she cold, nervous or something else entirely? He had felt something different about her as soon as he had walked inside the house. It almost felt like a string stretched taut between them, connecting them on some level Gavin didn't understand, yet. He *would* figure it out, though.

"Please, just sit down and you can read it. Then you can ask your questions," she finally replied, her voice dull and lifeless.

Rhi turned away from the window over the back door and indicated with a flick of her hand the wooden drop leaf table in the middle of the kitchen. She remained with her back to the door, leaning against it once Matt sat down. Matt pressed his lips together as he took a seat, dropping the notebook on the table with a soft thunk. Matt wasn't usually so edgy. Even with a case as savage as this one, Gavin wouldn't expect his partner to be so rude and abrasive.

Matt opened the journal and started to read. Rhi didn't join them at the table. There were only two chairs, but Gavin saw a stool near the stove she could pull up. Even better, he would give her his chair and take the stool, but she showed no indication of moving closer to them. She hugged her arms close around her body again, darting quick glances from Matt to the front part of the house and then to a room off from the kitchen. Briefly, he wondered if she was hiding someone, but his internal warning system didn't indicate there was anyone else in the house.

Matt closed the journal after only a few pages, his eyes wide and his mouth open a little bit, as if he'd seen a ghost. Gavin figured he was on overload and it was only going to get worse. His partner finally looked up to where Rhi stood facing them, her back to the door. Licking his lips, he opened his mouth and then closed it again before finally speaking.

"Maybe we should start out with you giving us a little information about you first." Pulling out his notepad, Matt

continued, "We know your name and that you're thirty-six years old. How 'bout you fill us in on the rest, like what you do for a living and where you're from originally?"

Rhi's brow furrowed and she bit her bottom lip before beginning. "I'm originally from Memphis, Tennessee, but I've moved around a lot in the last eight years." She looked everywhere but towards where they sat. Gavin felt her nervousness across whatever thread of energy seemed to jump between them. She'd stopped hugging herself, but clasped her hands tightly in front of her.

"I'm divorced. I don't have children, but I have a cat. I've been a nurse for about seven years and work through a temporary agency for four to six weeks at a time." Rhi gave Matt the name and toll free number of the agency. "I know you're bound to already have all this information. Why ask me?"

Matt ignored her question, never looking up from his pad where he took notes. Instead, he continued asking her questions in no real order. Gavin figured he was trying to confuse her— something they'd done when interrogating prisoners and people of interest when they were in the Army.

She gave them small bites of who she was and what she did in a strangely resigned voice, soft and without any hint of inflection. Gavin studied the way she clasped and unclasped her hands, alternately licking her lower lip and biting it. *She was scared*, he realized. The nervous feeling he'd picked up was a facade for the sickening fear eating her up inside. *Fear of what... who? Them?*

Matt looked up when she didn't continue. "Why don't you work in one of the hospitals around here? There are two or three within driving distance."

"I'd rather travel. I like working at a different place every time." Rhi finally looked directly at them for more than a quick glance. "I write some on the side, mostly articles for nursing journals, so I don't need to work full time. Temporary positions just work for me."

"How long have you lived here?"

"About two years." She didn't elaborate and Matt clenched his jaw. Gavin wondered what he'd read in the first few pages of her journal to put him on edge. His partner usually had more patience than this.

"Where did you live before you moved here? Why did you move?"

"I moved from Jackson, Mississippi because I was tired of the humidity. It's always hot and humid there, sometimes even in the winter."

"How long did you live there?"

"Two years." Her voice quivered and Matt looked up from taking notes. He pressed his lips together in a grim line before glancing over at Gavin and closing his notepad.

Pulling the journal back in front of him, Matt opened it and read through it again. As he turned the pages, Gavin watched his face grow paler. By the time he'd read the fifth page, he'd taken to running his hand through his hair every few lines, leaving it sticking up like a rooster's comb. Finally, he looked up, meeting Gavin's eyes. They'd both seen combat, rape, torture and the slaughter of children without allowing their

emotions to show for the outside world to watch. But here at the home of a woman claiming to have psychic dreams and visions, his partner's face reflected everything he thought and felt.

Rhi couldn't miss the disbelief, the pity or the exasperation that tumbled across his face, culminating in a general scowl that rested along his mouth. She didn't say anything or give any indication that she was aware of Matt's attitude. Gavin resisted the urge to pull the journal over to read for himself what had Matt fumbling his way out of some type of shock. Instead, he focused on what Matt's next move might be, glancing over at Rhi to gauge her reaction.

"I'm not real sure what I'm reading here." Matt spoke each word slowly and separately, like he was speaking to a child or someone mentally retarded. Gavin jerked his head back to Matt, realizing his friend was more keyed-up than he'd realized. *What was in that notebook?*

Rhi breathed in and then slowly back out before answering. She had Gavin's full attention now. "Basically, it's a record of my dreams concerning the two teenagers who were murdered." Hesitating only briefly, she looked Matt straight in the eyes. "Although I think you can already tell that from the entries."

Pushing away from the back door, Rhi walked over to the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of water. She didn't completely turn her back to them, as if she didn't trust they wouldn't jump up and touch her. When she turned the bottle up to drink, Gavin saw the water vibrate from her faintly trembling hands. She didn't return the bottle to the fridge,

but continued holding onto it as she leaned back against the sink.

Matt sighed and looked at Gavin, finally hiding some of his thoughts behind a grim expression. He pushed the open journal towards him without saying a word. Instead, Matt put both hands on the table and pushed himself up to walk over to the back door. Staring out the window much as Rhi had done earlier, he shoved his hands on his hips while Gavin read.

Gavin turned back to the beginning, and the more he read, the more he understood why he felt the connection—that thread of energy that stretched between them. Rhi was psychic. What kind, he wasn't sure. And based on her notes and how she reacted to Matt, he doubted she even knew.

Looking up from the journal, he caught her eyes studying him as intently as he'd studied her earlier. Instead of dropping her gaze this time, she continued to stare, her brows furrowed above her eyes. The thin string of electricity flared between them, becoming a conduit of energy and awareness. He felt it the instant she became as aware of him, as he was of her. Rhi's shock and that deep gnawing fear he'd felt earlier coursed through their connection and she balked.

When she would have pulled away, fought to pull away, Gavin held on and tried something he'd never tried before with another human. *"I believe you,"* he whispered across the tenacious line of energy to her. She'd tried hard to pull away, but he wanted to know. He needed to know. Could he communicate like this with a person, like he did with animals? It was a much more visceral form with animals—hunger,

danger, run—but still, to have that connection to another human...Gavin was more than intrigued

Rhi's eyes grew wide and she jerked back against the cabinet as if he'd hit her. He felt the confusion swirling in her mind along with a tentative curiosity, as well. She cocked her head slightly and licked her lips— a tiny pink tip swept across their pale flesh, drawing his attention to them. Something shifted inside him. Something he hadn't felt before. And then he heard her.

"Thanks."

Gavin broke the link, elated. It was another new emotion for him to think about later. Then he glanced towards Matt. His partner stood by the back door, staring at them. His jaw clenched so tightly that Gavin worried he'd crack some teeth. Matt knew something had happened between the two of them. His tightly controlled expression left no doubt in Gavin's mind there would be some tense moments until Matt could reason it out in his head. Still, Matt's narrowed eyes bothered him more than he wanted to admit.

He knew his partner had trouble accepting him and how he worked, but he'd tried and succeeded on some level. Matt was going to have a much more difficult time handling Rhi; Gavin was sure about that. As if to prove him right, his partner crossed the floor in two quick strides, drawing Rhi's attention when he grabbed the notebook from Gavin.

"Are you saying you had a vision of the murders before they happened?" Matt's question came across thick with sarcasm, which surprised Gavin.

Rhi nodded. "Normally they're dreams, though, not visions. The visions have only just started in the last few days."

"You can't expect us to believe that. I mean, you're talking about being psychic!" Matt drew in a deep breath, visibly making an effort to regain control.

"I can't *make* you believe anything, Sheriff, and I really don't expect you to, either. I told you that up front." Rhi's quiet voice betrayed nothing. "I can't explain how I know what I know, except to tell you the truth." She spread her hands, palms up. Then, sighing, she closed her eyes and rubbed them.

"Rhi, if you're connected to the killer, why don't you know who he is?" Gavin startled both of them with his question.

"Because when I'm connected to him, it's as if I'm inside him. I don't see his face. I don't *like* being in his head, it's confusing and he's so angry most of the time." She shivered, hugging herself again.

"What does it feel like to be inside his head, Rhi?"

Answering after a few moments, her voice was so soft, Matt and Gavin both leaned in to hear her. "Scary. Very scary."

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Chapter Twelve

She turned away and looked out the window over the sink, leaning her arms on the cabinet. "He's full of rage one minute and compassionate and concerned about the girls the next. He doesn't understand why they keep giving themselves to someone who isn't worthy of them. They belonged to him and they betrayed him." Rhi turned back from the window and looked Gavin full in the face, her mind totally closed to his now. "He'll keep trying to find someone who's loyal to him and killing the ones who aren't."

Gavin stood up and walked over to the back door and stared outside without really seeing anything. He felt Matt's eyes on his back, but ignored the sensation and turned the information around and around in his head, looking for connections and patterns.

"Look, I don't know who he is," Rhi said. "If I did, I would gladly tell you. I know you don't believe me, but the information is as true as I can interpret it. Just read all the way through it and ask me whatever questions you have. I want you to find him. I *need* you to find him, because until you do, I can't rest."

"What do you mean you can't rest?" Gavin asked, turning around quickly.

"I'll keep having dreams about him and the murders until he's either caught or he isn't..." She threw up her hands, frustration shining from eyes already bright with unshed

tears. "I don't know, until he calms down and doesn't broadcast so loudly, I guess. I honestly don't know!"

Gavin added another obvious solution. "Or until he's dead." Matt didn't comment.

Rhi rubbed her temples, her face seemed even paler now. Continuing in a shaky voice, she leaned harder against the cabinet. "It is the same thing I told you in the email, he's going to kill again." She briefly closed her eyes, breathing lightly through her nose. "He's changed since the first time he killed and he's growing tired of waiting for the perfect girl."

"How long have you been having these dreams?" Matt asked without the sarcasm this time.

"They started about eight years ago. The first one I had about the two here was November third."

Matt didn't even attempt to hide his astonishment. "Have you been sending tips to the police all this time?" Rhi nodded, but said nothing. She rubbed her eyes again, using both hands.

"So, how have your tips been received in the past?"

Rhi looked back up, glaring at him. "I think you know the answer to that one, Sheriff." Standing straight again, she looked him in the eyes. "I was either labeled as a crazy or investigated as a suspect. It didn't matter, though, because the end result was always the same. I moved to get away from the speculative looks and the phone calls."

Gavin wasn't surprised. Being different himself, he could well appreciate what she went through when anyone learned about her. The difference was that he had earned a reputation that kept most people from voicing their unwanted

opinions. She wasn't that lucky. He moved around out of choice, she moved out of necessity. Their finding her would necessitate another such move and he couldn't allow that. She was their connection to the killer.

Smiling ruefully, Rhi went on, her voice lifeless. "Eventually, I stopped trying to warn anyone and just concentrated on giving the authorities as much help as I could without being traced—till now." She narrowed her eyes at Matt. "I'd like to know how you managed that, too."

Gavin pressed his lips together, suppressing a smile. No doubt Matt was doing the same. When Matt shifted his gaze to Gavin, he just shrugged.

Rhi rubbed her temples yet again, using the cabinet to prop herself up. Gavin couldn't help but wonder what was going on in her head. She was in pain. He could feel it strongly enough that his own head pounded, a lighter version of hers. Still, she continued to talk trying to convince Matt she told the truth.

"If you'd just accept the information for what it is and don't dwell on how I know it, maybe you can use it to stop the bastard!" She stood up a bit straighter, but didn't take her hand from the cabinet. "Not everything in this world can be neatly folded and placed in a square box, Sheriff."

Matt scrubbed his mouth and chin with one hand, sighing noisily before shoving his hands on his hips. "Thing is, we can't use the information officially and you can't testify in a court on how we learned about it. I *need* to know the truth in order to justify how I use it."

When she didn't answer him, he shook his head, muttering a curse under his breath. Matt grabbed the journal off the table and carried it over to the back door and Gavin. His quick long stride and thinly pressed lips made it clear to Gavin that his partner was agitated. Not that he needed the visual indication. He felt it rolling off Matt in waves. Agitation, exasperation, confusion, anger—they all beat against Gavin's *other* senses.

From the corner of his eye, Gavin caught Rhi pulling a bottle of some sort of over-the-counter pain medicine from the cabinet, swallowing two of the pills with the bottled water from the fridge. He'd been right about the headache. His inherent curiosity churned through his mind as he registered Matt standing in front of him.

Gavin leaned his back against the door, waiting to see what Matt would say. Gavin pretty much knew what was on his friend's mind without his having to say anything. Sometimes it came in handy—like now.

"Hard to accept, but equally hard to dismiss, since it's a damn accurate description," Gavin said, keeping his expression neutral.

Matt rubbed the back of his neck, his mouth tight and closed. Gavin could tell he wanted to talk without Rhi in hearing range. Gavin nodded his head, knowing Matt didn't have a clue about what to do. His partner let the question show in his eyes. Gavin could read between the lines in a single glance and know he was floundering, questioning his beliefs.

Gavin struggled to keep his eyes empty, flat. It pissed him off that Matt chose to ignore the obvious, choosing instead to rationalize what he didn't understand and pretend the rest didn't exist. It wasn't just about Rhi and that damn journal as far as Gavin was concerned now. It was about their relationship, their partnership for nearly ten years. Matt hadn't really accepted him as he'd believed. He had simply chosen to pretend it was normal or that it hadn't happened at all. What got to him even more was that Matt couldn't throw stones. The son of a bitch had his own brand of gift—one he had rationalized away the same way he'd done with Gavin's.

The bastard clenched his jaw when Gavin didn't help him out. He knew. Gavin was sure Matt knew what he was thinking. It amazed him, in all the time they'd worked together in the Army, Matt hadn't dealt with this. Now, a slip of a woman had him torn up and dealing with all of it at once. The irony of it was almost enough to drag a smile out of him.

Matt raised his eyebrows, meeting Gavin's eyes with a blank look before turning away. He drew in a deep breath, his shoulders moving with it, and let it out slowly. Gavin wondered for one of only a handful of times what Matt was about to say.

"Rhi, I don't know what to make of this." Matt held up the journal. "But you have some details in this that only the killer could know. Not to mention some things we didn't know about. My gut instinct tells me you're not a murderer, but you know more than an innocent bystander would know, so something isn't right. I need to find out what doesn't feel right about you and about this journal."

Rhi looked down and nodded her head. "Of course, you can have the journal." Her voice oozed bitterness, thick and sticky. "I'll just start another one with the next dream. Because there will be another one, and another one until he's stopped."

Matt winced at the bite in her voice and Gavin turned his head to keep Rhi from seeing the smile he couldn't stop. God knew where it was coming from, because ordinarily he didn't smile unless he wanted to. Matt's next words had him jerk his gaze back towards them, the smile gone. They surprised him as much as they did Rhi.

"I need you to come back with us. I'll put you up at a hotel in Casper at the county's expense so we can go over this in detail. We'll need you to explain a lot of it to us."

"For how long?" Rhi jerked her head up—eyes wide—to stare at Matt. "Am I under arrest?"

"No, you're not under arrest." Matt shoved his hand through his hair, looking up at the ceiling for a minute before continuing. "There's a lot of information here we need to verify. Going by my gut instinct and what you're telling us, we don't have a lot of time, so it would be a lot more convenient for you to be close by."

Matt glanced back at him before adding, "I'd feel better if you were in Casper instead of out here by yourself."

Rhi's mouth worked without issuing a sound and she finally closed it, a panicked expression filling her face. Her eyes met Gavin's and he thought she would say something more, but instead she licked her upper lip, her face closing down, void of expression.

"Um, okay, can I bring my truck? I need to pack my things and I'm sure you don't want to wait around while I do that."

Matt hesitated for a minute before nodding his head. "Sure, Gavin can drive you back to town." He looked pointedly at his partner. Gavin shrugged and nodded, still reeling from Matt's decision.

"Oh, I can drive myself to Casper, I know where it is." Rhi's voice shook just a little. "There's really no need for him to wait around and drive me. I'm sure you both have a lot going on right now."

Gavin exchanged a quick glance with Matt; the knowing look in the sheriff's eyes confirmed Matt worried she would take off, given half a chance. Matt headed for the front door, but turned back to answer Rhi's question.

"Yeah, we do, but I don't want to leave you here by yourself or let you drive at night with the killer on the loose and you knowing so much about him." Rhi bit her lower lip and nodded her head, clearly unable to think of anything to use to argue with him. Matt smiled and picked up his hat as he walked through the front room. Gavin followed behind him.

Matt climbed into the driver's seat, slamming the door, and shoved the key into the ignition. Gavin leaned in the passenger window when Matt started the truck and powered down the window.

"Do you mind?" Matt asked, looking over at Gavin. "I'd stay and let you take the truck back, but I don't think she's too thrilled with me right now." Matt's hands gripped the steering wheel tightly enough that his knuckles turned white,

and he faced the front of the truck again. "Frankly, I've never believed all that psychic crap about visions and dreams and talking to dead people."

Shaking his head, Matt swallowed visibly. "But what she has written in this journal is solid." He patted the notebook and rubbed his face with both hands, then rested them on the steering wheel again. "I honestly don't know what to think."

Gavin knew Matt needed something to make sense and, as usual, was depending on Gavin to do that for him.

"Figured out she'd probably bolt, didn't you?" Gavin smiled at Matt with a lift of his brows.

"Yeah, it was pretty obvious. She's done it in the past by her own admission, so..." Matt shrugged.

"We need to talk when I get back." Gavin looked over his shoulder towards the house and then pointedly at the journal on the seat beside Matt. "Sometimes you have to look beyond what you think you know is true, Matt." Gavin patted the top of the truck before heading back to Rhi's house, leaving Matt to puzzle over his statement on his way back to town. It would give him something besides the case to keep him company, Gavin mused.

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Chapter Thirteen

Rhi stood at the door, blocking his way, when Gavin returned to the porch. His eyes held questions she knew she couldn't answer. She wasn't certain she'd give them to him even if she did. The man was a stranger to her, but something about him felt familiar. His eyes held her gaze for a moment. She discovered they were dark pools that, God help her, she wanted to sink into. Something about this man affected her, deep inside at her core. She didn't understand why, but to her, he felt safe—something she'd never felt with anyone in her life. Feeling safe was one of those secret wishes buried deep in her heart. She didn't know him at all, but sensed there was much more to him than she could see on the surface. He looked to be a very deep and complex person.

Breaking eye contact took strength of will. Nodding at him, Rhi stepped back into the room out of the doorway to allow him entry. A peculiar feeling washed over her, alerting her that she had taken a very significant step in her life. The knowledge both frightened and excited her both at the same time. Shoving her feelings aside, Rhi concentrated instead on what she would need for a few days' stay in Casper. Since she had already packed many of her personal things in case she had to pick up and run, it wouldn't require a lot of effort or time despite what she had told the sheriff earlier.

Toby would have to come with them, though she doubted the big man would be happy about that particular piece of knowledge. She couldn't help smiling despite her pounding

head. She had waited too long to take the Tylenol. She was beginning to get nauseous as well. Good Lord, how she dreaded the trip to Casper. It would be pure hell in the state she was in. Maybe by the time she was ready to go, it would have died down some.

Rummaging around in her closet, she came out with her duffel bag and backpack, already packed with a set of overnight clothes in each of them. She shouldn't need anything more than a couple pairs of jeans, t-shirts and maybe sweats in addition to her sleep shirt and underwear. The duffel bag held her jeans and sweats, while the back pack had her underwear and sleep shirts. She unzipped them both, checking to be sure they were ready before zipping them closed.

Rhi felt Gavin behind her and realized he had been standing in the doorway of her room when she checked her bags. He would know they were already packed and realize she had been ready to run even before they'd shown up. Hell, she had as good as told them that earlier. Sighing, she straightened up but didn't turn to look at him.

"I'm packing my things now. It won't take long." Biting her lip, she paused and tilted her head up as if she were thinking of what she needed to pack. Then she added, with a smile to herself, "If I'm going to be gone more than a day or two, Toby, my cat, will have to come as well."

"Sure, if you'll tell me what he needs and where it is, I'll go ahead and get it ready for you."

Rhi spun around, positive her mouth hung open before she could shut it. "Um, thanks, that would help. His carrier is on a

shelf over the washer and dryer off the kitchen and his litter pan and extra litter is back there, as well. His food and bowls are all in the kitchen in the pantry." She smiled nervously before turning back to her already packed bags. Rhi knew the moment he left the doorway. She all but collapsed on the bed once he was gone. The strain of someone as virile with so much personal energy in such close proximity added to her discomfort.

Once she finished packing the only thing left to pack, her toiletries, Rhi sat in the chair in front of the French doors to rest. Her head was about to explode. Moving around had only made it worse and now she felt sick. Leaning her head back against the chair, she closed her eyes. She just needed to rest a minute and she would feel better. She hadn't gotten much sleep in the last few nights with the dreams and they tended to wear her out. The Tylenol would kick in soon and she would be ready to go.

Gavin finished setting out the huge cat carrier and bagged up the cat's litter box with the extra litter. He used a box he found in the laundry room to pack up the food and a clean set of bowls. Hands on his hips, he briefly looked around for the cat in question. He sure hoped the carrier wasn't a true indication of how big the thing was. It could easily be a bobcat or a mountain lion. Maybe the carrier was just extra large so he'd have somewhere to sleep when Rhi took him with her on her nursing trips. Grimacing, he hoped like hell that was the case. He might have a way with animals and be able to pick up on their emotions, but dealing with a full fledged lynx or bobcat could be a bit tricky.

Shaking his head, Gavin figured he could go ahead and load all the cat paraphernalia with the exception of the carrier and then continue on to whatever Rhi had ready. Then, they would need to locate the cat. He started to call out to Rhi to find out where her keys were, but remembered seeing a set in the laundry room, hanging by the door. The keychain was a pewter syringe that said, 'Nurses Call The Shots'. Her truck turned out to be an SUV. It took two trips for the cat's stuff and he remembered to leave a large enough spot to fit the carrier. He figured she should have her stuff ready by then considering she'd already had most of it packed to begin with.

Before he made it out of the kitchen, he knew something was wrong. He felt the throbbing in her head again and almost ran down the hall. Rhi sat curled up in a chair with her knees to her chest, holding her head in both hands.

"What's wrong?" Gavin tried to pry her hands away from her head, but they wouldn't budge. He was at a loss as to what he could do to help her. Her skin felt cool and clammy, but other than wrapping a blanket around her, he didn't know what she needed. His skills with women were limited to the basics of pleasure and safe sex. He'd never needed to know much more.

Gavin knelt in front of her. "Do you need some medication or something?" She didn't answer him. Instead, she abruptly pushed out of the chair, nearly knocking him down in the process, and headed towards the bathroom. She grabbed hold of anything she could on the way, to keep her balance. Gavin immediately stood up to help her as she made it to through the bathroom door.

"S'cuse me." Rhi closed the bathroom door behind her, but Gavin caught a brief glimpse of her pale face before she closed the door. He ran a hand over his smooth head, wondering what to do next when he heard the unmistakable sounds of retching. Hesitating only a moment, he knocked on the door.

"Hey, you okay in there?"

Her muffled, "Go away, I'll be out in a minute," didn't ease his mind. Feeling helpless was new to him and he found he didn't like to feel that way. Running both hands along his scalp, Gavin shook his head and opened the door. She was on her hands and knees over the toilet, pale and shaking. He knelt beside her, having no clue about what to do. Gavin gently pulled her long hair back from her face, holding it until she'd finished throwing up. Careful to avoid touching her skin as much as possible, he was surprised she only leaned away from him. Once the heaving had subsided, he found a bath cloth and ran cold water over it before handed it to her to wash her face. Then he rinsed it and draped it across the back of her neck until she finally sat back against the wall.

"You don't listen very well, do you?" Her shaky voice made it clear she was exhausted.

"No, never have." Gavin helped her to her feet, feeling her cringe at his touch, but she was obviously too weak to fight him. "You probably need to rest before we head back to Casper. I doubt you've slept much lately, judging by the dark circles under your eyes. I'll call Matt and tell him we'll be late getting back." He helped her to the bed and, once she was curled on her side, pulled a blanket over her. He noticed she

didn't argue—probably didn't have the energy to, he reasoned. That would come later, he was fairly certain. She didn't strike him as someone who did as they were told without a fuss.

Matt answered the phone on the second ring. His, "Yeah," sounded muffled, so Gavin figured he had the phone on his shoulder while he worked.

"Matt, might want to make other plans on talking to Rhiannon any more tonight."

"Why, what's going on?" Matt's voice suddenly got clearer. He'd probably grabbed the phone in his hand in order to hear better. "Is she refusing to come back?"

"No, at least not yet, but she's sick. Not sure when I'll be able to get her to town."

"Sick? Are you sure this isn't just some ruse to keep from coming here to Casper?"

"No, she's sick, all right. Her skin is cool and clammy and she threw up her guts a few minutes ago. She's resting right now." Something in his voice must have carried over the phone.

"What is it, Gavin?"

"Just not my deal, Matt. Don't know what to do with a sick female, you know? You're married to one; what do I do?" It bothered him that Matt could tell something was up. Normally, he kept how he felt to himself, but for some reason, not knowing what to do bothered him more than it should have.

"Just let her sleep until she wakes up on her own." Gavin could hear the amusement in Matt's voice. "She probably had

a migraine. She'll be fine in a couple of hours. Let her sleep it off."

"Yeah, sure." He leaned back against the doorway. "I'll use her computer and see what I can dig up on the other murders till then."

"OK, let me know when you're on your way back and I'll meet you at the motel."

"Will do." Gavin closed his cell phone with a snap. He'd check on Rhi and then use her office until she woke up. Moving soundlessly back down the hall, he peered into the room to find she was still curled up on her side, apparently asleep.

Reassured, he took a quick look around her office before settling down at her computer. He wanted to check out some things he'd thought about on the drive over. It would serve to keep his mind occupied and off the red-headed woman lying in the next room. Something about her stirred things in him he'd never felt before and would just as soon keep locked down tight.

Logging onto the Internet, he used Google to locate the newspaper archives he was interested in. He had memorized the list of murdered girls and where they were found so he could do some additional research later. Well, it was as good a time as any. Gavin accessed the papers with online searchable archives first. Beginning with the last known murder before the two in Casper, he began his search of the classified ads. He scanned several weeks of job postings after the murder and printed out any newly advertised jobs placing the employee close to teenagers. From there, if the angle

panned out, they could locate the information on who had vacated the position after the murder and possibly track him to the next murder.

Gavin worked that angle for nearly two hours before he heard sounds coming from the bedroom. Rhi was sitting on the edge of the bed, her hands gripping the mattress, looking down toward her feet.

"How are you feeling?" He spoke softly, hoping to keep from startling her, but she jerked her head up anyway, staring at him from across the room. He could tell she was better, but not completely well. He could also tell she wasn't thrilled he was still there. In fact, he could almost feel the hostility pushing against him in the doorway.

"I'm fine. What are you doing still here?"

Yep, that was clearly annoyance in her voice. Even with the pallor of her face, her eyes shot sparks meant to singe.

"Wasn't going to leave you sick and alone," was all he said as he walked further into the room.

"I'm fine now; you can go." Rhi slid off the edge of the mattress and stood swaying by the bed. One hand snaked out to hold onto the mattress as she tried to regain her balance. After a few seconds, she took a step towards the bathroom, still not quite steady on her feet. When he moved toward her, she stopped and held up her hand.

"Don't. Don't touch me, okay? I really don't like it."

Gavin stopped and held out his hand, palms up, and waited for her reaction. Reaching the bathroom entrance, Rhi gripped the door facing for support.

"I really need to take a shower before we argue over anything else, OK?" Without waiting for his reply, she closed the door behind her with a soft click. The unmistakable louder click of the lock struck Gavin as funny for some reason. Not just because a lock wasn't much of a deterrent for him, but also because she saw him as a threat of some type. And he was, he thought to himself. He'd experienced more emotional firsts and surprises in the last twenty-four hours than he'd had in almost his entire life—something he'd need to think about when he had the time.

Shaking his head, he returned to her office and gathered up the papers he'd printed out. He tidied up the desk and closed the computer down before returning to her bedroom to sit on the bed and wait. He had extensive experience with patience and waiting. In his line of work, it paid to be able to sit or stand for long periods of time and blend into the woodwork. He figured this would get interesting if she planned to argue about going to Casper. He chuckled to himself, something he rarely did. She would go, all right; besides, he didn't have a way back without her truck.

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Chapter Fourteen

Matt read through the journal one page at a time, making notes as he went along. There were an awful lot of questions in his notes, but then there was also quite a bit of information, as well. The murder scene she described had been eerily on target. Despite his immediate instinct to dismiss her claims as hogwash, the facts were right there in front of him. He just needed to figure out how she actually came up with the information. There had to be another explanation.

The fax alarm startled him and he absently reached back to pull off whatever was printing. He nearly dropped it when he read the first page. The Oxford Police Department hadn't wasted time with his request for information on the death of one Jason Miles. He had fully expected not to hear anything back from them till Monday and had thought more than likely it would be a false lead. This floored him. Now he really wasn't sure what to believe about Rhi's claim to dreaming about the murders. Matt read all the way through the fax twice before he jotted down the new information into his notes.

Jason Miles, freshman at Ole Miss in 1986, majored in pre-law and was a promising center on the college basketball team. He wasn't first string, but the first string center was a senior that year, so Jason got a lot of playtime for a freshman. He was reported missing on a Thursday night after he didn't show up for practice or his classes the next day. A

farmer found him while out walking his fields. His hunting dogs went crazy at the door of an abandoned farmhouse. Thinking there might be a raccoon or squirrel inside, he'd pushed open the door to let his dogs chase it out, only to have one back out whining and the other barking his fool head off as soon as they ran inside.

On November 12, 1986, Jason Miles died alone in an old farmhouse, all but castrated, his genitals hacked to pieces. He bled to death, according to the coroner's report. There had been no fingerprints or other evidence found at the scene, so the case was never solved. There was no mention of his heart being removed, so that was different as well as the mutilation of the genitals instead of castration. Gavin was probably right in that the heart being removed was something new. If this was the same person who had killed the two in Casper and if he had also killed some of the other teens on the list, he'd had a long time to practice and evolve in what he did.

The basketball player had been stripped and tied down by his arms and legs with rope on the remains of a bed. How had he been lured there, Matt wondered? How had the killer tied him down with rope? Had there been something driven into the floor or had the killer used something already there? He was sure Lafayette County Sheriff's Department would be calling come Monday to ask what interest their case from 1986 had for his office. Right then, he wasn't sure what he could say.

Continuing to read through the coroner's report, he noted that there were no drugs in the boy's system, but he had been drinking and there was evidence of a blow to the back of

his head. Another similarity consistent with Tommy's murder, Matt noted. There were similarities, he conceded, and the differences could be explained as evolvment of the killer's fantasy or whatever the hell you called it. Matt looked back over the list of the girls murdered in the previous twenty years and noticed the ones Gavin had picked out looked similar to Carol Ann's murder, as well.

He located the oldest murder on the list of females and circled the date in red. Martha Louise Owens, sixteen, of Etta, Mississippi was murdered November 13th, 1986. She was stabbed to death in the school auditorium and found by the janitor as he cleaned the building. There were twenty-two stab wounds to her body, the majority of them located in her pelvic area. The murder weapon was never recovered and the case remained unsolved. Only one day separated the murders of Martha and Jason. What were the odds, he wondered? Pulling up a map of Mississippi on the Internet, Matt checked the locations of Oxford and Etta, finding they were in fairly close proximity. Matt thought about this for a long while and then began listing questions.

Did Martha and Jason know each other and, if so, were they dating? Had the two cases been linked by law enforcement back then? Where there any clues left at the scene of Martha's murder? Had a class ring or gold locket been found at either murder scene or were they known to be missing? Who did the two teenagers have in common? Matt tapped his pen against the edge of the desk in a random rhythm as he mentally mapped connections between the two

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cases. If they were connected, then there was a good chance something had been missed. He needed more information.

Another thought hit him. Maybe they needed to check for teenage boys missing or murdered during the same month in the general area the girls were found. So far, it looked as if the murders in his jurisdiction could be connected to the murders in 1986 over in Mississippi, but until he knew for certain if Jason and Martha were a couple, he hesitated to focus on any one area. He was basing all of this on information from one person who claimed to have precognizant dreams. No, he wanted more information, something a little more concrete.

Going back to Rhi's journal, he thumbed through it, looking for the page he remembered reading—about the newspaper article on Jason's death. It seemed like there was something else in that entry that stood out in his mind. Locating the page, he slowly read through it and jotted down the articles she had listed from the cigar box: a gold locket, the newspaper article, some pictures and a program. The pictures were what he was looking for. She had described the teenage girl as about sixteen with dark hair and a gold locket around her neck. The teenage boy looked about the same age, with blue eyes and sandy blond hair that appeared shaggy.

Matt needed to get pictures of the two murdered teenagers from Mississippi for Rhi to see if they were the same teens in the pictures she described in her journal. That would be the connection they needed and they could work back from there to determine who the two couples had in common. If he was going to accept her visions and continue to work that angle,

that was. Kicking his garbage can so it flew across the room to roll around near the window, Matt ran his hands through his hair, realizing once again he still needed a damn haircut. He was working the angle, all right. It was all they had.

Rhiannon opened the bathroom door almost thirty minutes later to find Gavin sitting on her bed. It struck her what a good looking man he was, with dark intense eyes, and the shaved head was sexy. But she didn't need any sort of relationship in her life right then. Especially a complicated one, and anything with this man would be complicated. Rhi bit her lip, reminding herself she'd never be able to manage a relationship with her tendency to dream about murders. How many trustworthy men out there would stick around once they woke up next to a woman screaming about blood and mutilated bodies, especially when it came with a nosebleed—or worse?

Tightening her hold on the towel wrapped snugly around her, Rhi walked over to her dresser and selected her underwear without acknowledging the man sitting on the bed. He didn't say anything or move when she selected jeans and a shirt from her closet. Dropping them over the back of a chair, she turned to Gavin and pointedly raised her eyebrow at him.

"Do you get your kicks watching or are you going to leave while I dress?" Fully expecting him to leave, she became nervous when he didn't say anything or show any intentions of leaving the room. Grimacing, she collapsed in the chair and stared at him.

"Look, I'm not going to Casper with you. I'll email you every single detail from the dreams as soon as I can write them down." Rhi waited, but all he did was smile and shake his head. "Then you're going to have to arrest me." She schooled her face to hide the panic that washed over her and jerked the two ends of the towel tighter across her legs.

"Can't," was all he said. His eyes never left her, kicking her anxiety level up a notch or two.

"What do you mean you can't? Can't what?" Rhi had a bad feeling she wasn't going to like this answer.

"I'm not an officer of any type of law, so I can't arrest you." His dark eyes still held their promise of danger, his face void of any expression. Finally, he moved off the bed, stretching to his full height before slowly approaching her.

Rhi's breath caught in her throat as she watched him draw nearer. Caught in the chair with a towel barely covering her, she had nowhere to run. Her only choice would be to drop the towel and break for the door, but she wouldn't even consider that option. When he leaned over her, snagging her panties with two fingers from the back of the chair, she sank deeper. His face never registered the first hint of emotion, but his eyes grew impossibly darker as he slowly lowered the silky scrap of cloth into her lap.

"You're going to Casper." He caught her eyes with his and she couldn't look away no matter how much she tried.

"Unless you'd rather stay here with me as your roommate." Leaning forward, he placed a hand on both arms of the chair, smiling with that predator smile, more teeth than lips.

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It wasn't a particularly friendly smile, but one holding the promise of something deliciously wicked. Rhi nervously moistened her lips, still unable to tear her eyes from his, and tried to keep from sinking any deeper into the chair.

"At least in Casper you'll have a room all to yourself."

Dear God, she groaned to herself. That smile was a dangerous thing. When it wasn't all teeth, being dangerous, it turned his dark eyes into fiery pits promising every exquisite torture a woman's body could ever crave. Everything inside her wanted to find out what just one of those delicious tortures would feel like, but she knew better. The crackling energy around him seemed alive with a mind of its own, telling her even though a taste would be worth it, she'd likely get burned in the end.

Biting her lip, Rhi knew he meant it. He wasn't leaving and she couldn't afford to be stuck alone with him for any length of time. All her good intentions would fly out the door; hell, they might break the damn door down. She looked deep into his eyes, willing her body not to betray her by closing those few inches between them, knowing if she touched him now, she would be lost. When he finally stood up, breaking that invisible thread tying them together, its sudden withdrawal left a puzzling longing behind. Yet she couldn't hide her relief.

Despite the physical attraction her body refused to ignore, she was afraid. Afraid of knowing him and then seeing him die, afraid of finding out that deep down she was a coward, but most of all, afraid to trust someone enough to relinquish her hard-earned control over her life. Her instincts warned

her Gavin was a man who would accept nothing less than everything and she didn't have everything to give anymore.

Resigned to going to Casper, Rhi stood up and turned her back to him. She struggled to pull on her underwear beneath the towel. Not an easy feat, she realized after losing her balance twice. When her bra landed over her shoulder, she managed not to yelp, but jumped just the same. Swallowing her pride with a gulp of anger, she dropped the towel to the floor, where it pooled around her ankles, and put on the bra. Holding her hand out for her pants without turning around, she figured he might as well help if he was going to stand there watching her. When they landed over her arm, she pulled them up quickly, trying to avoid hopping on one foot.

She didn't hold her hand back out for her shirt, but turned around with a defiant look that belied her nervousness and made a grab for it out of his hands. Gavin didn't let it go, but held on to it, staring at her with a strange feral look in his eyes, frightening her. Then the look vanished, along with the throbbing energy she'd felt surrounding them since she'd come out of the shower.

"What happened to you?" His whispered question tingled along her spine, raising the small hairs at the back of her neck. His fingers gently touched the scar that started out on her back among the others and ended just over her shoulder. Then they dropped down to lightly trace the one running over her stomach. Gasping, Rhi pulled back, almost losing her balance. She reacted more from the heat of his touch than from the fear of it. She continued backing away, stumbling over the chair in the process. Regaining her footing, she

didn't answer, but reached out and tugged her shirt free from his grasp. He didn't hold on to it this time. Instead, he crossed his arms and leaned against the door jamb and watched.

Her hair tumbled out of the towel it was wrapped in when she pulled her shirt over her head. Lifting her hair out of the shirt, she ran her fingers through it to loosen it so it would begin to dry. She couldn't stop the shivers invading her body, not so much from the cool air in the room as from the jumble of conflicting emotions invading her thoughts. Some, she hadn't experienced in more years than she wanted to think about. Without taking her eyes off the compelling man leaning in her doorway, Rhi grabbed her brush off the dresser. Focusing on her breathing, she pulled it through her hair until she finally managed to fall into a familiar rhythm, one that helped her regain her focus and control.

Gavin watched from across the room as Rhi drew the brush through her long auburn hair. The damp tresses curled at her shoulders, hinting that if left alone, they could become full fledged ringlets. He knew instinctively the slow deliberate strokes were intended as a catharsis as well as to help dry and control her hair. He knew she shivered, but didn't need to look. He felt her. Her emotions, even her thoughts, as he'd found out earlier, revealed themselves to him. He wasn't sure what was going on, but knew in his gut she might be the one to bring him down. The only logical course of action would be to keep as far away from her as possible, but they had a killer to catch and she was their only clue so far.

The brush continued to glide through her hair from top to bottom, slowly, methodically. Gavin couldn't help but think about the scars. They bothered him. He knew from that one brief touch, the scars were traumatic and beastly. He felt someone's rage oozing from them like an open wound that wouldn't heal. They'd been deliberate and they'd given someone a great deal of excitement. The knowledge burned deep inside him and he wanted to find the man responsible for her pain. This need to make the man pay for his treatment of a woman he barely knew puzzled him. In fact, it unsettled him that he felt so strongly about it.

He rarely felt anything when he took a life. He assumed he was different that way, unable to feel remorse over something so basic and important. It made him a sociopath according to modern psychiatry, but he figured he defied the common beliefs because he knew it was wrong and he didn't kill for sport or pleasure, only when it was necessary. He had a code of honor, though he doubted anyone would believe him if it came down to it. When it was necessary to neutralize or kill someone, it was all business, the mission and nothing else. This feeling, he realized, was new to him and he needed to think about it when he had the time, when they weren't searching for a monster—like him.

Rhi was different from any woman he'd ever known. Shit, who was he fooling? Himself? He didn't know anything about women. He had nothing to offer them. He had no home and worked only when it suited him. He didn't stay in one place and liked it that way. When he felt the needs of his body become more than he wanted to deal with on his own, he

found someone and satisfied those needs and moved on. He rarely stayed more than one or two nights with a woman. He'd never had trouble finding a woman willing to spend time with him. Woman tended to hang onto him, enjoying the way his body made them feel, but it wouldn't be long before they called him crazy. So, he saved them both the hassle and left before they woke up the next day. After all, he was the Ghost, appearing and disappearing without a trace.

He watched her pick up the hair dryer and turn it on. Their eyes met in the mirror as the hot air from the dryer sent wave after wave of auburn hair billowing out from her face. Gavin had to take a quick breath when he realized he'd stopped breathing. Watching her watching him was doing something to him. He didn't get emotionally involved with women. He barely got physically involved, so why was this particular one worming her way under his skin? He'd known her less than eight hours and already felt connected to her, drawn to her in a way that made his pulse race and his stomach sink. If he didn't know himself better, Gavin would say it frightened him, but then nothing frightened him anymore.

He almost jerked when she wrenched her eyes away from his. She looked down as she drew the brush through her hair in long, even strokes. Watching her aroused him unlike anything he could remember. She swept the hair dryer back and forth beneath her hair, sending it fanning out from her body, creating a sensual ballet. Mesmerized, he shifted his position in the doorway to relive the cramped space in his

jeans. He wanted to run his hands through the soft silk of her hair and jerk her head back to...

The thought shattered when Rhi cut off the hair dryer. Bending over, her back to him now, she allowed the auburn stream to flow over the top of her head. Gavin watched through half-closed eyes. She brushed over and then under, over then under, until the tightening in his groin was more than he could stand. Gritting his teeth, Gavin jerked his thoughts away from the images racing through his mind. Her present position, bent over with her back to him, made it all the more difficult to control his breathing. *Shit!* He needed to get laid in a bad way if watching a woman brush her hair got him this hot and bothered.

"I've already loaded the cat's stuff, just not the cat." His voice came out harsh and almost abrasive. He needed something to do for a few minutes while he regained control of his libido and made some sense out of what was going on. "What can I take from in here?"

"My suitcase is ready. I just need to put a few things in my overnight bag and it'll be ready, as well." She didn't meet his eyes in the mirror or look up. Without acknowledging he'd heard her, Gavin grabbed her suitcase and walked out of the room.

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Chapter Fifteen

Breathing a sigh of relief when Gavin left the room with her suitcase in tow, Rhi leaned weakly against the dresser. Her hands gripped the edge as if her life depended on it. The man stirred her up in a way she'd never been stirred before. The sizzling mass of conflicting emotions bombarded her, nearly driving her to her knees. Her stomach felt as if she'd just stepped off a roller coaster. It was too much. She couldn't breathe, much less think around him. One minute she wanted to wrap her arms and legs tight around his waist and the next she wanted to run as far and as fast as she could.

Realizing her hands had grown numb from holding on to the dresser, she relaxed them, watching the color slowly return to her knuckles. It had been too long since she'd been around a man as virile as Gavin. She was reacting like a schoolgirl, a skittish virgin, anxious after her virtue. Why did she feel so volatile around him? Energy, similar to the energy felt with her dreams, radiated from him. His felt more natural and earthy—something alive and moving like a current along a wire. Until now, she hadn't really thought about what hers felt like. She'd always believed it to be a curse, something left over from her injuries as a bitter reminder. It had never felt real or alive to her—until then. At that moment, she wasn't so sure.

She had enough to worry about without adding her hormones or his virility to the equation. If they reacted like

this all the time, she'd lose her mind. His aura overwhelmed her, canceling hers out in the process. She could easily lose herself in him and that wasn't going to happen. It had taken her years to build herself back. No way would she allow a man to take it all away from her again. *Dammit!* Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath to steady her nerves. Rhi picked up the rubber band with fingers that trembled. It took two tries to pull her hair into a ponytail.

This isn't a good idea. Never mind, she wasn't being given a choice. The idea of a strange place and strangers around her when she was experiencing some of the worst dreams of her life terrified her. To top it all off, the dreams were different than before and she seemed to be having visions as well. Biting her lip, Rhi stuffed her brush and the hairdryer into her bag, zipping it closed. The finality of the motion wasn't lost on her. She sensed that it would be the last time she'd see her room. What that meant, she had no idea, but figured it couldn't be a good sign.

When she walked into the kitchen, Gavin was nowhere in sight. Dropping her bag by the back door, Rhi realized the only thing left besides taking out her overnight bag was locating the big cat and loading him into his carrier. The carrier stood empty in the middle of the floor, waiting. She had a feeling capturing Toby would prove to be the most difficult task of all. Alone, she could handle him without a problem, but Gavin was a stranger to Toby as well as to her. The cat would make it his duty to avoid capture by the strange human. She couldn't help the wry smile that crept across her mouth. This, she would enjoy.

When Gavin opened the back door and walked in, Rhi was sitting at the kitchen table with a glass of water and her overnight bag at her feet. She didn't say anything, just took a drink and waited. She watched, amused, as he looked around, appearing lost, and then looked inside the carrier as if he expected the cat to be inside waiting for him.

"So, what's his name again? Does he come when you call him?"

"His name is Toby and he has a mind of his own. I've never really tried to call him. He usually comes and goes as he wants." Rhi bit her lip, trying to keep the smile off her face. This really should be good.

Gavin shrugged and looked around. He tried calling both inside and outside the house, but quickly tired of that. After he had checked every possible hiding spot in the house and come up empty-handed, he searched outside including the shed she normally used as a garage while Rhi watched through the window. Thoroughly enjoying herself, she nearly groaned out loud when he finally wizened up. He picked up the opened box of dried food and shook it.

Rhi sighed in disappointment when Toby dashed into the room from parts unknown, slamming into the cabinet when he couldn't stop in time. Despite her disappointment, she couldn't help but smile at the amazed expression on Gavin's face when the pudgy cat appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

"Not real bright, is he?" was all he said, but Rhi didn't miss the tiny smile playing along the edges of his mouth.

"No, but considering everything he's been through, he does okay." Rhi allowed the cat to eat his treats before

stuffing him in the carrier. She let Gavin carry Toby to the truck and wasn't the least bit sorry about it, either. Toby was one fat cat.

Once he had Toby settled, Gavin added Rhi's bag to the rest of the cat's paraphernalia in the back seat. Climbing in the passenger side, she secured her seatbelt and closed her eyes while he locked up the house. Allowing Gavin to drive didn't bother her in the least. She still had the lingering effects of the headache and dealing with traffic wouldn't help it any. When he climbed into the driver's seat and closed his door, she opened her eyes, but didn't say anything. Turning towards her, he stared at her a few moments, his expression unreadable.

"That cat has more luggage than you do. What kind is he?" Rhi couldn't help but burst out laughing. His question was so out of context.

"He's an old Tom cat that's used up most of his nine lives and, yeah, I guess he probably does." Gavin grunted, and without saying anything more, started the engine and turned the vehicle around in the drive, heading towards the main road.

When he had looked over towards her several times, she finally demanded, "What?"

"You don't get car sick, do you?"

"No, but there's a first time for everything." Rhi leaned back against the seat and closed her eyes. "I'll let you know if I start to feel sick so you can pull over."

She doubted Gavin could tell if she was serious or being sarcastic, but really didn't care right then. The further away

from home they drove, the more nervous she felt. Not long after they turned onto the main highway, Gavin pulled out his cell phone and alerted Matt that they were on the road and heading his way.

Rhiannon schooled herself to relax and not think about the man sitting next to her. He unnerved her and she didn't like it. The knowledge that anyone could affect her that way worried her. She had worked hard to become self sufficient, not needing anyone in her life. Then, in the space of one afternoon, this stranger managed to breach her defenses. Without even trying, he had awakened feelings and emotions she'd buried out of self preservation. He'd seen her as vulnerable as she got, holding her hair out of her face while she threw up. He'd seen her scars. He had learned more about her in that one afternoon than anyone in the previous eight or nine years of her life had ever found out. And it scared the crap out of her.

When Rhi emerged from the hell she had lived in for nearly six years, she'd made a promise to herself. Never again would she allow someone to control her life. She liked to think the brief time she had spent in a coma had been used to subconsciously re-evaluate her life. She'd learned to live again, until the dreams began. At first, they seemed like horrible nightmares that repeated over and over. Then they seemed to evolve and change from one night to the next.

Rhi had thought she would go crazy and wind up in an institution. Instead, she fought to maintain her precious foothold on her sanity—and won. Yet there she was, a passenger in her own vehicle, going to a place she didn't want

to go because *they* wanted her there. She didn't know how she was going to cope around the strangers, especially someone like the enigma of a man sitting next to her. He had his own secrets which he guarded just as carefully as she did her own. He was used to being in control. The fact she could sense his emotions and felt a connection between them only strengthened her resolve to stay away from him. He was dangerous to her.

Rhi slowly forced the muscles in her neck and shoulders to relax, the remaining knots and kinks not quite as painful as before. Feeling much more in control, she turned her head to look out the window. She didn't know whether to plan her next move but decided to put it out of her mind until she could concentrate on where to go. She decided she needed to focus on the killer and learning everything she could about him to help them catch the bastard. Until then, she was a prisoner one way or another, even without bars on her windows or cuffs on her wrists. The visions and nightmares of his slaughter chained her down as securely as a pair of handcuffs.

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Chapter Sixteen

Rhi gazed unseeing out the window, her mind concentrating instead on what she knew about the murders. The sudden change in speed and direction alerted her they had turned off the highway and, judging from the streetlights and the Wal-Mart sign in the distance, were heading into town. The earlier nervous fluttering in her stomach returned with a vengeance. She swallowed, drawing in a slow breath to steady the nerves. They turned into the parking lot of a Days Inn Motel and Gavin headed for one of the slots next to the building. If he was aware of her nervousness, he didn't comment or indicate he'd picked up on it.

"You're in room one-thirty-four on the bottom floor on the corner." Gavin didn't glance her way. Instead, he climbed out almost before he'd turned off the motor. "I'll carry everything inside for you." Opening the back door, he dragged the carrier out first with a grunt. Then, with a nod of his head, he indicated she should go first.

Rhi stopped in front of the door to her room, unsure what to do next. She didn't have a key card to open the door. The problem was solved when Gavin reached around her and knocked twice on the door. Looking back and up at him, she had the sudden urge to run, when the door opened before she could act on it. Matt nodded at them and stepped back into the room to let them through. He kept well away from her as he held the door for them to enter.

"Are you feeling better?" Matt closed the door behind them, but avoided eye contact with Rhi.

"Um, yes, I'm fine." She felt his unease around her like a musty blanket pulled from the bottom of an old trunk.
"Thanks."

Rhi stood just inside the door, on the opposite side from Matt, unsure of what she should do next. Gavin squeezed between them with the carrier, puffing his cheeks out as if it weighed a ton before parking it next to the bed. He shook his head at the carrier and turned to head back outside without a word.

"Out of shape?" Matt smirked at Gavin, his smile twisted to the side of his face.

"Fuck you. When she lets the bobcat out of his den, you better hope he isn't hungry."

"Bobcat?" Matt's expression melted into an alarmed look. "I only okayed a domestic cat with the Sutherlands." He ran one hand through his hair before taking a deep breath and settled the other one on his hip. His narrowed eyes followed Gavin as he crossed the room, letting the metal door close on the safety bar behind him. Matt looked down at his boots for a few seconds before his gaze returned Rhi, where she remained standing stiffly across the doorway from him. Gavin was obviously teasing the sheriff for some reason, but she didn't have a clue as to why and she'd be damned before she let them draw her into it.

"Well, shit," Matt finally said.

"He's not a bobcat. He's just—um—big." Shrugging her shoulders, Rhi didn't elaborate and she wasn't letting Toby

out until everything was inside. She had more important things to worry about, like figuring out who the killer was and where he lived so they could stop him. Biting her lip, she looked over to where Matt stood next to the little table complete with two chairs. His brows were drawn together, making a crease between them and up to his forehead. He licked his lips, hesitating as if he wanted to say something but didn't know how to word it. Surely he wasn't still worried about Toby being a bobcat.

Finally, shrugging in resignation, he spoke. "Figured you'd be more comfortable in a place by yourself than staying at the house with us. Sandy will be mad as a hornet about it, but she doesn't know you're not comfortable around people, so..." He let it trail off and then took a deep breath, glancing impatiently towards the door before he continued.

"Anyway, I wanted to be sure everything was okay and see if you needed anything. Gavin's a good man, but he's not always, um, aware of—things."

Rhi nodded without really looking at him. There was none of the earlier hostility and disbelief in his voice or on his face.

"Thank you, I'm fine." Rhi heard Toby move around in the carrier and moved to sit on the bed next to the carrier so he'd smell her and know she was near. "This is nice. I don't need anything special." This new tactic of acting friendly made her uncomfortable. She couldn't make up her mind if it was genuine or just a ploy to get her to do what he wanted. Rubbing her hands up and down her thighs, Rhi let her gaze stray towards the door, watching for Gavin's eventual return.

When he suddenly bumped the door open, carrying the rest of Toby's things along with her suitcase and overnight bag, Rhi nearly jumped out of her skin. He dropped the box of Toby's food and supplies on the floor near the bathroom with a little plop and went about setting up the cat's toilet before Rhi realized what he was doing. She jumped up from the bed to take over.

"Thanks, I can do that. I'm sure you and the sheriff have things you need to do." Picking up the food and water bowl from the box, she looked at him pointedly.

He only nodded and, after arranging the litter pan under the sink area, promptly picked up the bag of litter and poured some into the pan before rolling the top of the bag closed and dropping it back into the box. Rhi had the urge to grind her teeth in frustration, but forgot all about it when Gavin captured her eyes with his for only a few heartbeats. He didn't say anything and try as she might, Rhi couldn't read whatever was behind his eyes. There was something in them, but he turned away before she could decipher what it was. Gavin opened the door and walked out. Her mouth opened and then closed again. The man's lack of communication skills rivaled even hers.

Matt shoved his hands in his pockets and seemed to study his boots before finally looking over at Rhi. She realized he was trying to keep a smile from breaking through his carefully neutral expression. Gavin's abrupt behavior was obviously nothing new. He cleared his throat before finally speaking, the humor carefully hidden from her now.

"Get some rest and we'll check on you in the morning. I wrote down all of our numbers on the pad by the bed if you need anything or if you, um, have another dream. Go ahead and call if you do, no matter what time it is. We're working against the clock on this."

Rhi nodded that she understood and, after he gave her one last grim smile, Matt left, closing the door behind him. Making sure to fasten each lock on the door, Rhi sighed wearily, leaning back against it and closing her eyes for a few moments to get her bearings. Change. It might be good for the soul, but it was hell on her nerves, she decided, and pushed away from the door to take care of Toby's food and water. Absently, she glanced at the litter pan as she sat the water bowl down, noticing Gavin had managed to pour just the right amount of litter in the pan. Too much and the big cat would scatter it when he jumped in and out. Did the strange man have a cat as well? She couldn't help but smile at the idea.

"So, did you walk or drive?" Gavin pushed off the bumper he'd been leaning against and listened to the sounds of engaging locks as Matt stepped off the sidewalk.

"Walked, so you'll get your exercise walking back with me." Matt stretched his arms above his head. "Besides, I want to show you something before we head to the house. I told Sandy we'd be in around eight and not to wait supper for us. She's worn out from classes anyway, so she didn't argue for a change."

"She having problems at school?"

"Just the emotional stuff with the kids about these murders. They're doing some extra safety teaching and doubling up on adult supervision all over the campus. The longer hours along with the stress are getting to her." Matt pulled his keys out as they reached the sheriff's office.

"I don't want to make things more difficult for her. I can stay in the motel, as well." Gavin liked Sandy, thought she was the best and Matt was damn lucky to have her. He sure didn't want to give her any extra work.

"Don't be crazy, Gavin. You're not any trouble." Matt had the door unlocked, but stopped before opening it and cocked his head as if he were thinking about it. "Well, I guess that isn't really true, is it?"

Gavin just shook his head at Matt's weak attempt at humor. "You know what I mean. She enjoys having you here. We don't get company and since neither of us has any family left, well, you're a treat for her." Matt looked up at the sky, then back at Gavin.

"Never would have thought someone would call me a treat, least of all you, partner." Gavin pushed past his buddy and into the office, instantly focusing on the case. It was something he'd been able to do since he was a child, compartmentalize whatever was going on around him. It helped when something outside the job threatened to affect his work. Now it was just a habit.

As soon as they walked into the office, Matt pulled a piece of paper from under his blotter and handed it to Gavin. Pulling open his desk drawer, he extracted some note cards along with several folders, spreading them out across his desk.

"I took each of the girls' names you picked out from the list off VICAP and put them on separate index cards with their location and dates of death." Matt indicated the cards he'd laid out on the desk. "They're in chronological order of when they died with the details of their deaths on the back of the cards." Gavin lifted his eyebrows at this. Matt shrugged.

"Makes it easier to use them. I was getting confused trying to set up a time line." Matt cleared his throat.

"So you're taking Rhi's dreams seriously, then." Gavin walked around the desk, looking at each card without touching it, careful to keep his face free of expression. It surprised him that Matt was accepting her claim so easily.

"It's all we have. That fax," Matt pointed to the paper in Gavin's hand, "ties some of this together in a loose sort of way."

Gavin felt Matt's eyes on him when he walked over to the large map pinned to the wall. It illustrated the southern part of the United States, including all of the states represented in Matt's note cards. He stared at it for a few minutes before lightly tracing a line from one state to the next with the tip of his index finger.

"Got some flags, pins?"

"Yeah, somewhere in here." Gavin took the box of large colored tacks Matt finally located in the back of his desk drawer. Selecting a color, he marked each site where one of the girls died. Once he finished, there were red tacks spanning from Texas across to Alabama and up to Tennessee. Twelve other girls along with the young couple in Arkansas

made thirteen tacks representing fourteen deaths—that they knew about.

"I don't see a real pattern other than that he seems to have stayed in the south." Matt returned to the desk and looked back over his notes. "Let's number them and see what it looks like on the map."

Matt took a couple of blank note cards and cut them into fourths. Numbering them with a red marker from one to thirteen, he handed them to Gavin to add to the board in order of their deaths. They still appeared randomly selected. Nothing jumped out at the two of them. They tried sketching the pattern on paper and looked for common locations between the different states. Gavin could tell by the way Matt kept rubbing his face and jaw that he was frustrated.

Shaking his head, Gavin looked around the room, thinking of where he might find some twine, while Matt paced. It would help to see a pattern if it wasn't so flat or one-dimensional. He headed to the break room in back. Matt called out after him, but didn't follow. Returning with a ball of twine, he held it up for Matt to see and smiled. When his buddy only shook his head, Gavin took one end of the twine and wound it a couple of times around the first pin in Mississippi representing Oxford and Etta, then moved on to the next pin. Looping the twine once around each of the pins until all thirteen pins were connected by one piece of twine, Gavin let the remainder of the twine drop to the floor.

Stepping back from the map, he gazed at the colorful artwork of rusty twine and colored tacks. Matt joined him and the two of them shifted their gazes and tilted their heads

different ways in an effort to decipher whatever clever pattern the murderer followed. Still nothing clicked and Gavin sighed, as close to frustration as he'd ever felt.

"Might as well not cut it yet." Gavin kicked the much smaller ball of twine on the floor. "We may have more to add." Reaching into his coat, he pulled out the folded printouts from Rhi's computer, tossing them on top of the folders littering Matt's desk.

"What are these?" Matt picked them up and rifled through the pages.

"Classified ads for the general area where each of the murders took place. I checked the papers for a month after the murders, looking for help wanted ads. The ones I printed out are all for positions dealing with or being close to the teenagers murdered. Places like schools, parks, and movie theaters."

"How many of the towns had want ads for that time period?"

"Out of the twelve previous murders, I could only find eight with online access to their newspapers. All of those eight had at least two openings for qualifying positions. Figured the killer had to move on fairly soon in order to set up in a new place, but he'd stick around long enough to be ruled out as a suspect before handing in his resignation. Otherwise he'd have stuck out like a sore thumb."

"Good idea." Matt shuffled the pages, reading through them and then sat down and started making notes.

"What are you thinking?" Gavin sat on the edge of the desk.

"We can check the want ads from each town against each other for similarities. I'm sure he's changing names, but he might be sticking with variations to keep it simple and he might choose his next city based on whether a specific type of position is open or not."

Matt slammed his hand on the desk top. "Damn good idea!"

"With the Internet and the quality of printers and publishing programs out there, it wouldn't be hard for him to create an all new identity every time he moved." Gavin shrugged and looked over his shoulder at the map on the wall with its tangle of strings and pins. He'd done it often enough to know just how easy it could be. Used to be you had to pay good money for a set of papers to change identities. But if you weren't looking to stay in any one place very long or planning to open a business or retire, you didn't have to buy a new identity, you could just print one off.

"Need to get some pictures of the victims, especially the first one." Turning to look at Matt, he almost smiled. "High school annuals would be better since teachers are usually in them as well."

"Yeah, thought of that." Matt held up his pad of notes. "I'm going to start Gail working on that first thing in the morning. She's good with the schmoozing and we need to charm results out of some people pretty damn fast."

"Better Gail than you, is all I can say."

"What's that supposed to mean? I've gotten pretty good at small talk since I've been sheriff here." Matt picked up a wadded up piece of paper and threw it towards Gavin.

"Shit, you don't know the first thing about charm or smooth talking. I never did figure how you managed to snag Sandy." Gavin caught the missile and chunked it in the overflowing trash can next to Matt's desk.

Offering Gavin one of their favorite gestures, Matt leaned back from the desk shaking his head. "*You* sure as hell can't help out in that area."

Gavin ignored the obvious and fiddled with Matt's notebook full of questions and lists, using a pencil. "Time's getting away from us on this."

"Yeah, it's Saturday night already and with tomorrow being Sunday, we aren't going to be able to do a damn thing till Monday." Throwing his hands up, Matt began shoving folders in his desk drawer.

"Think he planned it this way?" Gavin thought about the dates over on the map.

"Yeah, all the dates are just before or right on the weekend." Matt stood up and grabbed his notebook away from Gavin's pencil attacks.

"Not much more we can do tonight. Let's go to the house and get some rest." Picking up his hat and turning the desk light off, he headed out the door. Gavin followed behind with one last look toward the map on the wall before Matt flipped off the overhead light and closed the door behind them.

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Chapter Seventeen

Rhi stopped her nervous pacing long enough to take a quick look out the window of her motel room. She was hungry as well as nervous, not a good combination for her. The Sheriff had said they'd come by in the morning to check on her. Part of her hoped it would be soon, but another part of her wasn't in any hurry to be around them again. Both men made her nervous, but especially Gavin. There was something...different...about him. When he was near her, she felt some sort of connection with him. It frightened her, but if she was honest with herself, it was exciting, too.

Toby sat on the heating unit in front of the window with only his tail visible from beneath the curtain. Its slow but constant swishing back and forth took up a more frantic twitch as the part of him on the other side of the curtain made odd mewling noises. Rhi decided he had his eye on a bird and was protesting his confinement. Peeking once more around the curtain, she panicked at the sight of the Sheriff's truck pulling into the parking lot. Rhi leaned weakly against the door for a few seconds, attempting to calm her racing heart. Only a few moments before, she'd wanted them to hurry up.

"This is ridiculous," she muttered to herself. Drawing in a deep breath, she pushed away from the door and, turning around, opened it just as they made it to the sidewalk. Both men looked to her as if they'd slept like babies, but then

she'd been the one up at three in the morning, afraid to fall asleep.

"Morning, Sheriff, Gavin. I was about to look for a place to eat, but I can't seem to find my keys." She looked pointedly at Gavin. "Or the key card to my room." Another pointed look at Matt.

"Oh, I think they're still in my jacket pocket." Gavin didn't smile or look apologetic, just pulled the keys out of his pocket and dropped them in her outstretched hand. Matt followed suit with the key card, but he had the grace to look guilty.

"There's a diner behind the motel that has the best food in town. We can walk or take the truck, whichever you feel like." Matt indicated a building just around from the motel's office.

"I could use some exercise. Let me grab my jacket." Rhi stepped back inside the room to grab her jacket off the bed before letting the door close behind her. Matt's long legs gave her a good workout trying to keep up with him, but she didn't complain. She really did need the exercise. She wasn't used to sitting in one place for long periods of time. She enjoyed exploring and hiking almost every day. Out of the blue, it crossed her mind as they reached the diner that Gavin had walked behind them. Why? Why not walk even with them, she wondered. No doubt he'd done it to watch her walk, an idea that both annoyed and pleased her. The bastard probably enjoyed the show and who knew what was going on in his mind anyway? He was too quiet.

Stepping into the brightly lit diner, Rhi inhaled the distinct smell of frying bacon mixed with the rich aroma of coffee in the air. The smell of food immediately drowned out all other

thoughts as her stomach reared its head, anxious for sustenance. Following the sheriff as he headed to the back, she realized he planned to take the last booth. It was far enough away from the majority of the other customers to afford them a little privacy, but meant two people would sit next to each other. Knowing the male tendency to avoid contact among themselves in public, she already knew what that meant.

Scooting quickly across the bench seat in the last booth, Rhi hugged the outside wall, grinding her teeth until her jaw hurt. She grabbed a menu from the four sticking up between the napkin holder and condiments, scanning the contents to decide what to order. She cringed when her stomach rumbled loudly in response to the smells, broadcasting to the two men still standing beside the booth silently arguing over where to sit.

They both stopped whispering to stare at her, surprised expressions plastered over their faces. Gavin shrugged, shaking his head at the other man before sliding in next to her. The idea he might reach across her for a menu spurred Rhi into taking proactive measures and she quickly handed a menu to him. His deep-voiced *"Thanks"* caused a little shiver down her spine, which she covered for by pulling on her ponytail.

When the waitress appeared to take their order, Rhi was ready with her request for two scrambled eggs, toast and jelly, with orange juice to drink. She avoided looking at the men after she ordered, but noticed they only ordered coffee for themselves. When she did look up, her expression must

have given away her curiosity. Matt nodded toward where Gavin sat next to her.

"Gavin fixed pancakes for Sandy and me this morning, so I'm stuffed." He grinned, leaning back against the seat and patting his stomach.

Rhi could tell he enjoyed passing on that particular piece of information, but wasn't sure why. The two men seemed to get along well enough, so why the sheriff would pick on Gavin didn't really add up to her. Lifting her eyebrows, she couldn't help a resounding "*Men*" thought as she sipped the water left by the waitress.

Matt sighed and pulled her journal out of an inside pocket of his jacket and opened it. Rhi could tell he wanted to ask questions and was thankful he was at least giving her the benefit of the doubt, but how about breakfast first. She was starving, for God's sake! She watched as he flipped back and forth between pages he'd clipped together and had to restrain herself from grabbing the thing out of his hands. Gavin hadn't said a word since they'd sat down, which bugged her just as much.

She was about to lose it and snatch the journal out of Matt's hands when the waitress brought her breakfast. The smell of hot scrambled eggs triggered her stomach to growl again, much to her embarrassment and the amusement of the men. Mumbling under her breath and showing her teeth, Rhi immediately began spreading jelly on her toast.

"Sorry, but I didn't eat anything after lunch yesterday, so I'm a little hungry." Adding some of the divided scrambled eggs to the toast, Rhi folded it over, making a sandwich.

Glancing up as she took a bite, she caught both men staring at her. Even the quiet one had an actual expression on his face.

"What? Haven't you ever had an egg sandwich before?" Taking another bite, Rhi rolled her eyes.

"Can't say as I have," Gavin answered when Matt dropped his eyes and sipped his coffee. "Looks good, though; might try it tomorrow for breakfast."

Matt sputtered his coffee all over the other man and had to quickly set it down to keep from spilling it. He hurriedly sopped up the coffee from the table in front of him and off the notebook with paper napkins. Rhi rolled her lips inward, licking them as she did to hold back her own smile. Instead, she raised her eyebrows, glancing sideways at Gavin as she took another bite of the egg sandwich. One more bite and she was ready to make the next one.

The sheriff didn't seem to want to embarrass her, but then it could just be he wasn't comfortable around her; few people were. "Why don't you go ahead and ask whatever it is that's bugging you. I can eat and answer questions at the same time." She needed to remember to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. She didn't socialize much, either. As soon as the second sandwich was ready, she took a bite and listened to him ask his questions.

"The part where you see the hands going through some things in a cellar, are these like metaphors or something, or are they really what you saw?"

"Usually what I see is the real thing." She took another sip of orange juice, enjoying its tartness against the jelly she'd

just eaten. "It's not like on TV where a psychic sees or dreams about something and they have to interpret what the symbols mean. Mine are usually more like pictures. What I see is what's really there." Rhi's voice trailed off as she stared at the jelly she spread on the third slice of toast. The bright red strawberry jelly shimmered, flowing into something darker, and her thoughts shifted.

The scene at the cabin jumped out at her. Gloved hands covered in blood as they carefully, almost reverently, removed the necklace from around the girl's neck. The way they held Carol Ann's head up to pull the gold chain from beneath her hair as if to keep from hurting her chilled Rhi. Seeing hands—*hers?*—smooth the girl's hair back in place mesmerized her. Then those same hands brought the bloody trinket to *her* lips to kiss. The blood, the smells—so fresh, she would have sworn they were back in the cabin—overwhelmed her. She so did not want to touch that bloody locket to her lips! Panic clogged her throat and she fought to pull away from the vision, but she wasn't in control. She felt her hands grip something tight enough that it hurt. That was fine with Rhi, she welcomed the pain. The pain drew her out of the vision.

"Hey, you all right?" Matt's concerned expression was the first thing she saw when the mist cleared from her eyes. He stared hard at her, concern and something more in his eyes.

"Yeah, just..." Blinking her eyes to focus, Rhi shook her head and looked down to finish making her egg sandwich only to find her knife gone and her bread crumpled over the egg. Jerking her head up in alarm, Rhi's eyes met and followed

Matt's gaze toward Gavin. Turning her head she saw the knife, bent and rolled up in a paper napkin in his hand. The calm empty expression on his face she'd already begun to expect was gone. *Oh, God. What had she done?*

"What..." Rhi had to try again, forcing the word past the stricture in her throat, "happened?" The odd expression on Gavin's face scared her more than Matt's had, perhaps even more than the vision.

"It burned my hand when I took it away from you."

"Burned your hand? I don't understand. What just happened?" Fear and panic threatened to smother her as she stared at Gavin's hand loosely holding the napkin-wrapped knife.

Gavin shrugged slowly, laying the bent knife on the table in front of him before looking over at Matt. Neither man seemed able or willing to even try to explain it. Rhi swallowed convulsively, fighting the urge to run screaming out of the diner. She pushed her plate away with a trembling hand, afraid she would be sick at any minute. Matt finally broke the odd silence between them and suggested they head over to the office to finish going over her journal. His face carefully masked, he scooted out of the booth.

Rhi waited until both men were standing before she slid out to join them. Seeing Gavin carefully hide the bent knife in his jacket pocket, she realized he didn't want to leave it for the waitress to puzzle over. Her plate of ruined food would be enough. She wasn't sure she could look them in the eye right then and the idea of spending any amount of time with them didn't ease the tension building within her. She followed Matt

to the front of the diner with Gavin again bringing up the rear. When she would have stopped to wait on Matt to pay the ticket, Gavin moved around her and indicated with his head they should go on outside.

She had to give the big man credit. He didn't try to touch her elbow to guide her like most men tended to do, and he didn't crowd her. He seemed to understand on a deeper level than anyone she'd met since the dreams began, which was good because right then, she felt like she would come unglued if anyone touched her. Self-conscious, Rhi dug her hands into her jacket pockets and avoided looking in his direction.

The sheriff joined them, exchanging a quick look with Gavin before they headed back to the motel. Her jacket did nothing to warm her against the cool air. The chill from her vision, if that was what it was, had seeped deep into her bones. Rhi kept pace with the two men, hoping the activity would warm her, but the images were still too clear in her mind. She doubted anything could warm her.

Gavin and Matt waited outside her room while she brushed her teeth and checked on Toby. The round lump under the covers in the middle of the bed assured her he was settled in. This was his favorite place when they were in a hotel or apartment during her travel jobs. Taking advantage of being alone in the room, Rhi sat on the edge of the bed a moment and rubbed the outline of the big cat through the covers. His immediate stuttering purr calmed the quaking in her stomach. With a deep breath, she joined the two men outside.

"That monster cat you have in there OK?" Gavin's question startled her.

"Toby's fine. He's keeping my place warm in the bed." Looking into the cab of the truck as Matt climbed behind the wheel, she realized all three of them would have to ride in the cab together. No way could she sit between them. Even next to the door she'd be too close. As nervous as she already was, she'd never make it no matter how quick the drive was.

She realized her face must have reflected her unease as she hesitated before climbing into the truck. Gavin stood by the door, but didn't attempt to help her. Instead, once she'd climbed inside, he nodded his head once and closed the door behind her. Puzzled, she watched him walk around the truck and, using the back of one large hand, rap on the sheriff's window and wait while he rolled down the window.

"Matt, I'll walk over. It's not far and I didn't get my run in this morning. I was too busy cooking someone breakfast." Without waiting for an answer, he started off across the street.

"I didn't mean to keep him from riding," Rhi whispered, feeling guilty.

"Don't worry about him. Gavin isn't much on closeness either. Besides, he's telling the truth, he didn't get to run this morning, so he can use the exercise." Matt grinned conspiratorially while shaking his head. "He eats like a teenager instead of a nearly forty year old man who has to watch out for a pot belly, like me."

Matt drove the block to the office without another word. Gavin stood waiting outside the sheriff's office when they

pulled up, moving to open the door for her as soon as the truck stopped. Again, he didn't offer his hand, but stood close by just in case while she slid out on her own. Rhi risked a quick look up at his face once she had her feet on solid ground. The snap of electricity in the air between them as their eyes met startled her enough that she almost lost her footing. Jerking her gaze away with a shiver that had nothing to do with the cold air or her vision, she wondered if anyone other than her felt the tingling of electricity. She hadn't seen any sign that Gavin felt it, so it was probably just her. Gritting her teeth, she followed the two men inside. Great. Now she had something else to add to her growing list of unknowns.

Since it was Sunday, they had the office to themselves. Matt told them that unless the deputy on call decided to do his paperwork in the office, they mostly handled everything out of their trucks. He'd had given all his deputies a list of names to track down and interview concerning the murders. There were more than enough of them to keep a larger department busy for days, so he didn't expect they would be interrupted.

Gavin settled Rhi at the conference table in the back while he and Matt gathered up the case files and maps from his office. Gavin figured they would set up the conference room as a command post before it was over with, and Rhi could probably use the extra space, judging by how tense she acted around them. He also noticed Matt kept as far away from Rhi as he could when he pushed the portable case board into the conference room. That thing with the knife back at the diner

had totally freaked him out. Not that Gavin blamed him. It hadn't done a lot for his comfort level, either.

"Okay." Matt indicated the folders, notes and cards spread out on the table, representing what they knew—or thought they knew—about the murders so far. "Let's start where we think he killed first and follow the trail that way."

Gavin pointed to the first card in the line, Jason Miles, who was murdered November 12, 1986 in Oxford, Mississippi.

"This is probably the first one. Rhi, you gave us the information in your email and Matt verified it with the Oxford Police Department."

Matt pointed to the next card in line. "The next murder was close by in Etta, Mississippi. A girl by the name of Martha Louise Owens, stabbed to death November 13, 1986. She was sixteen years old and Etta is less than an hour from Oxford."

Rhi threw up her hand, interrupting him without saying anything at first. Matt and Gavin exchanged looks when she grabbed her journal from Matt.

"Do you recognize the name?" Matt asked her.

"Just a minute." Rhi flipped the pages in her journal until she located the one she wanted. With a satisfied sigh, she turned the journal back around and pushed it towards Matt, with the hint of a smile at the corners of her mouth. "She was one of the names on the play program. I had her name wrong."

"We need to find out if Jason knew her. I'm betting he was either from Etta or somewhere close by." Matt bent over the journal and then made some notes.

"They might have been dating," Gavin added from his vantage point near the map. Matt nodded, chewing on his bottom lip, and then continued reading down the list of names and dates for Rhi's benefit. Gavin watched her face grow paler with each name. "Kelly Andrews, fifteen, of Hamilton, Alabama, murdered November 15, 1988. Robin Sims, sixteen, of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, killed November 5, 1989." And the list went on until all of the victims had been identified and given their brief slice of attention. Rhi's face registered each one as Gavin watched her face, her reactions. She truly had not realized how far and how long this had been going on. Looking over to where Matt stood at the other end of the table, it was also clear the sheriff had hoped until now that there would be another explanation for Rhi's dreams. The devastated expression on her face convinced him.

Rhi listened with growing horror as Matt read off the names, barely able to conceal the effect it had on her. Hearing their names out loud made them real, hearing how many took her breath away and the bizarreness of her freakish connection with the killer began to solidify in her mind. The term tunnel vision made sense to her now with the realization that she might be tied to him through every murder he committed for the next twenty years if they didn't stop him. It all narrowed down to those names. *Oh, God!* Even one more was more than she could handle. The ringing in her ears grew louder and she knew she'd pass out if she didn't get a grip and focus on what she could do to stop him.

The two men were talking around her about the similarities between each of the victims. They didn't realize she was close

to passing out, or worse, freaking out. Focusing on their voices, Rhi slowed her breathing and concentrated on the information in front of her. Something ate at her as she processed the information on the cards. She spoke out when she noticed the lapse between two of the murders.

"He skipped a year between the first two and the third," she mused. Looking up, she saw she had their attention and shrugged. "Why? Did he just not kill that year or was he somewhere that didn't show up on the search? And it looks like he only kills once a year. What's up with that?"

Gavin cocked his head to one side and moved back to the map. "Depending on how they were killed, some of his victims might not have popped out with the parameters we used." Rhi watched him study the map and then return to the table to thumb through a stack of papers. "It's possible he strangled one or more of them and didn't use a knife. The necklace you described could have been the method he used out of necessity. He might not have planned to kill them, but they fought back and things got out of hand..."

Matt interrupted, shaking his head. "The *Modus Operandi* would be different and not show up on the search if that's true, but I can't see him changing back and forth. He used a knife on everyone we have in this group. They don't switch methods unless they switch consistently. Maybe he got scared after the first two and laid low."

"Or, he was in jail for something else, maybe even a mental institution," Gavin suggested. Rhi noticed he continued looking back at the map as if something about it

bugged him, maybe the same something bugging her when she read over the cards but couldn't put her finger on it.

"Could be, but I don't think so." Matt drummed his fingers on the table. "He moved around, so maybe we just missed one."

"Looks like he skipped another year between the sixth and the seventh victims, as well," Rhi pointed out, reading back over the cards.

"It looks like he kills about the same time every year," Rhi added. "Maybe the first two *were* his first and whatever it is that makes serial killers tick didn't kick in with him until two years later." Both men stared at her as if she'd spoken in tongues.

Matt's steady drumming stopped suddenly. "Gavin, I'll put a new search in ViCAP for the two missing years, using females strangled in the age range we're using, and see if it pulls anything anyway. Making assumptions this early with what little we have is dangerous. You're probably right that he might have strangled them prematurely."

Rhi jerked back in her chair when he jumped up, gathering his own notes as he talked. "In the meantime, maybe you can work with Rhi on her journal and pull out some more clues while I meet with the city boys on what we have."

Cursing her knee-jerk reaction didn't slow her rapidly beating heart down one bit. Before Matt made it through the door, she realized what bugged her about the murders.

"If the same person killed all of these teenagers, we're talking about a serial killer." Ignoring the catch in her voice, she continued. "One who's been killing for nearly twenty

years. Why hasn't anyone noticed this before? I mean, why isn't the FBI involved?"

Matt looked over at Gavin before he answered her question. Rhi wasn't sure what the two men were thinking, but she didn't like the silent exchange.

"What? What aren't you telling me?"

"They don't know about the connection." Rhi's mouth hung open as Matt licked his bottom lip and continued. "No one ever put any of the murders together until now."

Gavin drew her attention when he spoke her name. "Rhi, we don't have any proof other than what you've given us. Before you sent those emails, Matt knew he was dealing with an organized killer who'd probably killed before, but that was it."

"There hasn't been anything to connect them for the FBI to hit on." Matt ran his hand through his hair in frustration.

"The FBI isn't going to get involved in a case unless there's solid evidence of multi-state homicides or a string of murders in one general area." Gavin leaned back against the table, propping himself on it as he talked. "These murders all took place in mostly rural areas where, unless the department handling the case had experience or advanced training, they might not have caught on that the killer had previous experience."

"Plus, he probably wasn't as organized at first. He improved his methods and learned from his mistakes." Matt's face reflected the bitterness she heard in his voice.

Rubbing her face with both hands, Rhi bit back the curse on the tip of her tongue. She'd known that. Her anxiety

concerning her connection to the murderer and the evolution or mutation, however she chose to look at it, of her *ability* was interfering with her usually logical thinking.

"You're right, I'm not thinking clearly."

Matt started to say something, but shook his head instead. Rhi could tell he'd changed his mind as she watched him walk through the door, leaving her in the conference room alone with Gavin. Not a good thing, she was almost sure.

Once Matt was gone, she immediately noticed a difference in the room. Breathing seemed just a little bit easier, though she hadn't noticed it was difficult before. Now that it was gone, she realized that she had been able to taste the tension in the air. But one look into Gavin's dark eyes sent it shooting back up. Unable to look away, she could swear the electricity between them was a visible thing. It crackled and sparked until the hair on her arms and at the back of her neck stood on end. Now she was very sure Matt's leaving wasn't a good idea, but it was too late to stop him.

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Chapter Eighteen

He wouldn't allow it to happen again. He was tired of watching them turn from him, not realizing who he was. The boys and their nasty ways were everywhere, taking what was his and his alone. Those boys devoured their innocence and then moved on, leaving them behind, tarnished and broken. It wasn't his sweet angels' fault. They couldn't resist in their innocence. Only he could protect them, prevent their fall. It was clear to him now what he must do. He must stop the ones responsible for ruining their innocence before there were none left to save.

His eyes followed the crowd of teens as they left the church, piling into cars and trucks. Groups of four and five teenagers belted out Christmas carols, heading to the house of one of the youth directors. He knew their routine well. They spent Sunday afternoons in one of several homes where they made plans for the upcoming holiday programs or just watched movies or practiced singing. He had his own plans to finalize now, plans to protect his chosen one, his sweet angel. There were several boys among them filled with the dark one's sick lust for young innocence. He knew now who the boys were. He'd stop their spread of sin once and for all before it was too late. Soon, soon it would be time

Reaching deep inside the pocket of his jacket, he felt for the locket. His fingers touched the cold metal and he closed his fist around it until the heat from his hand warmed it. He fancied he could feel it pulsate like the heart of his last

precious angel before he ripped it out of her deceitful chest. Gone...he'd purified her in the end, but she was lost to him all the same

Breathing in the crisp cool air, he smiled, thinking of his new chosen one. So far he'd resisted giving the locket to her, but she needed to wear his mark. Once he eliminated the lust of the boys sniffing after her, he could claim her for his own. She would mature into the perfect virgin worthy of his possession. Until then, he must watch over her innocence. It was his duty to protect her, his duty to eliminate those who would take her from him

Gavin startled Rhi when he dropped the pad and pencil on the table in front of her. The telltale jerk and widening of her eyes said it all. She was close to falling apart. He didn't want that to happen and especially didn't want to be alone with her when it did. Moving more slowly, he pushed her journal back across the table until it was directly in front of her. This time, she didn't react other than to draw in a deep breath. The slow rise and even slower fall of her chest told him all he needed to know. She'd be okay. She was determined to find something that could identify the killer. It was all there in her eyes.

"Want something from the machine? I'm going for water." He waited for her to answer.

"Water would be great. Thanks."

She bent over the journal, a stubborn set to her mouth. Gavin headed down the hall to the back where a storage room doubled as the break room, complete with a small table, three chairs and a couple of vending machines. His shoulders

felt uncomfortably tight, which wasn't surprising considering the energy snapping between them. Rolling them to loosen them up, he dug change for the vending machine from his pockets. He couldn't put his finger on what bothered him when he was around her. Something about her drew him to her and he wasn't used to feeling like he didn't have a choice. He made his own choices; they weren't made for him.

Standing in front of the vending machine, it occurred to him he was more than just sexually attracted to her, he felt connected to her. He could almost *feel* what she felt or at least tap in enough to know. It puzzled him and he needed time to think about it, time alone without distractions. *Humph*, that wasn't going to happen any time soon. Closing his eyes, he dropped his head from side to side, releasing the tension in his neck with a soft pop. Gavin punched the numbers on the machine and grabbed the water, steeling himself to walk back down that hall to where a temptation he'd never felt before waited to taunt him.

On returning to the conference room, he hesitated in the doorway and watched her jotting down words on the pad in no apparent order. He resisted the urge to lean over her, touch her. Instead, he walked around to the other side of the table where she could see him before handing a bottle of water to her. If she noticed the distance he put between them, she didn't indicate it.

"What are you doing?"

"I read back over the first account of my dream and realized I'd only written what I saw, not what I felt during the dreams." She turned the journal with the added notes and

pushed it towards him, tapping the pencil eraser against her bottom lip. "I'm writing what my other senses picked up during the dreams. I thought it might help reveal something new." She shrugged, tilting her head a bit to look at him.

"Good idea. Your senses pick up on things you're not aware of when you're stressed."

Gavin turned the chair around backwards, straddling it, and leaned forward to read. He pushed the note page back across the table for her to continue writing and waited for her to finish the list she'd started. Watching her as she concentrated, it occurred to him she wasn't showing any of the turmoil he felt radiating from her. Her face appeared almost tranquil until he noticed the way her mouth tightened now and then or how her fingers trembled when she reached for the water. Still, she hid it well as she concentrated on the dreams. Having something constructive to do seemed to help her stay focused. He'd remember that.

"Here, look over these and see if they mean anything to you since you've read the journal and the other stuff you and Matt dug up." He nearly jumped when she tore the page off the pad, handing it across the table to him. He'd let down his guard while studying her, trying to read her. He'd gotten distracted. What was going on with him?

Accepting the proffered paper, Gavin resisted the urge to jerk it from her hands in a sudden rush of anger at himself. Grinding his teeth together to maintain his balance, he read through her notes and phrases. It wasn't her fault he couldn't sustain his control around her. Taking a deep breath, he

worked at regaining his focus...something else he didn't normally need to do.

"I was terrified and frustrated all at the same time. I didn't want to have the dream at all, didn't want to see what was done to them, but at the same time, I was frustrated that I couldn't see more to identify the killer." Rhi leaned back from the table and into her chair as he read, unaware of how hard he had to concentrate to take in what he was reading.

After a couple of false starts, Gavin finally managed to block out the woman across the table from him and centered his attention on the list. "Okay, in the first dream you seemed more focused on the act itself." He wrote his thoughts down as he talked. "Their fear, their pain and what he did to them." Gavin pointed out two words she had written, "Choking and breathing. Was this what you felt or what one of the victims felt?"

"I thought at first it had to be what *he* felt, since I'm connected to him, but I couldn't figure out why he'd feel that way." She bit the side of her lower lip, staring down at her journal for a minute. "It's what I'm feeling, though. I can't breathe around his emotions, they're so wild. They choke me."

Rhi glanced up, her mouth slightly parted as if she had something more to say. He captured her gaze and held it. The silence stretched between them and, as if she suddenly realized the silence was there, she just as quickly dropped her gaze back to her journal...but not before he caught that split second of awareness when her eyes widened before she

looked back down. She'd felt that connection and recognized it for what it was. So where did that leave him?

Obviously, out in the cold, judging by the way she did a damn good job of ignoring it. Better than he could at that moment. Whatever it was between them, he didn't plan to pursue it, but he sure as hell wanted to know what *it* was. It was something he'd never felt or experienced with anyone before. Outside of his odd affinity for and connection to animals, the only bonds he perceived were those he had developed and cultivated with Matt and the Unit. There had never been anything remotely on the same level as what he was getting from Rhi. And it looked like she was handling it better than he was.

"I don't want to have the dreams, but when I have them, I want to know more so I can do something about them. The more I know, the better chance I have of helping to catch the killer and end the dreams." She picked up the pencil again, fiddling with it nervously before dropping it back on the table to tug at her pony tail. It was a nervous gesture he'd noticed before.

"This is the first time I've connected to the killer. The whole thing is—different. The dreams are different." Gavin watched the tension build within her as she concentrated on the dreams. Her lips trembled when she spoke and the tiny crease between her brows had him clenching his fist to keep from reaching across the table to smoothe it for her.

"The pain he causes them is..." She hesitated, searching for the right word. "It's unbearable. It's horrible to think

about, but this monster's emotions and thoughts are even worse, if that's possible."

"I can't imagine how you've managed to live through these dreams and stay sane for eight years."

She shuddered before looking towards the window across the room. "Sometimes I'm not so sure I am anymore."

"How often do you have them?" Driven now to discover everything he could about her, uncovering all her secrets, Gavin probed shamelessly. He tried to smile, intending to encourage her, but found it more difficult than it should have been. He decided it must have come out creepy by the way she fidgeted in the chair. But, then, he didn't smile enough to be practiced at it.

"Usually, four or five episodes a year, but some years there have been more."

"What do you know about the dreams...how they work? What determines who you'll dream about?" Leaning closer to the table, he saw a guilty look flit across her face before she stopped it and he wondered where it had come from.

"I've been trying so hard not to have them that I've avoided trying to learn anything about the damn dreams other than how to stop them—until just lately." Her head sagged against the back of the chair as she closed her eyes. "I just wanted them to go away."

"Can't blame you for that. I don't think anyone would want to go through what you do on purpose." Gavin crossed his arms along the back of the chair.

"I do know that I have to have some sort of physical contact between me and them to forge a connection. Then, I

have dreams about them beginning two or three weeks before it happens, and I only have dreams when it's a violent death of some type. Usually it's murder." Rhi rubbed her hands together, interlacing her fingers and then pulling them apart as she talked. She carefully avoided his eyes, looking at her hands or the journal, anywhere but at him.

"So you know these people, probably talked or worked with them. That has to be harder than if they were complete strangers."

Rhi's head jerked up to meet his eyes this time. He had little difficulty recognizing the anger in hers. Ignoring a sudden bout of conscience urging him to stop before he went too far, Gavin retained an impassive expression.

"Usually they *are* strangers to me, especially after the first few years." Rhi shuddered, but her anger didn't desert her. "I made sure of it. Eventually, though, I pretty much always recognize them and remember where we crossed paths." A shadow darkened her eyes and then the spark was back.

"But you're not connected to the victim this time." He caught her gaze again, making sure she understood where he was going with this.

"This time is different," she acknowledged quietly, no inflection at all in her voice now. She didn't pull away from his gaze immediately, either. "I don't know where I could have touched someone so vile and not recognized it when it happened."

Finally she stood up, hugging herself as she walked over to the windows. "It frightens me even more that it *will* be someone I know. Someone I would never have suspected of

something this evil. Someone I trusted and liked, but I didn't recognize it in them. How could I not know when I dream about evil all the time?" Rhi turned to face him, tears bright in her eyes like glitter.

There, it was said. Gavin watched her face slowly lose its stiffness and composure. The faint tremble of her chin cut into him like a knife through the gut. He'd understood her fear that the killer might be someone she knew might hold her back. Subconsciously, she could block something useful to prevent discovering it was true. Refusing to acknowledge that last fear kept her from hurting even more. And now he'd taken the one piece of comfort she had left away from her. She'd be able to tap into those feelings more easily now that she'd faced the fear. He felt like the lowest bastard on earth for having done that to her, but she needed to be able to tap into all her senses if they were going to stop another murder.

Rhi struggled to regain some of her previous composure as Gavin watched her return to the table. Her eyes were still bright with tears, but despite her tension she held her chin just a little higher than she had before. He wanted to take away some of the pain he'd caused her, but she needed him to be the son of a bitch he was. Being a hard unfeeling SOB was what he did better than anything; he was the best. Feeling and caring didn't figure into who he was...it never had. So, why all of a sudden did it bother him? Where had it all come from? Ignoring the foreign emotions rampaging through his head, he tried instead to focus on the physical things he felt around her. He could handle arousal. A hard-on wouldn't kill him and it damn sure wouldn't worry about how

she felt. That he could deal with. Gavin breathed in through his nose and focused on getting them back on track with the business of finding a killer before he struck again.

Touching the journal between them to draw her attention, he waited for her to look up. "Let's get to work, then, and stop the dreams."

The corners of Rhi's mouth turned up ever so slightly before returning to a determined line. He didn't count the tiny tremors as she pulled the journal back in front of her. She bared her soul to him, revealing the smells and thoughts and disgusting urges from her dreams so that he could write them down. And Gavin continued fighting the forbidden urge to touch her.

* * * *

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Chapter Nineteen

They still sat across the table from each other when Matt returned nearly two hours later. Several empty bottles of water and the incriminating evidence of snacking littered the opposite end of the table. Rhi bent intently over several legal pads, moving from one to the other, adding notes along the margins and connecting words with lines. Gavin lifted his hand with a half wave without looking up as soon as Matt entered the room. He'd continued working on the help-wanted angle, but monitored Rhi's progress now and then. She'd been at it the entire time Matt was gone, providing them with a little more information on the killer's state of mind.

"I sure hope you two have managed to come up with something." Matt all but threw his folder on the table next to Gavin.

Gavin stood, stretching his arms above him with a groan before walking to the map. "We've managed to figure out a few things that may give us more to go on, but I think we need to eat something first."

Matt chuckled, and then laughed out right when Rhi jumped at the sound. Gavin noticed her brows creased nervously.

"He read my stomach. I was just about to suggest the same thing." Matt grabbed an empty water bottle and threw it at him. "Trust Gavin to say it first, though. The man has a bottomless pit for a stomach."

Rhi's expression tightened with strain. Gavin felt her discomfort beat at him with tiny wings and he was about to ask her about it when Matt's cell phone rang, making her jump. Why was she suddenly jittery? She'd calmed down earlier and they'd managed to work together without incident. What had changed other than Matt returning? He busied himself gathering the vending machine empties and instead of dropping them in the trash can there in the room, followed Matt out into the hall where he'd gone to answer his phone. He felt her slowly relax as he and Matt walked down the hall. She was nervous around them; shit.

Matt answered his cell on the third ring as he walked out of the room with Gavin behind him. Matt's face immediately broke into a wide grin. Had to be Sandy on the other end. Gavin dropped his load into the trash can by the door when he followed Matt into the front office.

Matt laughed into the phone, flashing Gavin a smug smile. "There has to be a bug in the office! I swear, Sandy, Gavin just stood up and said we needed to look at getting something to eat. You know how hungry he always is.

"On our way, babe. You're the best, you know that, don't you?" Closing the phone with a snap, he signaled with a nod of his head at Gavin to follow him.

"I take it Sandy's bringing food." He fell in behind Matt as the other man headed for the office door.

"Yep, always one step ahead of me." Matt paused before opening the outside door and yelled back to Rhi still in the conference room. "My wife brought us some early supper. We're going outside to help bring it in. Be back in a minute."

Rhi relaxed, sinking back into the chair as the relief of finally being alone for a few brief minutes soothed her frazzled nerves after all that energy boiling between the two men. She needed to figure out how to buffer all that energy when both of them were in the room. Rhi pushed stiffly to her feet. She'd been sitting far too long. She stretched, loosening the stiff muscles of her neck and shoulders. Rubbing her eyes, she reasoned that it had to be something about the two of them in particular, because she had rarely had this much trouble before when around more than one person. Even when she worked the Emergency Rooms, she hadn't felt so overwhelmed.

The few times she'd felt energy on that level had been around some of the cops and paramedics when working the Emergency Rooms, but they came and went so quickly, it had never affected her like that. She hadn't noticed it as much at the diner, but cooped up with Matt and Gavin in a small room with only one window gave claustrophobia a whole new meaning for her. Gavin's energy sent chills up and down her spine, but she'd figured out how to shield around him. But together, they were potent, triggering her fight or flight instincts. She certainly didn't want to fight them, but running away wasn't an option, either.

Drawing in a deep breath to calm the last of the butterflies flitting around her chest, Rhi wandered over to the map, marveling at the pins with the twine wrapped around them. She didn't see a pattern just looking at it, just a sort of randomness. *Deliberate randomness*. It seemed almost planned. *Planned*, she mused to herself. He deliberately

moved in an opposite direction from his last move after each murder. There *was* a pattern! She could see it clearly now, as if the twine glowed, tracing a path from one site to the next.

Excited, she traced it with her fingers and thought about directions and opposites. First, he had killed in Mississippi at Oxford and Etta. She felt sure these two were connected in some way for the killer. Then he'd moved to Alabama, nearly straight across to Marion. The opposite of east would be west, but that might not be a true opposite in his eyes, as it would be expected, so he chose south and moved from the east to the southwest direction and to Hattiesburg in Mississippi. From this move, the opposite would be from south to north and Searcy in Arkansas was logical.

Rhi traced the route along the prickling twine from Hattiesburg to Searcy and it felt right. Next would be a southern move again, but to the east and not in Arkansas. Mississippi would be logical but recent, so the move to Louisiana should have been the next move. Why wasn't it? She couldn't figure it out. His actual next move going by the date had been to Texas instead. That was the only piece of the pattern that didn't fit for her. He went west again as well as south—Sleepy Hollow, Texas, near Bryan and northwest of Houston. Something happened between Arkansas and Texas, but what?

Pacing as the inkling of an idea took shape in her mind, she found her thoughts scattered by the door in the front office banging against the wall amidst cheerful voices and laughter. A fierce longing usurped her vow to remain detached and reserved. Out of necessity, she needed to avoid

relationships of any kind, but the longing for human contact remained. Hesitating in the doorway, Rhi focused, preparing for the onslaught of the two men's auras. She pictured a shield of iron and steel, wrapping it around her like a great buffer, her refuge. Licking her lips, she strode forward into the front office to face whatever came next.

Both of the men struggled, their hands full of bags and boxes, followed by an attractive woman in her mid-thirties with shoulder-length blond hair. She carried a box in her arms and kicked the door closed behind her. Smiling in spite of her vow to remain aloof, Rhi hurried forward to take a bag from Gavin's fingers that looked to be in danger of falling, and one from Matt that was hanging off his little finger.

"Here, I can carry something." Rhi managed to snag the bags without touching either of the men.

She followed the group to the back room obviously used as a break room. Sandy smiled an open smile, pulling an answering one from Rhi. Busily pulling things out of the bags they had sat on the counter as she talked, Sandy introduced herself without holding her hand out to shake. Matt must have told her, Rhi decided nervously, relieved that he'd thought to do so.

"I'm Matt's wife, Sandy. I sure hope you're okay with my barging in like this. I know you're busy helping with the case, but you have to eat." Another bright smile with a conspiratorial wink. "I thought you could use a little female company for an hour or so to counter act some of the testosterone these two seem to leak everywhere they go."

Rhi didn't usually make up her mind about anyone so quickly, but she instantly knew Sandy would be someone she could trust. And just as quickly reminded herself why she didn't make close friends. A little of the warm enthusiasm faded, leaving behind a cold, empty place inside.

Sandy didn't seem to expect Rhi to answer, as she kept the conversation going in between directing where to set up the food, and filling Rhi in on being a school teacher and a little about her and Matt. Rhi began to feel more at ease, welcoming the distraction. She had the guys set out paper plates, utensils and napkins on the little wooden table and Gavin procured another chair from somewhere so everyone had a place to sit. Rhi was impressed with the meal. Sandy had cooked a roast with seasoned potatoes and carrots along with English peas and rolls. There was even homemade pecan pie for desert.

Rhi helped transfer the food to the table. "I'm not really accustomed to being around people anyway, so yes, I'd really appreciate it if you could stay for a while." She smiled, knowing it sucked as far as smiles went. Sandy beamed as if Rhi had offered her a million dollars.

"They," and she indicated the two men already filling their plates, "are a little much to take for long periods of time." Rhi poured tea into their glasses once Sandy finished filling them with ice. The other woman winked at her, carrying two glasses of tea to the table to hand to Matt and Gavin.

"Come on, Rhiannon, we better get our plates or they'll be ready for seconds before we even sit down." Sandy started with the roast as she seated herself.

"Call me Rhi. It's a little less of a mouthful," Rhi offered as she speared potatoes and roast when Sandy moved on. "I was named after my father's grandmother who lived in Wells. He met her only one time as a teenager, but talked about her when I was a child. Evidently, I look exactly like her." Rhi stiffened when she realized she'd just shared something with these strangers she'd never told anyone before. Before she had time to agonize over the rash statement, Sandy moved on.

"That's interesting." She took a bite of the roast. "I was named Cassandra after my mother's mother. Everyone calls me Sandy and the only time I heard Cassandra was when I was in trouble."

"So you never met your great-grandmother, then?" Matt asked Rhi from across the table. Amused, she noticed his plate was already nearly empty.

"No, she died before I was born. I saw a painting of her when I was around ten or so, but all I can remember is she had long red hair and green eyes, as I do. I really don't remember much more about the portrait and, as a child, I couldn't see the resemblance, but my father was adamant about it." She smiled, remembering those long-ago years that were so happy before her parents were gone.

"You never saw it again?" Gavin stopped eating, regarding her with a puzzled expression knitting his brows. "What happened to it?"

Rhi felt the undercurrents of something else along with the warm tingle of his energy flow around her, dissolving her relaxed state in a matter of seconds. It felt as if he was there

in her mind for a brief moment and then the feeling was gone. His face returned to the blank expression she'd become used to as she struggled to regain her composure, aware that Matt and Sandy watched her.

"Um, no, my parents were killed in a car wreck when I was twelve. Since I had no other living relatives—anyone could find—I ended up in the system until I was old enough to move out on my own. By that time—" she shrugged as she took a bit of the roast, "—most of their things were gone." To lighten the mood before it could sour the remainder of the afternoon, she smiled, adding, "I have a few pieces of my mother's jewelry, and some notes and papers of my father's. They were in a safety deposit box and held until I turned twenty-one."

Rhi returned her attention to her plate and continued to eat, but with less enthusiasm now. It wasn't just the trip down memory lane disturbing her, but also the strange contact with Gavin. He'd been inside her head. He'd seen something inside her, she was sure. What had he seen? Few of her memories were good ones. And how they were able to touch each other's minds like that frightened her. God, she didn't need any more surprises or changes in her weird existence to puzzle over. He didn't seem to be in any hurry to acknowledge what had just happened, which was fine with her. She hoped he wouldn't bring it up later, either.

Sandy seemed to understand Rhi had become uncomfortable and changed the subject. She seemed adept at reading situations and intervening. Maybe it was something she'd picked up from being around the two enigmas sitting at

the table, Rhi thought. It would take a strong woman to live with someone like Matt without losing herself. That both men were overwhelming was an understatement. They literally oozed testosterone and control from their pores.

Matt sat back in the chair and groaned, sounding miserable. "Honey, if I wasn't so full right now, I'd hug you. I just can't move yet."

"It was really good. I haven't had anything like this in a long time." Rhi started gathering the paper plates to dispose of them as she stood up.

Gavin jumped up, pulling the paper plates from Rhi's hands. "Why don't you two leave that stuff here and we'll do the dishes." He didn't look at Rhi, gathering the other disposables.

"Come on, worthless, you ate as much or more than I did. Get up and help me." Gavin kicked Matt's chair hard enough that Matt had to sit up to keep from turning over.

"Gavin's right. Leave the food and dishes and we'll bring anything home that isn't disposable." Matt hauled himself out of the chair with an overstated groan and kissed the top of Sandy's head. "No need for you to worry with all this, since you cooked and brought it out here."

Sandy smiled, a mischievous glint in her eye as she reached up and grabbed his collar, pulling him down for a proper kiss. The display seemed so natural, Rhi spent a few seconds soaking up the emotional buzz the two of them created.

What was she doing? Rhi froze, pulling her shields around her once more. This was crazy. She was *feeding* her

emotionally starved soul off of them. What was going on with her? Guilt washed over her, burning color into her cheeks when Sandy spoke again.

"I'll definitely take you up on that offer." Standing up, she stretched, catching Rhi's eye. "Come on. Let's get some fresh air while these two do the dishes." She winked at Rhi, evidently not noticing her heightened color before grabbing her jacket on the way to the door.

Outside in front of the office, Sandy leaned against her SUV and yawned. "Sorry, I'm a bit tired this weekend. There's been so much going on."

"You teach school, you said? I'm sure that has to be a draining job." Rhi wasn't sure what to say; she wasn't used to making small talk.

"Ninth graders. I love that age group. They're just beginning to explore what their possibilities are, testing their limits and all." Sandy buried her hands in the pockets of her jacket, drawing it tighter around her, and tilted her head, looking directly at Rhi.

"Are you doing okay? I wish you would stay at the house with us, but Matt explained you live alone and aren't really comfortable around—strangers."

Rhi's mouth tightened. *More like people in general.* Sandy probably thought she was a nut case and maybe she was right. "I've been on my own a long time and since I work as a travel nurse, I don't really spend a lot of time around the same people."

Determination replaced the easy smile on Sandy's face, as if she'd made up her mind about something. Rhi braced for

the worst, sensing something in the way Sandy leaned away from the SUV, her eyes sharp and assessing.

"Matt said you're having dreams about the murders." Sandy quickly pulled her hands from her pockets, putting them up palms out when Rhi began to back away. "I'm not going to say anything to anyone. I'm a sheriff's wife. I know to keep quiet." She took a deep breath and looked Rhi in the eyes. "I just want you to know that if you're having trouble with the men, being cooped up around them, I be glad to stop by and chat or we can drive around for a while... just get out."

Rhi opened her mouth and then closed it, not sure what she could say. She'd let down her guard with this woman, instantly liking her, pretending to herself she could be a normal woman for a little while. Well, she couldn't and she wasn't. Dammit all, anyway. Clenching her teeth, she was furious she had allowed herself to want something as normal as a casual moment in time.

"I won't ask questions that are none of my business, but there's no telling how long you're going to be stuck here and you're bound to get tired of a hotel room. I can't even imagine the pressure you must be under."

Before she realized Sandy's intentions, the other woman caught her hand, squeezing it in an obvious show of support. Instinctively, Rhi jerked her hand away without meaning to look rude, but it was too late...too late for more than one reason. There was no going back now. She'd rebuffed the other woman's offer and shame and guilt poured over her, threatening to clog her throat.

Shrugging, Sandy smiled sadly and turned to head back to the office, but paused before going inside. Turning around again, she didn't look as if she'd been offended and Rhi released a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. She honestly liked Sandy and didn't want Matt's wife to think she was rude.

"I'm used to things that don't always make sense, Rhi. I'm married to an ex-special forces operative. He and Gavin were partners, closer than Matt and I were for a while. There were times nothing made sense to me. I learned not to question how or why, I just accepted it and was grateful they were alive every time they finished a mission. I made it just fine. You will, too." She smiled sadly and continued into the office.

Rhi stood on the curb, watching the small town activities of a late Sunday afternoon for several long minutes after the other woman went back inside. Once she felt in control enough to face the others, she returned to the office to deal with whatever the next few hours had in store.

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Chapter Twenty

Sandy left soon afterwards to get ready for school the next day, with Matt promising not to be late coming home. The three of them returned to the conference room and puzzles waiting to be solved. Matt poured over new notes while Gavin and Rhi worked on her journal. He would ask questions about their notes occasionally and then continue reading or making his own notes. Rhi was relieved that he finally seemed less uncomfortable around her.

It was Matt asking questions about some of the notes that jogged loose something in the back of her mind she had tried earlier to pull out.

Gavin's head snapped up, his eyes meeting hers the instant it was clear in her mind. "What is it?"

Without questioning how he knew, Rhi answered as she pulled the journal closer to her. "When I originally recorded the dream after I woke up, I described the ashes in the fireplace and what I saw him doing differently than I remember it now. Listening to what *he* was feeling and thinking at the time, it's obvious now I misunderstood what it meant. I was wrong about why he burned their hearts." Rhi circled a few of the words in the journal before flipping the pages to the entry she remembered.

"Listen to this." She moved her finger over the words till she found her place and began reading out loud.

"The metallic taste of blood coated the roof of my mouth just from the smell of it spilled out on the wood floor. He

lifted each of their hearts over his head before placing them on the folded newspaper in the fireplace. The glint of metal shimmered on the paper despite the blood and he struck the match against a brick. It flared to life. He held it close to his face and his breath caused the flame to dance at the end of the match.

Rhi shivered despite having read over this a dozen or more times by then. "It wasn't a sacrifice as I thought, but a cleansing. Fire is used to cleanse. If he'd meant to sacrifice them, he wouldn't have burned the hearts with Tommy's ring. He would just kill them. Instead, he cleansed them both, or maybe just her, of their sins." Rhi looked from Matt—who had slid his chair closer to listen—to Gavin.

"According to the other reports, he didn't take the hearts from the others." Rhi nervously licked her lips, attempting to relieve their dry condition as she raised her eyes to meet those of the two men. "So this confirms he's changing more than how he kills. He's changing why he kills, too. He's no longer just looking for a special girl."

Gavin donned the now-familiar mask, absent of any emotion as he nodded before adding, "She's right. So far, the reports from other murder scenes we have access to don't show this much order and ritual, which is probably why they were never seen by the local authorities as anything other than a rage killing. We'd already decided he was evolving, so this confirms it."

"Shit, changing *how* he kills is a hell of a lot different than changing why or when." Matt drew in a deep breath and let it out in a loud 'whoosh.' Rhi felt the worry building inside him.

Gavin pulled the faxed reports back in front of him, looking through them again. "Mostly the reports focus on the stab wounds and the lack of sexual activity. Behaviors typically associated with disorganized killers in a rage. Only the last four were tied down in the same manner as your two teenagers. The others were tied down, but not in any particular way." Rhi noticed Gavin's brows furrow as he flipped back and forth between the reports.

"Only a few of the reports mention rings or lockets. Either it's something new or they didn't pick up on them." He shoved the reports back down the table; it was the only hint of rage she had seen. Rhi could tell her revelation had increased the stakes, if not the tension in the two men...Gavin, especially.

Matt's brow drew downward with worry and he added, "The victims might have kept the locket and maybe the ring hidden from their parents, especially if they weren't supposed to be dating or dating a particular boy. Or, they might not have even exchanged rings. Some kids don't get them these days." He rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. "If the killer gave the locket to them, I doubt they knew it wasn't a gift from their boyfriends." Scrubbing his face with both hands, Matt stood up and stretched.

"It's possible he left the necklaces for them somewhere like their school locker. They would have thought it came from their boyfriends and if they were dating someone their parents had forbidden them to date, they would have hidden the locket just like they hid their boyfriends," Rhi offered, thinking back to her vision about the pictures in the lockets.

Gavin returned with three bottles of water, causing Rhi to blink several times; she hadn't even realized he'd left the room. Frowning, she took the bottle he handed her, nodding stiffly in thanks and shivering as she did. Rhi realized there was a lot more to Gavin than his being Matt's Special Forces partner. Gavin handed the last one to Matt, who took it absently, obviously used to Gavin's spooky behavior.

She couldn't help watching Gavin from across the table as he opened his and, after taking a generous swig, sifted through the stacks of papers. He was looking for something, but Rhi doubted it was in the staggering amount of information accumulated among the three of them. Most of it only generated more questions, not the answers they needed. He was using it to stimulate whatever he was trying to remember. Not sure how she knew that, Rhi chose to ignore her own questions and turned back to her journal again.

Standing up so abruptly his chair tipped over behind him, Gavin actually smiled a hard, cold-eyed smile.

"Matt, can you get a list of people in the area who've been here a year or less and have jobs that put them in close contact with our teenagers?"

Matt winced at the request. "Casper's a small town, but it's not exactly Mayberry. I don't know every person in the area or when they moved here." Shaking his head, he ran the tip of his tongue around his bottom lip, thinking about it. Then a smile found its way through the uncertainty. "But I know someone— actually, two someones—who probably do." He slapped his hand on the table before clapping Gavin on the back as he passed by on his way towards the door.

"I'm going to make some calls. Be back in a few." Matt headed down the hall towards his office.

Rhi was uncomfortable alone in the room with Gavin after their little shared mental exercise earlier. But curiosity won out and she had to ask, "Why do you want to know who's lived here less than a year?"

"The killer has moved around at least every year. He has to be someone with close access to the teenage population, so he'd have a job. Otherwise, he would stand out to authorities as a transient and be an instant suspect." Gavin stood up and gathered some of the papers they had spread out on the table. "By finding out who in the area has been here a year or less, we can narrow down our suspects and, using the want ads I pulled from some of the other towns where murders have occurred, we can narrow it down even more. Once we get some photos of the employees and teachers at the other locations, we should find a common face in the crowd."

Rhi had unconsciously started helping him gather the papers and folders into neat stacks. She tensed when their fingers touched as they lined the stacks down the table. Without looking up, she continued the ones she had started, wondering if he felt the same tingle when they touched that she had.

"I'm willing to bet he works around where the teenagers go to school. He would need to be close enough to monitor them so he'd know when they edged toward whatever sets him off. He'd be a teacher or a coach or maybe a janitorial

worker, someone who wouldn't look out of place watching a school full of kids."

Rhi agreed with his analysis of the situation, having already come to the same conclusion. "They started talking about having sex with their boyfriends. That's what set him off. Once they crossed over to talking about it with their best friends, they were only a few steps away from the act itself." She knew from the rage she had felt during her first vision that this was his trigger. She caught Gavin staring at her and was keenly aware of his scrutiny, but she couldn't tell what he was thinking. She wasn't about to try to find out by pushing into his head. Taking a seat at the end of the table, she waited for Matt to return. She realized how exhausted she was and reminded herself she hadn't slept much the night before.

Gavin looked down at his watch; a frown sprouted as a furrow between his brows. "It's nearly nine o'clock. I didn't realize it had gotten so late." He looked down at the stack on the table before continuing. "When Matt gets back, I'll take you to the motel and let you get some rest. Tomorrow's going to be busy and I'm not sure what Matt has planned right now."

Rhi managed to nod in agreement, but her attention was captured by Gavin's slow, determined walk to the chair across the table from her. He leaned over it, his hands flat on the table, and captured her eyes with his. They drew her in closer to him until she was sure she would drown in their dark depths. She hadn't moved from her chair, but felt as if she'd

floated across the table to stand directly in front him. It was that intense, that real.

She felt a stir inside her mind and deep in her body. Gavin was going to say something important, but Matt's footsteps thundering down the hall towards them tore them apart.

"Okay, I contacted my informants from the diner and the post office and asked for their help. They're only too glad to lend a hand with this." His whole face spread into a smile as he rubbed his hands together. "Both of them can't be a day under sixty and since they've lived their entire lives here, they'll know everyone who's new in town."

Gavin leisurely straightened to his full height and, shaking his head, warned Matt, "Sandy's going to castrate you when she finds out you asked your girlfriends for help." A slow, wry grin played across his face.

Matt laughed, shaking his head. "Not if you don't tattle."

"You're not paying me enough to risk my gonads for you, partner."

"I'm not paying you at all, remember?" Matt grinned at him, his hands resting on his hips, obviously relieved at having something positive to work with at last. He turned to Rhi as if to make some scathing comment and winced instead, checking his watch.

Rhi looked from one man to the other, puzzled at Matt's sudden change of expression. His earlier excitement with its silly smile was gone, replaced by a somber expression that changed his expressive face completely. If Rhi hadn't known any better, she'd have thought she'd grown a third eye in the center of her forehead.

"Damn, I'm sorry, Rhi. I know you have to be worn out. I shouldn't have kept you here so long tonight." Shoving his hands down in his jean pockets, a sheepish look settled over his face. "And tomorrow's going to be hectic, but hopefully we'll unearth some solid leads to help us close in on this guy."

Matt floundered for a minute, clearly uneasy again about what to do with her. "Uh, I'll make sure you have whatever you need to be comfortable, food..."

Gavin interrupting him, clearing his throat. "I'll ride her over on my bike on my way to your house and make sure she's settled in." Nodding his head to indicate the papers on the conference room table, he suggested, "You might want to move anything out of here the others don't need to see."

Matt ran his hand through his shaggy hair. "That's what I'm about to work on." Grabbing an empty box from one of the chairs, Matt pushed it into Gavin's stomach before he headed for the door.

"Hey, you're not getting out of helping me with the leftovers, bud. You can carry some of them to the truck on your way out." Without waiting for a response, he picked up the folders with the photos and some of the other papers on the table, heading towards his office.

Gavin handed the empty box to Rhi with a shrug and a lift of his eyebrows. He loaded her box with some of the leftover food and then loaded another box with the heavier dishes to take for himself.

"Do you mind a bike?" The question came out of nowhere and he didn't wait for her answer, just headed out the door. Snagging the bag of rolls off the table, she followed him out

of the office, wondering how she would manage sitting behind him on the bike. Rhi handed the box and rolls to him when she reached Matt's truck. He added them to the rest of the food in the cab before shutting the truck door.

"My bike's over here. I have an extra helmet in the saddlebag. Here's the key." He dropped the small key into her hand. "Gonna' holler at Matt to let him know we're gone. Be right back."

Getting used to Gavin's abrupt departures, Rhi wandered over to where the black bike was parked, admiring its sleek lines and chrome it sported. It wasn't a touring bike, so it wasn't as large as she had hoped it would be. She had no idea how she could ride without holding on to him. Holding on to him would be asking for trouble, but there wasn't much she could do about it.

When Gavin returned, she had unlocked the saddle bag and pulled out a battered red helmet, but hadn't put it on yet. He unhooked his own helmet from the seat, a full-face black job, and took the key back from Rhi. She really didn't want to touch him, even with his shirt and jacket between her hand and his skin. It seemed too intimate and they already had held some sort of energy link between them. Still, it was a really short ride to the motel. Surely she could handle something so minor. Sighing in resignation, she hoped she wasn't that much of a coward.

Pushing the helmet down on her head and strapping it under her chin, Rhi waited for him to tell her what was next. She'd actually ridden one of the contraptions a long time in the past, in what seemed like another life, so she knew not to

jump on someone's bike before them. Nervously, she watched him strap on his helmet before pulling on the gloves he'd had in his jacket pocket. Rhi felt heat spread through her lower body at the sight of him decked out in the jacket, complete with gloves and tight fitting jeans. When he turned away from her to mount the bike, the words were out before she could stop them.

"Damn, you look good!" Gasping, she couldn't believe she'd uttered those words out loud. Rhi hurriedly covered them with a cough, totally mortified and glad the helmet hid the majority of her face.

Gavin pushed the big bike off the kickstand and, nodding his head at her, said, "Hop on up."

Lightly placing her hand on his shoulder for balance, she managed to get her leg over the seat and settled as far back from him as she could and still be safely on the seat. Her hands rested lightly on her own thighs, waiting until she had no choice but to hold on for the ride. The bike roared to life and Rhi took a deep breath before reaching out to hold onto either side of Gavin's waist. The lightest touch on either side instantly generated that spark of electricity that seemed to constantly crackle around him. She almost jerked her hands back, but he pulled forward, forcing her to tighten her grip to keep from falling off. The solid connection sent warmth seeping through her body, but the crackling sparks stopped. Rhi barely managed to resist digging her fingers into his waist or worse, hugging up against him. What in the world had gotten into her? Thank God it was only a couple of blocks!

See How They Die
by Mary Alice Pritchard

He rode well and didn't hug any curves to make her hold tighter, so she felt a little better about the short ride. Once he pulled into the parking lot of the motel and cut the engine, Gavin dismounted first. Removing his helmet and hanging it on the handlebar, he waited for her to make up her mind on how to get off. Rhi was grateful he didn't smirk at her when she finally gave in and let him help her. He gave her his hand, still gloved, to hold so she could throw her leg over the seat and slide off without losing her balance. She was just a little too short to manage it on her own. Still without saying anything, he waited for her to use the key card to open the door.

Stepping inside, Rhi turned back to where Gavin remained outside the door. She wasn't sure what to say next; her eyes looked anywhere but at him.

"Would you like to come in for a minute before you head to Matt's house? I mean to give him time to get back." Faltering, she gave up and stepped back from the door when he moved to walk inside. Rhi escaped across the room to where Toby sat on one of the pillows on the bed and rubbed the big cat under his chin, eliciting a grave purr for all of a minute. Then he jumped down and walked over to the food bowl to indicate it was empty.

"I think he's a little miffed you didn't check on him," Gavin supplied with a hint of amusement in his voice.

Startled, she bit her lower lip and shrugged. Then, unable to resist the cat's obvious begging posture, Rhi poured crunchies into his bowl and watched him inspect them.

"Yeah, he doesn't like his bowl to get empty, but he'll live." Toby dove into his crunchies while she watched, amused as always at his enthusiasm. Rhi didn't know what to do with her hands once she'd put the cat food back in the box. Gavin seemed aware that she was nervous around him. He hadn't moved any further into the room.

She looked up when he drew in a deep breath and a melancholy shadow crossed his face. "I'm not going to bite you, Rhi." Walking over to the door, he hesitated before looking back. "Is there anything you can think of you might need in the morning?" He opened the door, waiting for her response. When she didn't answer right away, he turned to face her, his eyes fastened on hers and holding them captive for the briefest of moments.

"No, no thanks. I can't think of anything." She swallowed around the knot in her throat and crossed the room on shaking legs to stand next to the door, just out of reach. She'd deliberately put herself closer to him partly out of defiance of her own nerves and partly because she would need to lock the door behind him.

She managed a hint of a smile. "Thanks for the ride."

Gavin's lips twitched and he nodded before softly closing the door behind him. Rhi quickly slid the chain in place and briefly rested her forehead against the cool metal of the door. Toby pranced over to the window and jumped up, disappearing behind the curtain to watch Gavin saddle up and leave.

"Traitor," she scolded before ducking back from a quick peek around the curtain herself.

See How They Die
by Mary Alice Pritchard

Rhi waited to hear the motorcycle roar to life before turning the covers back on her bed. A hot shower would be heaven. She was mentally and emotionally exhausted and hoped she would rest that night. The combined energy from the two men had drained her to the point where she was running on fumes. If she didn't figure out how to shield or dampen it somehow, she wasn't going to be of much use to anyone. Rhi had never experienced anything like it before and wondered what about them generated so much energy. Sighing as she turned the shower on, she mused to herself, this psychic gig was getting harder and harder instead of easier as time went on.

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Chapter Twenty-One

Gavin listened closely without opening his eyes. Using all of his senses, he waited patiently and listened, but didn't hear anything to have awakened him. There was nothing close he could detect that could pose a threat.

Gavin opened his eyes, allowing them to adjust to the darkness before he turned his head to check the time. He'd only been asleep about three hours. There was nothing he could sense out of place and he didn't hear anyone moving in the house, but something was off. Rolling out of the bed without making a sound, his gun in his hand, nothing was different in the room. Gavin pulled on his pants and silently checked the house, his feet bare, but found nothing wrong.

Relaxing, comfortable that everything was ok and his friends were safe, he gazed out the window of the kitchen door into the darkness. Then it hit him. He knew what woke him. *Rhiannon*. Something was wrong with Rhi. Gavin didn't question how he knew. He had long before stopped wasting time by asking useless questions. Instead, he concentrated, trying to determine what exactly was wrong, but he couldn't grasp whatever it was.

Moving quietly back through the house, he grabbed his shirt and shoes from his room and locked the kitchen door behind him. He walked the bike down the drive and out to the road before starting it so he wouldn't wake Matt or Sandy. If he needed Matt, he could call him later. Now, he needed to get to Rhi and see what was wrong.

It took all of ten minutes to ride across town to the motel where she was staying, but it felt longer. Jumping off the bike as soon as it stopped, he kicked the stand in place and knocked on her door. When there was no answer, he put his ear to the door to listen, but there was no sound. Now he used both hands curled into fists and when she didn't answer the pounding, he tried kicking it open, but the solid steel door wasn't going to give that easily.

Movement to the right caught his attention and there in the window sat Toby. The enormous, odd looking gray and white cat stood on his hind legs and pawed at the window once he had Gavin's attention. It was all the encouragement he needed and, shooing the cat away from the window, pulled his shirt off despite the cold night air and wrapped it around his fist to use as a makeshift club. He broke the window pane with one quick jab, making little if any noise. Pushing the remaining jagged glass out of the way, he unwound the shirt from his hand and laid it over the sill so he could crawl safely through the broken window into the room. He ended up in a crouch.

He was on his feet immediately, gun in hand, looking for the danger he felt even stronger now he was in the room. The dim light coming from the partially closed bathroom made it difficult for Gavin to see at first. Not feeling anything actually physical that would cause his senses to go wild, Gavin felt for the light switch. When the table lamps came on, he saw her lying on the floor between the two beds. She was deathly white and not moving. Kneeling next to her, he checked her pulse once he found she was breathing. It was fast and

thready and her skin was cold and clammy much as she'd been the day he had brought her there. Seeing no obvious signs of injury, he picked her up and gently lay her on the bed, covering her up.

"Rhi, wake up! What's wrong?" Grasping her hand in his, he was alarmed by its chill. So he pulled the coverlet off the other bed and piled it on top of her. Toby jumped to the bed and curled up next to her side.

"Come on, wake up. I don't know what to do here." Desperation filled his voice and he realized he'd never felt at a loss before in any situation. This was something he didn't know how to deal with. Dragging a pillow over for her head, he gently lifted it and shoved the pillow beneath her. Rhi moaned, thrashing against him.

When she bucked as if she were having a seizure, he held her arms down by her side to keep her from hitting them against the wall. Her breathing sped up and became ragged as if she were running. When blood flowed from her nose, Gavin cursed, rolling her onto her side to keep her from aspirating. Now he was seriously worried. He swallowed hard, growling at her, his voice tight and angry.

"Wake up, dammit! Let go of the dream or whatever the hell it is and get back here."

Gavin kept her on her side, straddling her and using his knee to keep her propped up. Grasping one of her hands in his, he squeezed it tightly, hoping to draw her out of whatever the hell she was in. She was scaring him and he didn't scare easily. Toby had moved out of the way when she'd first begun thrashing about. Now he moved closer and

lightly bit the hand Gavin was holding, just enough to draw blood before jumping down from the bed to watch from the floor.

Rhi's eyelids fluttered but remained closed. She moaned, trying to move out from under him, but he kept her pinned, afraid she would hurt herself...afraid she'd choke on the blood still flowing from her nose. When she screamed and tried to sit up, Gavin pulled her up against him, wrapping his arms and then his legs around her, trying to calm her down and wake her up all at the same time. He was getting desperate.

"Rhi, it's all right, you're not alone, wake up." Gavin grabbed some tissue from the bedside table and held it to her nose to staunch the bleeding. She was completely in his lap then with his arms around her and one leg still crossed over hers as he leaned back against the wall. "Come on, Rhi. Wake up and talk to me. What's wrong, what's going on?"

"Stop him, have to stop him," she gasped, whispering between breaths. "He's killing him. Oh, God, he's killing him!" Her eyes flew open with the sudden realization someone was holding her down. She fought wildly to get away.

Gavin kept her arms by her sides and carefully turned her around to face him. "It's me, Rhi; it's Gavin. You're okay now." Slowly, he let go of one of her arms to lay the palm of his hand against the side of her face. He gently pushed her hair back from her eyes. They were solid green and wild.

Gavin lightly ran his hand over her hair, whispering against it, "You're okay, you're okay," over and over until the quaking in her muscles slowed to fine tremors.

She still didn't say anything. Her glassy, unfocused eyes remained huge. She seemed to be looking right through him. The continued fine tremors over her body worried him. He was afraid she might be going into shock. Pulling the coverlet back around them, he tried talking to her again.

"Tell me what you saw and I'll write it down. You aren't alone this time, Rhi. I'll help you through it." He watched her breathing slow before she lowered her head and cried quietly. Gavin knew he was in over his head. He didn't have a clue how to handle her tears. He almost pulled his cell out to call Matt, but instead, instinct won out and he gathered her into his arms and gently rocked her while she wept. Gavin felt his heart tighten to the breaking point. He couldn't understand why he was so connected, so in tune with her. She fit in his lap, next to his body, and under his chin as if she were made for him. The thought stilled him momentarily, then he continued to rock until her sobs quieted.

Pulling away from him once she had stopped crying, Rhi wiped her face with the tissues he handed her.

"I...I'm tired, but I need to write this down. I won't remember the details if I don't." Her voice came out grave and hoarse and she winced at the sound. "I'm sorry," she finally managed, realizing his bare chest was wet with her tears and blood.

"Let me grab a warm bath cloth for you and I'll write while you talk." Settling her back against the headboard with a pillow behind her, Gavin ran water until it was warm enough to satisfy him.

She accepted the cloth with a wan smile, wiping her face, neck and hands before she began talking. Picking up her tablet from the bedside table, Gavin listened, writing quickly as she outlined a scene that might have come out of a horror movie. She seemed to go inside herself as she talked, not allowing the words to affect how she recounted them. Gavin found it difficult to concentrate on recording the dream as the graphic details unfolded. He was used to them, had lived them on a daily basis, but knowing she'd experienced this was almost more than he could fathom.

"I was him and I was so angry with them, the boys. They have no right to touch her. She's not theirs. She's mine and I won't let them defile her like they have all the others."

Rhi's eyes grew glassy again and the lack of emotion on her face crept into her voice, making it cold and bland. He moved so that he could place a hand on hers, using his lap as a table to support the pad.

"I'm—no, *he's* watching them walk across the campus, joking back and forth. He's thinking how he'll take care of them once and for all. They wouldn't put their nasty hands on her again. He'd be sure of that. It had never been his precious angel's fault, it was theirs! Why hadn't he realized it before now?"

Gavin watched the emotions flit across her face as she fought to keep from falling back into the dream. The determination in the set of her jaw amazed him. He struggled at times to keep up with her and, at other times, it was a while before she managed to speak again.

"The two boys he's watching don't know they're being watched. One is dark, not black but maybe Hispanic or maybe he's just dark. His hair is thick and slightly curly. It's not real long, but long enough to have curls." Rhi moved her hand against her own hair, demonstrating the length.

"He's about five feet, five inches and he's the shorter of the two. He's wearing a class ring, so he must be a junior or senior." Her voice faltered for a minute and he waited for her to continue.

"The other one has light brown hair, I think, but it's cut really short. Not a crew cut, but close. He has dark blue eyes and he's nearly six feet, I think, wearing a jersey with a letter on it. I can't see the letter to know which school. I can't see his hands, either, to know if he's wearing a ring or not. His hands are in the pockets of the jersey." Her breathing picked up as she focused. Gavin watched as her nostrils flared, her eyes wide and round. The fear and loathing on her face nearly made him stop her from going any further.

"He's in a truck, the killer is, and sees the short one walking alone on the street. It's not quite night, but dusk. He stops and offers him a ride." Her voice grew deeper, hoarser.

"You don't need to be out walking alone at night these days. Come on, I'll see you home." Rhi shook her head slowly from side to side. "Don't do it, don't do it."

"He's pleased it's so easy. They're all so stupid. If they'd only leave his girls alone, he wouldn't have to punish them. He's driving toward the school. Says he needs to check the grounds one more time and then he'll take him home. The boy isn't worried. Why isn't he worried?" Rhi's fingers made a

steeple against her lips, tapping her fingertips against the tight line of her mouth before continuing.

"Just sit tight. I'll be right back. Gotta' be sure those doors are locked," he tells him before he walks off. Then in a couple of seconds he calls out to him. "Hey, give me a hand, the door's stuck."

The boy is aggravated. He hits the side of the door, mumbling something before he gets out of the truck. He starts across the grass, but the man comes up behind him."

"Why doesn't he know he's there? He should have been paying attention." Rhi's voice, husky with tears, trembled as she shook her head from side to side. Gavin wanted to touch her again and tell her it was all right. But it wasn't.

"He hits him over the head with a brick. He has to hit him twice and the boy goes down hard." Tears slid down her face and Gavin tightened his jaw to keep from wiping them away. He couldn't interfere and risk losing of any of the details of her dream.

"There's so much blood, but he's not dead. I—I—*He* has to move him where he can finish the ritual. It's only fair if he has to kill them that he cleanse them." Rhi sat quietly for several minutes; the tears continued to flow down her cheeks unchecked.

"Oh, God, there's so much blood! He's tied down to the floor. It's hard and cold." Once again Rhi's eyes went dull as Gavin watched. "The place he's taken him for the ritual is dark except for a fire he built, and the sparkles. They're all around him, above him, like tiny stars. I don't see the sky, only the darkness, the fire, and the sparkles."

She began to shiver again, rocking back and forth with her knees drawn up to her chest. "No, no, I don't want to do this. I *can't* do this again."

Cursing under his breath, Gavin reached out to her, hating himself all over again. She had to do it or another teenager would die. She had to *see it* and tell him about it and he had to help her do it. Gavin covered her clasped hands with his and forced himself to calm her.

"Rhi, breathe slowly. It's all right; you're not there. You're here with me. I'm not going to leave you. Take it slow." He wanted to pull her out of it and hold her tight against him till the nightmare was gone, but he knew it would just come back. She needed to work through it and they needed the information to stop the bastard.

Relaxing at his touch, she nodded stiffly. Swallowing, she sat up, in control once again, and continued. "The spot was already prepared, the spikes already driven into the rock. It had been almost impossible to do, but he managed. He ties him to the spikes spread out like before and cuts his clothes off." When she paused, he saw she had to fight to stay focused.

"I can feel the heaviness of the knife in his hand. It feels like an old friend. I know what has to be done. Now, before his soul leaves, before it's too late for him to be cleansed. He has to cleanse the boy or he'll have to pay for the teenager's sins as well. He prays over him, something about forgiving his wickedness, cleansing him of his evil thoughts and deeds.

"The boy is barely conscious and he knows it's time now. He kneels between the boy's legs and, grasping him, brings

the knife down. Oh, God! NO! I can't go through this again, I just can't!" Before Gavin could pull her to him, she gasped, wild eyed, covering her ears with her hands and frantically shaking her head.

"He's screaming with pain and *he* can't stand hearing the screams. He," Rhi coughed, gagging as the tears ran down her cheeks. "He stops his screams. He fills the boy's mouth with his own flesh."

Gavin tightened his grip around the pen as Rhi's heart-wrenching sobs cut him to the bone. He felt the pen break in his hand and, cursing at the mess, he grabbed a tissue and another pen. She was still talking, so he had to keep writing.

"He plunges the knife into the boy's chest, ripping downward with both hands. I can hear bones crack, but he isn't trying to break through them. He cuts lower until he can reach in and under for the heart." Her voice had turned soft and cold, void of emotion. Gavin didn't know if that was better or worse.

"There's so much blood, so much blood." Rhi stopped abruptly and looked down at her hands. Holding them up in front of her, she turned them back and forth staring, at them as if they didn't belong to her.

"I'll never get it off my hands." She kept them up in front of her face, rubbing them against each other as if she was trying to wash the blood off. She began to shiver and shook her head. "It won't wash off; it'll never wash off."

Gavin caught her hands in his and pulled her into his lap once again. She was ice cold in his arms. He knew she didn't like to be touched any more than he did, but there and then,

it was what she needed...what they both needed. The fact that he didn't have a shirt on didn't seem to register with either one of them at first. But after a few seconds, Gavin felt her cold cheek wet with her tears, against his chest. The silky feel of her hair next to his bare skin was the sweetest torture he'd ever endured.

"We will stop him, Rhi. Your dream will help us find him, but you need to rest now." He slowly eased down on the bed until they were lying side by side with her head resting on his shoulder. "Just rest and sleep if you can. I'll be right here until you wake up." Gavin pulled both coverlets closer around her shoulders and tried not to think about the small feminine body nestled against his side as anything other than someone who was hurting and needed help.

Once her breathing became shallower, evening out, he eased away from her to take care of the window. It amazed him no one had heard anything between his breaking the window and her cries, but more than likely, none of the nearby rooms were occupied. Stuffing one of the pillows into the broken window to keep cold air out, he turned the heat up in the room to make up for the cooler air still seeping in. Then, unlocking the door and stepping out into the cold night, Gavin called Matt. He figured Matt should be getting up soon anyway; it was nearly five o'clock.

Matt shook his head, handing Gavin another shirt through the truck window. "I have enough to do without busting you for breaking and entering, partner." Gavin pulled on the shirt without answering him. Matt's smile as he handed him a

thermal mug of coffee didn't quite reach his eyes. "Not to mention bringing clothes to you. Plan ahead next time."

Gavin didn't return the smile, but shrugged as he took a welcome sip from the mug. "Yeah, well, I'm already serving time. I'm working for you." Indicating the room behind him with a jerk of his head, Gavin filled Matt in on finding Rhi on the floor in the middle of a dream.

"She's sleeping right now, but I made copies of the parts describing the boys for you. Maybe you can figure out who they are and watch them; I don't know." He rubbed his head; feeling the light stubble of hair scratchy against his hand. He needed to shave. "It's pretty vague."

Matt took the notes, scanning quickly through them. "What if we get pictures? Do you think she would recognize them from a picture?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm sure she would. School pictures would work. Maybe get access to the school annuals."

"Should be able to get copies; they're basically public, anyway. I ought to be able to get them without it being a school board issue."

"Better get a couple of years to be sure they didn't skip out on their pictures one year. I never got mine taken. Skipped school those days." Gavin shook his head, looking out over the back of Matt's truck for a long time.

Matt slapped his hand against the outside of his truck door, getting Gavin's attention. "That's a plan! Stay with her and I'll let you know as soon as I get hold of the annuals." Matt leaned back in the truck, about to crank it, but something on Gavin's face stopped him and he looked closer.

"What is it?" Worry edged his voice and Gavin knew he was busted. "What's got you on edge?"

He took a slow deep breath, looking over at the horizon where it brightened towards dawn. "I don't know. I can't figure out how I knew something was going on with Rhi. It woke me up, but I didn't know what was wrong until I felt it again." Shaking his head, Gavin leaned over from the window where he could see the motel without looking into Matt's face.

"It was like a tether that connected us and she was being dragged under, so it tugged on me. How did we end up connected like this?" Still without looking at Matt, he cleared his throat. "I don't understand what's going on, Matt. I can feel her from here. She's restless and I feel like I need to check on her."

Slapping his hands against the truck bed, he finally looked over at Matt, letting his face show the turmoil roiling inside him. He didn't know how to put into words what was going on inside of him. He'd never allowed anyone to see so much of him, but Matt was his partner, the only person he'd ever felt any sort of kinship for. It was something he didn't have a handle on and he needed help.

"You've connected with her somehow, Gavin. Don't know why unless it's because you've touched her. I guess it's different from when she's connected to the victims she dreams about, though." They exchanged looks and Gavin saw Matt was uncomfortable, knowing he was worried. "Maybe it happened when she was sick back at her house. You were there with her for quite a while."

"Yeah, you're probably right." Gavin knew better, though. They had connected from the first moment they had met, before they'd ever touched. He had felt it when he first saw her standing on her porch. Sitting at her kitchen table when they interviewed her, he had found himself feeling her anxiety, catching glimpses of her thoughts. But there were other things that needed to be taken care of before he could think about it. Pushing it to the back of his mind, he changed the subject, sharing some things he had been mulling over for a couple of hours.

"Just in case our guy has moved on and these kids aren't local," Gavin pointed to the paper with their descriptions lying on the passenger seat, "you might want to do a head count of all the teachers, coaches, employees, and anyone else you can think of to be sure no one's gone missing." He almost smiled, but it felt like more of a smirk, "Guess that can be in addition to creating a list of anyone who has moved here in the last year or so."

Matt threw his hands up in mock surrender before letting them drop back to the steering wheel. "Okay, you can have my job. I'm sure as hell not gonna put up a fight." Then in a serious tone, "Once she wakes up, if you get anything more, call me and fill me in. I'll work on things from the office and see about those annuals. Maybe we'll start getting some information from everyone making those phone calls for us. It's going to take a lot of patience fitting the pieces together."

Gavin nodded, back to no emotions and a blank expression as he turned back to the motel, letting himself in the room as Matt pulled out of the parking lot. He'd take care of the cat's

needs while he waited for Rhi to wake up. Toby had already taken up a position by the bowl when he walked in. Gavin swore the cat frowned at him.

"Hey, I had to see about business first. I'm going to feed you," he whispered to the fat cat, carefully pouring dry crunchies into the cat's dish to keep from making too much noise.

"You're not a very patient fellow. Better learn to be as long as I'm in charge of your food." Giving the funny-looking cat a scratch between the ears, he moved on to tend the litter box and change the water.

Gavin finished, leaving the cat to gorge, and stretched out on the second bed to doze while he waited. He was surprised when the fat cat pulled his bulk up onto the bed and settled next to him. When he purred in a throaty stutter, Gavin had the strange thought it sounded a lot like his bike. Smiling completely naturally for maybe the first time in years, he absently stroked the soft fur and closed his eyes to rest.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Matt made it to the office before anyone, but considering that it was only a little after six o'clock, he really wasn't surprised. He checked in with the call operator and collected the night's calls. Gail would be in by seven to take over the messages and dispatching.

Looking through the calls for the night, he was relieved to see there weren't any major ones for a change. Considering the extra duty everyone was pulling, they could use some light call nights for awhile. Matt hoped to make some progress on phone calls before anything cropped up demanding his attention. The Sheriff's office was always fairly busy without the present murder investigation, so he needed to make the most of his time.

Contacting the school's superintendent of education, Matt requested a list of all school employees who didn't report to work over the next few days and a list of any new employees hired between six and fourteen months ago, as well. He knew Superintendent Taylor fairly well, having worked with him on various community projects in the previous four or five years. He could count on the man to get the lists to him quickly. He also knew the early morning phone call wouldn't be an issue, since the Superintendent was a morning jogger.

Next, he called the chief of police to see where they were at that point, earning a hearty laugh from the man.

"You do realize it's only six-thirty in the fucking morning, don't you, Matt?"

Wincing, he held the phone away from his ear. "Yeah, sorry, thought maybe you'd gotten lucky early and wanted to catch you before both our phones started ringing off the hook."

"Too late then, they've been ringing since I got here at five-thirty and since my wife is visiting her sister..."

"Ha, ha, Chief." Matt interrupted him with a groan. The other man chuckled into the phone.

"But, I do have a little information for you. I'm faxing over the list we got from the city water company of people who've turned water on between September first and July thirty-first of this year." Clearing his throat, the Chief gave a half laugh.

"We thinned the list by removing anyone who was just moving around the area or who had their water cut off for non-payment and then back on. That helped some, but there are still about forty or so names on the list. 'Course, our guy might not even live in the city limits or he could have a well."

"Yeah," Matt agreed, "But it's a start and we're getting a list of new school employees. We can cross reference the two lists. Anyone not on the city water list who is new would be a good check out."

"Well, you got lucky on the list because one of my boys' moms works there and he was able to get her to go in last night to print out the list for us. I'll fax it to you as soon as I get away from this blasted phone." He cursed as another line began ringing.

"Thanks, I really appreciate it. I'll keep in touch."

Matt thought about the descriptions Gavin had given him of the two boys, shaking his head though he knew it wasn't

anything he could share with the chief right then. In the meantime, he circled his note in red to ask Gail to check on the annuals from the high school. He needed for Rhi to look through them in hopes of identifying one or both of the boys.

Thinking about her brought up another worry in his mind. Trying to reconcile the whole psychic idea, he had done some research on the Internet. It took more time than he had wanted to spend, weeding through the junk and hype, but he'd managed to locate a few good articles that were backed by research. He wasn't altogether sure that Rhi's unusual abilities weren't going to kill her in the long run. Some of the cases he had read about scared the hell out of him. He didn't want to be responsible for her life or mental state when it came to using her abilities. He planned to broach that subject with Gavin later, but just then they had a killer to stop and he had made the decision to wait at least twenty-four hours before giving the articles he'd printed out to Gavin. Closing his eyes for a minute, he prayed he was making the right decision.

The next few hours kept Matt busy with normal Monday morning activities including a morning briefing with his deputies. Then he met with Gail, filling her in on what he had planned for the day so she could field his calls. The briefing that morning included Terry's weekend report, which consisted mostly of break-ins and bar fights around the county. Nothing stood out to Matt as either related to the murder investigation or something he needed to personally check into. His deputies were experienced and rarely needed help from him with routine things.

Gavin's call a little later let him know Rhi was awake, if a bit tired, and reminded him of his earlier worries about her health. Gavin hadn't sounded much better. In fact, his buddy sounded almost anxious. Not like him at all. Before Matt could think about that any more closely, the phone rang and the calls started again.

When he finally got to the fax from the police chief, Matt took it with him to meet with Gail at her desk. She was another source who knew most everyone in the area and one thing he believed in was using all of his available resources. Straddling the visitor's chair next to her desk, Matt sat his pile on the edge of her desk and handed the fax to her off the top.

"Gail, would you look over this list and help me narrow it down some?" Propping his elbows on the desk, he added, "Cross off anyone you know has been here more than a year or that you know is over sixty years old."

"Sure, I can do that—shouldn't take long." She glanced quickly down the list. "Looks like it's pretty accurate, though." Marking through one name immediately, she studied the list.

"Matt, I only see one that I know for sure has been here more than a year, but there are several who are close to sixty or who use a walker or a wheelchair. I can mark through them if you're not dead set on them being sixty or over."

"No, anyone you think might not be a candidate, mark through the name and stick a note out to the side about what knocks them off our suspect list."

"Gotcha,' Sheriff; this won't take long at all."

"Thanks. It'll cut down on a lot of time checking out so many." He handed her another slip of paper. "Can you check

on getting a copy of these annuals, as well? We need them as soon as you can get them."

Gail nodded, but shook her head at him with a frown. "You don't look like you've slept much, boss." Before Matt could comment, the phone rang and her task of fielding calls began in earnest.

Saluting her, Matt headed back to his office, eager to start fitting some of the pieces together—if they had any that would work yet. Before the morning was gone, the stack of papers had become a monstrous task of sorting, grouping and eliminating, with no end in sight. It didn't take long for him to become frustrated. There was so much information to read through, he had a hard time remembering what he had already read. He threw down his pen after two hours and kicked his desk hard enough that his in-tray slid off to land in the trash. He was tempted to leave it, but after giving himself a few minutes to calm down and another few minutes to enjoy seeing it there, he fished it out and picked up the next stack of notes to review.

Gavin woke at the sound of her gasp. Jumping up from the next bed, gun in hand, Gavin searched for what had Rhi's face frozen with fear. Rhi's mind was screaming, *intruder*. He searched the room in the dim light from the bathroom. Finding no one other than the two of them and Toby, snoring where he had curled up next to him sometime during the night, Gavin realized *he* was the intruder. She had sensed someone in the room with her, but hadn't realized who it was when she woke.

Visibly relaxing, Gavin felt Rhiannon's fear as if it were his own. Panting and shaking all over, she had pulled her knees to her chest. "Hey, it's just me." Edging closer to the bed, he moved slowly to keep from startling her.

"It's all right. There's no one here but us." Gavin slowly lowered himself to the bed, but didn't try to touch her right away. She looked so fragile sitting there with her chin resting on her knees.

"You've been asleep for about three hours. How do you feel?" He reached out slowly with one hand to touch hers. It surprised him when she didn't pull away.

"I took care of Toby, so he's fine. He eats more than I do, and he snores." Gavin continued to talk softly, leaving his hand resting lightly over hers. He felt her reining in her fear and locking it down. The sensation felt surreal to him.

Rhi took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, but didn't look at him. "He does snore, doesn't he?" Stretching her shoulders, she moved her head from side to side. "What time is it?"

She had pulled away from him, stretching her legs out in front of her. "About eight- thirty; are you hungry?"

"Yeah, a little, but I really need a shower first." She winced when she pushed her legs over the edge of the bed. She finally looked at him with a nervous expression before she attempted to stand up.

"Maybe you should try a bath instead." He wasn't so sure it was a good idea for her to try standing in the shower alone.

"I'll be fine. I'm just punch-drunk from waking up so suddenly is all." Her smile looked weak to him, but she'd made the effort.

Gavin hovered close by until she closed the door behind her and he heard the shower. Not knowing what to do was new to him. He was used to being sure of every move he made before he made it. Not knowing from one moment to the next how to proceed had him jumping at every sound. Nothing about this assignment made sense.

"Shit!" Assignment? She wasn't an assignment and that was the whole problem. Resisting the urge to hit something, he listened again to the sound of the shower before picking up the phone to call Matt. He planned to get them something to eat and then go back over the dream with her to see if she could add anything to his notes. He wasn't used to taking dictation and wasn't sure he'd gotten everything down.

"How does she look?" Matt's voice held more concern than before. Gavin had a feeling there was something his friend was holding back, but dismissed it. He was over-analyzing everything.

"Beat, but I guess we all look that way right now." As he stifled a yawn, it crossed his mind that he probably looked pretty scary in Rhi's eyes. He stilled at the realization of what he had been thinking. Why did it matter what he looked like? Matt cleared his throat.

"She was cold and frightened when she first woke up, but I think that was mostly reaction to being in a strange place."

"Probably so, but we don't know what her normal routine is when she has these dreams, so she might always be like that when she first wakes up," Matt answered.

"This isn't my usual gig, Matt. I'm not really sure how to handle..." Pausing, Gavin tried to find the right word, but couldn't think of one that suited him and settled for, "...this situation."

"Just do the best you can. Neither one of us has any experience with whatever this is. Aw, hell, Gavin, it's off the radar in my book!" He heard Matt sigh into the phone. Matt was still uncomfortable with believing Rhi to be psychic...or precognizant...or whatever.

"Look, when you finish, give me a call. Maybe I'll have those annuals by then. I'm hoping she'll recognize someone out of one of the annuals. Regardless, I've got stacks of papers from our phone call brigade to go through."

"I'll call as soon as we're done." Gavin hung up with the feeling Matt had something on his mind. It bothered him, but he had enough to deal with. He'd talk with Matt once they were alone.

Toby hadn't woken up yet or, if he had, he'd gone back to sleep. The fat cat didn't look like he'd moved from where he'd curled up next to Gavin to sleep. Needing to do something, he left the cat undisturbed and straightened Rhi's bed instead. It occurred to him Rhi might want some privacy to get dressed. He could pick up breakfast and bring it back. It would save time, as well.

Gavin was just about to knock on the bathroom door to tell her he'd be right back when it opened under his hand. He

almost fell into her, but caught himself in time on the door frame. She had a towel wrapped around her and avoided looking up into his face. His eyes picked up on the paleness of her skin with a few scattered freckles across her shoulders as well as the faint scars. Her long auburn hair pulled loosely back in a ponytail was sprinkled with water droplets that looked like diamonds.

Gavin had to remember to breathe as he backed away to give her space. Swallowing hard around the lump in his throat, he couldn't help but follow her with his eyes when she slipped past him, crossing the room to gather up clothes to put on. Not exactly following her, he walked over to the other bed where Toby had finally managed to wake up.

"I thought I'd go ahead and pick up breakfast while you dress." Trying not to stare as she pulled out underwear, he turned toward Toby, giving the cat all his attention. Running a hand through the thick fur, it startled him when a sputtering purr rumbled from deep in Toby's throat. "You wouldn't have to worry about being around anyone that way, either." Still looking everywhere but at her, Gavin gave Toby one last scratch and moved to the door.

"Thanks; I really wasn't looking forward to venturing out."

"I'll be back in about thirty minutes. Don't open the door unless it's me or Matt." Gavin's hand hovered over the door knob. He was acutely aware of her lack of clothing and angry with himself for even thinking along those lines. He clipped his words short without meaning to.

"Don't expect Matt to come by, though. I just talked to him on the phone." Gavin struggled to control his attraction to

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her. It was all wrong. She was a victim, just like any of the women he and Matt had tried to help back in Baghdad or Venezuela or one of the many other places they'd found themselves over the years. Gritting his teeth, he opened the door and walked out without saying anything else. The door closed quietly behind him and he headed for the diner on foot.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Rhi pulled on her jeans and noticed the indentation on the pillow of the second bed with Toby snoozing curled up in the middle of the coverlet. She reached out a hand almost before she realized it to touch the indentation. The moment her hand touched the soft cool pillow, she laughed out loud, startling Toby from his slumber enough to turn an ear in her direction. Then the cat opened one eye in a glare.

"Hey, don't look at me like that; you need to get your fat butt out of bed and get some exercise."

It did no good to fuss, since Toby just settled back into his nap, ignoring her. Smiling, she sat next to him, running her hand lightly over his soft fur, and thought about Gavin. What made her touch the pillow like that? Had she subconsciously thought to learn something about him by touching the pillow? She couldn't read objects, so why had she done it? Maybe because she'd never felt a connection to anyone like the one she and Gavin had.

Gavin was a strange man and not knowing what to make of him, people probably thought him rude or maybe even dangerous. Rhi shivered, realizing he was dangerous, just not to her. He'd seemed cold and hard at first glance, but she could see a different part of him that was anything but cold. Somehow, she didn't think other people could see it. It should have worried her, but instead it made him much more interesting than was safe.

She couldn't afford to be interested in any man, especially a man like Gavin. He obviously had demons of his own and it took all her energy sometimes just to make it through the day. How could she deal with his when she still wasn't able to handle her own problems? And it hit her in a rush of warmth that spread through her body to curl up in that intimate center of her. She liked Gavin a lot more than she should.

Denial took over and she pushed the realization to the back of her mind. Rolling Toby over on his back, she tickled his belly, scratching under his chin until he made imaginary biscuits in the air. Purring like a sputtering motor, he drooled all over himself and the bed covers. Laughing nervously, Rhiannon gave the cat one last scratch. "You're a spoiled cat, Toby, and I'm just making you worse."

Rhi sighed and, in an attempt to keep her mind busy, she started clearing off the small table and purposefully directed her thoughts back to the dreams. Odd as it seemed, she was more comfortable dealing with the horror than her own treacherous thoughts. They promised her things she could never hope to have.

A knock at the door broke the familiar silence, startling her so that she froze in mid-motion. The second knock sped her heart into a gallop and she hurried toward the door. She quietly slid the chain in place.

"Who is it?"

"Me." She recognized Gavin's deep voice through the door. "I've got food."

Rhi closed her eyes, leaning against the door in relief before removing the chain and opening the door. She quickly

jumped forward, rescuing one of the bags in danger of slipping from Gavin's arms.

"Goodness, what all did you order?" Dropping one bag on the table, she reached for the next one.

"It isn't all breakfast. I picked up some snacks so you don't have to go out if you don't want to." Gavin pulled out a jar of peanut butter, a box of crackers and a loaf of bread from one of the bags. When he produced a bag of chocolate chip cookies, Rhi quickly snatched them from his hands and growled.

"Mine!" She made a show of stroking the bag of cookies, holding them close to her

"Figured you might want something sweet after peanut butter." Gavin's face relaxed into amusement when she backed away to *hide* the cookies under her pillow for later.

Their eyes met and the innocent moment changed, sending shock waves through her, binding them even tighter than they already were. Rhi felt the imaginary strings tightening between them. She felt him right there with her, inside her head, or was she inside his? Neither moved for a few seconds while their minds struggled to understand what was happening to them.

Breaking away first, Rhi dropped her gaze and busied her trembling hands with setting up two breakfast boxes and opening containers of orange juice. Without looking up, she pulled over a chair to sit in.

"I appreciate it— the snacks, I mean. I really didn't want to go out if I don't have to." She heard him pull out the other chair across from her and sit down. Risking a glance toward

Gavin's box, she couldn't stop a smile when she saw he had eggs, toast and jelly and was busy making an egg sandwich.

Sharing a silent breakfast, Rhi knew they were each caught up with exploring the obvious connection between them and what it could mean. Since neither of them could come up with a satisfactory conclusion by the time they'd finished, the puzzle was moved to the back of their thoughts. There were other problems to resolve and time was running out.

Rhi cleared the table while Gavin retrieved the tablet Rhi used to record her dreams. He tore out the pages he'd used to write on earlier that morning and handed them to Rhi.

"Why don't you read over what I took down to be sure I didn't leave anything out, and I'll write it again. You can concentrate on the details and your other senses without the distraction of writing."

Rhi hesitated, dreading the influx of the killer's thoughts and emotions, but finally focused on the dream, reading Gavin's notes. Pulling all of the previous dreams to her, she wanted this to be the last time she needed to do it. After a few minutes of silence, she began.

"He's already chosen the next girl, the one he sees as special, but he's focusing on the boys now. He believes they are the real problem. They corrupted all of his girls, making them unfit, unclean. He plans to deal with the boys first." Rhi pushed harder, wanting to concentrate on the boys, to remember more about them. They were in more danger than the girl this time. He had changed his focus.

"I don't think these two boys he's focused on are really all that interested in the girl. He's obsessed with keeping her pure, worthy of him, so anyone he sees as a threat is in danger." Rhi could feel the intensity of the killer's anger even without the aid of the dream.

"He isn't taking chances with this one, Gavin. He plans to kill them soon." She couldn't contain the shiver that ran down her spine.

"He hasn't killed yet, right?"

"No, not yet, but soon. He's afraid he'll lose another one if he waits too long. He hadn't expected Carol Ann to weaken so quickly with that boy. He should have realized it sooner." Rhi shook her head, forcing herself to breath normally. She was losing herself again inside the killer.

"You okay?" Gavin stopped writing.

Rhi was almost panting again, gripping the edge of the table with her fingers, but she didn't answer him. Instead, she focused on the barrage of emotions feeding into her, almost against her will.

"I was him and I was so angry with them. They're dirty boys and need to be punished. They have no right to touch her, brush up against her. She's mine. I won't let them defile her like they have all the others!"

She knew Gavin was having trouble concentrating on writing because he was worried about her. She didn't dare pull away while she had so many of his thoughts and feelings without his anger and rage. Rhi felt the emptiness fill her as she continued talking. She knew her eyes would reflect that emptiness to Gavin. She hoped he wouldn't interfere.

"He likes to watch her. She's shy and quiet with a gentle beauty he wants her to keep. She reminds him so much of *her* when he first met her, wanting desperately to be in the play, but too shy to try out. He first saw her working on the stage props with her hair pulled back. He knew then she was the one for him." Rhi felt confused; she couldn't tell who he was thinking about any more. His thoughts jumped around too much, but finally she was able to zero in again on the present.

"He sees his new chosen one nearly every day at school. She's shy and uncomfortable being around the popular crowd, but she wants to help with the play. She's always there after school when they practice. He's there, too. Watching them. Always watching them. She doesn't know him for who he really is. She's comfortable enough around him because she sees him nearly every day."

Rhi fought to pull out now. She was losing control of it again and knew Gavin wouldn't know what was going on, but she didn't know how. Then her fear changed it into something darker.

"Soon, he promises himself. He could touch her. He wants to show her what love really is. Not the fumbling sex those dirty boys want with her. He reaches out to touch her hair, she's that close, but he doesn't. Not yet." Rhi drew in a steadying breath, seeing something for the first time. She felt Gavin move across the table from her. He could sense something was different with her.

"His hands look different than when I saw them before, but I can't tell why. Something is different about them, about

him. I just can't see what it is. If I could just see his face!" Rhi tried desperately to see, but because she was inside of him, she couldn't. She struggled to find something, anything to help identify him.

"He won't stop. He *will* keep killing. If not here, then the next place he moves. Part of him enjoys killing them, watching the fear on their faces when he brings out his knife. The way the girls beg and plead for him to let them go fills him so full of power he can barely control himself with them. It's more than sex. It's the knowledge he has the power of life and death over them. He's in control now and they can't choose anyone but him. They always choose him when he holds the knife." Gasping as the rage and joy in him rushed through her, Rhi tried to pull out, but she was trapped and couldn't say anything, do anything to save herself.

"Part of him hates that other part of himself. He doesn't want to kill them. He wants them to love him, only him. He knows he can't keep from killing them, so he cleanses them instead so they don't suffer eternal death. It's all he can do to help them." Sadness and desperation filled her as his overwhelming regret and pain took over. It choked her until she found herself grabbing at her throat, trying to breathe around it, through it. Rhi could see Gavin panic at the sight of her. It was almost like being outside of herself and watching everything that went on without feeling it.

He jumped up, his chair turning over behind him as he lunged to grab her hands before she dug trenches into her own neck. She made horrible gasping noises as she struggled to breathe, but she couldn't feel it from where she watched.

"Rhi, don't fight, relax and just breathe." He held her hands in his. She watched as he breathed with her as if he was trying to breathe for her. "It's all right now, you're not alone, Rhi. I 'm here, listen to my voice and wake up." Her breathing slowed and the terrible gasping and raspy noises went away.

He took a deep breath when she finally focused her eyes to look into his. Once again they were connected, eyes and hands, with the air around them thick with energy and heat. He didn't seem able to look away and she didn't want to, but the memory of what she'd seen and felt intervened and she dropped her eyes first.

"It will be soon; he's too emotional now. He won't be able to control himself much longer. Something about these last murders changed him. Maybe because it was both of them together, I don't know, but soon."

Gavin inched her chin upwards with two fingers beneath it to force her eyes to meet his. "We'll find them and stop him, Rhiannon. Don't keep this inside you. You're blaming yourself for not being able to tell us who he is. You can't do that. It's not your fault."

Rhi barely nodded, unable to look away from the dark beauty of his eyes and the shadows she saw in them. She wanted to reach up and touch his face, the corner of his mouth, to learn what it felt like. His face rarely held any emotion, but when she looked at him, she saw the pain, the emptiness he felt, the struggle he made every day to control his own abilities. She couldn't see what they were, but she

knew he thought them terrible. And then he pulled away from her to stand up and she felt the loss inside her when he did.

He moved a little bit away before stretching. With his back to her, Rhi couldn't help noticing the strength of his back, his narrow waist and how he held himself. She remembered how he'd looked the night before in his tight jeans and the black jacket. It drew her mouth into a silent O and heat curled deep inside her womb. She felt her body's response, knowing she was wet, lusting for him. She followed him with her eyes as he walked to the window, peering around the drapes. The liquid movement of his body reminded her of Toby when he was on the prowl, hunting prey. There was an economy of movement about Gavin that seemed almost impossible.

"Let's go for a ride and get some fresh air." He turned from the window before she had realized it, surprising her with his sudden offer.

Because she was mesmerized, totally immersed in her thoughts and fantasies about him, his suggestion didn't penetrate at first. Then, once it sank in, her face must have shown her surprise, because he smiled ever so slightly while putting his jacket on.

"You need to get out some, but I know you don't want to risk being around anyone, so this is as good a way as any."

Rhi weighed each of her fears about riding with Gavin, but finally dismissed them and smiled. "OK, that sounds like a good idea." Putting on her jacket, she waited as Gavin opened the door, checking the area around them. It appeared to be second nature to him and once again she wondered about his past.

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While she waited for him to mount the bike, she almost lost her nerve. Instead, she did a mental shake and climbed on the bike behind him. It took two tries before she was finally able to hold on to either side of his waist. She was fairly comfortable that the layers of clothing acted as insulation between them when they touched, but she wasn't sure it mattered anymore anyway. They shared a connection and she was sure touching wouldn't be able to bind them any tighter than they were already bound. It should have worried her, but it didn't. She just worried about how it would affect her once she went home. Alone.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Gavin waited for her to secure her helmet before starting the bike. Then he pulled out of the parking lot, heading west and out of town for the open road and less traffic. The weight of Rhi's hands on his waist felt right. She wasn't plastered to him, barely touching him with any part of her body other than her hands, but he was as aware of her as if she had been all over him. The connection he had with her scared him. He'd only been close to one other person in his life and that was Matt. This was different, though, and not just because of the sexual tension between them; there was something more.

Pushing it once again to the back of his mind, he concentrated instead on sensation of flying on the bike. It felt great to ride and not need to watch for so many cars. He didn't take chances, but having the freedom to open it up really felt great—freeing. He was a lot like Rhi. He didn't like to feel smothered by other people. Actually, they had a lot in common. And once again he became aware of her hands holding on to his waist through his clothes. As he'd pushed the bike faster, she'd increased her grip, leaning just a little more into his back.

Gavin leaned forward over the machine to concentrate on the ride, but his mind wouldn't cooperate and his thoughts returned to Rhi. They both valued their privacy and had something to hide. Well, that wasn't quite fair. He'd only just met her and she didn't owe him anything, especially not an account of her entire life. But she had a past. Gavin was

almost positive it was nearly as dark as his own. Something in her eyes hinted at it, as did that brief glimpse he'd gotten of her scars. She'd suffered and survived.

Riding the back roads for close to an hour, he let go of his control and enjoyed the freedom riding the bike always gave him. He stopped trying to ignore the pleasure he got from having Rhi's body pressed against his. Though she kept it to a minimum, he didn't need more than the grip of her hands on his waist to feel tightening in his groin. He was aware of every inch of her body. Even through their clothes, he knew she was as aware of him as he was of her. The tension between them hummed in his head, demanding he do something about it, but he wouldn't. He couldn't.

He didn't want to stop, but he pulled off the road when he spotted a roadside picnic area. They could both use some time to stretch their legs and he needed to adjust his jeans, which were cutting off circulation to a certain area. Gavin parked the bike close to the picnic table and, cutting the motor, let Rhi climb off the bike first, using his shoulders for leverage and balance. Pulling off his helmet, he hung it on the handlebars before he dismounted. Rhi sat hers on the seat and rolled her shoulders before stretching the muscles in her legs.

Gavin picked up a couple of beer cans on the ground next to the table and, using the excuse of throwing them in the trash can near the road, managed to straighten himself out before returning to sit on top of the picnic table.

"Thought you might like to sit outside awhile before we head back," he finally said when she continued to stand by

the bike, an uncertain look on her face. "It's quiet and there's no one around."

Gazing out over the road and out at the field across from them, Gavin's eyes focused on bales of hay waiting to be loaded and stored. He didn't move when she sat a few feet down from him on the picnic table. He was afraid if he looked at her, she would bolt. The tension between them hadn't dissipated one bit with the ride. If anything, it seemed stronger.

"How do you manage being a nurse, working around people?" It came out of the blue, startling Gavin as well as Rhi.

She jerked at the sudden break in the silence. "I wear gloves when I'm at work. I'm always busy and most of the contact I have with anyone other than the patients is verbal. I can't always avoid touching someone, but I try." She leaned over her legs and ran her hands down the jeans until she grasped her ankles, stretching her back. Then, turning her head toward Gavin, her head resting on her thighs, she smiled bitterly up at him.

"They all think I'm weird, but I'm a damn good nurse, so they don't care."

Neither of them said anything for a few minutes. Gavin couldn't turn away from the sight of her stretched out over her legs...the way her hair fell down them. When she sat back up and rolled her shoulders, he wanted to rub them for her. But she stood up after a few seconds and walked to the edge of the deserted road, turning her face into the light wind.

"Sometimes I get lonely. I'm in the middle of a freaking Emergency Room full of people and I feel like the only one there. Like I could walk all around them and they wouldn't see me." Shaking her head, she walked back toward Gavin and the table.

"They have this bond between them. They work together seven nights a week, sometimes more. They hang out together. Every ER is like that, just different people. I can't take that chance. So it's difficult." Gavin saw the emotions flickering across her face: sadness, anger, fear, loneliness. He wanted to take those away from her, but he didn't have any right to try. He had his own demons. He watched as she turned back to the road and the field across from it.

"I have to work to live and I love nursing. I just can't allow myself to get too attached to any one place. I can't afford the questions that would eventually be asked. I guess I should be honest, though—I don't want to see them die one day in my dreams, either." Sighing, she turned and looked at Gavin.

"What about you? I can tell you keep to yourself as much as or more than I do. What part of life are you hiding from?" Rhi's question startled him. He was sure she saw the shadow flash across his face. He hadn't been able to prevent it. He smiled ever so slightly before turning back to the road. He knew he was being intentionally rude, but he didn't want to share, or feel like he had to.

"Just not a people person."

When he didn't elaborate or turn around, he felt the tension between them increase like a guitar string stretched until another twist of the key would break it.

"That's no answer. You're good at digging into my life, so don't try to take the shovel out of my hands to keep me from digging into yours."

"Shovel?" He shook his head, a harsh laugh escaping before he turned around with a snarl curling his lips he answered her question. "You won't find anything worth knowing by digging around in my life. I was raised in a series of foster homes, got tired of the shuffle and took off on my own. I've been on my own ever since. End of story." Without planning to, he suddenly stood in front of her. He dared her to say anything nice to him. He fully expected her to say something along the lines of, 'That's so sad' or 'I'm sorry'. He wasn't prepared for her to call him on it.

"That isn't quite the truth. You have a bond with the Sheriff and there's history between the two of you. You're almost comfortable around him and I don't think you get comfortable around anyone." She'd thrown his challenge back in his face and stood her ground. Damn, she had nerve. And guts. She wouldn't back down.

Gavin moved in closer and looked down into her face. Electricity crackled between them and for a moment he felt trapped in those green eyes of hers. He couldn't look away and he didn't want to. He wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shove her to the ground beneath him. But he didn't touch her and there was still space between them. He swore he felt their auras slide over one another like old friends, urging him to do the same. The moment passed, but Gavin didn't move back. Instead, he let her see a little of the

darkness in his soul, wanting to frighten her, but she didn't frighten easily.

"Matt and I served ten years in the Army together. Yeah, there's history there." Gavin leaned in closer and breathed in the scent of her so that she could hear the intake of his breath next to her ear. It almost backfired on him when his groin grew harder, screaming for him to touch her, take her. Take her by force if necessary. Then, breathing out his warm breath against her neck, he growled deep in his throat before telling her the first lie.

"But I keep to myself and that suits me just fine." He moved away so suddenly, she swayed on her feet. Somehow, he didn't feel any better for having acted like an ass. Instead, he felt strangely bereft and ashamed.

Rhi appeared to gather herself before raising her head, her face cold and as empty as his now. She shrugged her shoulders and walked over to where the bike stood to pick up the helmet.

"Guess we should head back now."

Gavin nodded, but instead of walking toward the bike and Rhi, he turned around, his back to her. Fighting to control the barrage of emotions he rarely felt anymore, he cursed under his breath.

"Sometimes, all you know is being alone. It's comfortable that way and uncomfortable when you're not. After being comfortable for so many years, learning how to get comfortable with people around me has been a lot more difficult than I thought it would be."

See How They Die
by Mary Alice Pritchard

Having said in his own way that he was sorry, he turned to face her before walking over to where she stood next to the bike. Donning the helmet and strapping it under his chin, he flipped the face shield down and hopped up. He waited for Rhi to mount the bike behind him and settle on the seat before starting the motor and turning the big bike in the direction of town.

Gavin rode wide open once they were on the road, trying to rid himself of the tenseness he felt in his gut. Only, he was much more aware of the hands holding on now, their touch reminding him that something connected them in a way nothing he did or said would change. He wasn't even sure he wanted it to. He hoped it wasn't something that would allow her to see through him. She wouldn't like what she saw.

They reached the hotel a little after noon and, after checking to be sure the room was empty save for the massive lump under the covers in the middle of the bed, he gathered up the notes he'd taken and left without a word. He didn't know what to say, anyway. He was sure she would be glad to be free of him after his childish actions, but God help him, even then he wanted to turn around and lay her on the bed and make love to her until neither one of them could get up.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Matt stood almost at attention by Gail's desk, talking to someone on the phone. Obviously, it wasn't someone he wanted to be talking to, because he was frowning in annoyance and gripping the phone as if he would like to bang it on the desk. Seeing Gavin walk in the office, he covered the mouthpiece, whispering, "Conference room. Be there in a minute," and then broke into the tirade coming from the other party that anyone within ten feet could hear.

"I'll call you the minute we have anything more to report, sir. We're following all leads and checking with every resource we have to find this man."

Gavin left Matt to finish what sounded to him a lot like bullshitting someone in power...something he'd never had the patience for or the inclination to learn. Detouring by the break room, he grabbed a bottle of water from vending before settling in at the conference table. There were several pages of notes from the police department concerning the phone calls they'd made. Browsing through them, he found that Matt had already underlined anything common among each of the murders where they had been able to access more details.

Leaning over the table, he picked up the pad Matt used to map out information. A list of names caught his attention. For each of the murders they were aware of, a list had been collected of people who had not lived in the area for long before the murder took place and left soon afterwards. Gavin began making his own list of names and, using the want ads

he had pulled, he drew lines to show relationships. Beside each name, he added their job title, and found that eight were employed in some field that put them in close proximity to teenagers.

Satisfied with what he found, he looked for the same information for Casper. The list of new men in the area was longer than he would have liked, but he might be able to trim it down using their occupations. He quickly crossed off the ones who didn't have contact of any type with kids. Then he crossed off the names of men who were under twenty-five. He was sure they could go up to thirty, but he decided to wait. This left only eight names on the list.

Matt walked in and closed the door behind him. Hands on his hips, he visibly composed himself before running a hand through his shaggy hair, leaving several areas sticking up across the top. Gavin shook his head and actually smiled at him.

"Man, I'd have never believed you to be an ass-kisser if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes." He had to duck when Matt picked up an empty soda can and threw it at him.

"I don't kiss ass, I just try to be a good public servant and keep the political voice boxes happy. Not my favorite part of this job, I can assure you." He plopped down in a chair opposite Gavin and saw the list his buddy was working. "What do you have there?"

"I took off some of the names on your list of men who haven't lived here long and narrowed it down some more for you. I think I could narrow it down a little more, but I don't want to just yet. We're missing something important about

this guy that would get us closer to him." He tapped his finger on the list as he spoke and then began writing again.

"That looks like word association," Matt said, looking at the list of words Gavin was writing down. "What are you associating with?"

"Just anything to do with school and teenagers." After only a few minutes, he threw the pencil down with a curse. "I don't know enough about high school or teenagers to do this. Like I said, we're missing something." Gavin got up and walked over to the map, thinking about Rhi's dream and the notes.

Matt pulled the pad closer to him and after a minute snapped his fingers. "Hey, I'm married to the perfect person for this!" Unclipping his phone, he called Sandy, leaving her a message.

"Hey, gorgeous! I need your help with something. Give me a call and I'll fill you in. Love you." Grinning, he closed the phone before catching the look Gavin gave him.

"What? It doesn't hurt to sweet talk her sometimes. Makes her feel special, ya' know?"

"First I find out you're a political ass kisser and then I find out you're pussy-whipped. It really hits hard to learn your buddy isn't who you thought he was all these years."

"Yeah, right, blow it out your ass."

Ignoring him, Gavin returned to his notes and was still connecting similarities between them when Sandy walked in, looking more than a little drained. Gavin watched how she and Matt greeted each other and the knowing looks they exchanged—looks that only mates had for each other. They communicated without speaking, much like he and Matt had

on missions. He guessed that was why their marriage had survived when so many hadn't during their tours.

Sandy walked over to Gavin, smiling at him before she took a seat next to him. "Hi, Gavin, how are you doing? Is Matt treating you OK?" It always amazed him how she just accepted him as Matt's friend. She'd never balked when he showed up with Matt on leave.

"Hi, Sandy. Yeah, can't complain much, at least not where he can hear me." Gavin managed a quick smile for her before turning back to the lists.

Sandy pulled her chair closer to the table when Matt sat down. "OK, what do you want me to focus on—the kids or their activities?" The excitement in her voice drew Gavin's attention again.

"Put a teenage girl as your focus and see what you come up with," Matt instructed her. "Gavin thinks based on what we have, the girl is the center of this guy's attention, so we think he has to be someone who would be close to her activities somehow." Nodding, Sandy went to work.

Matt smiled and moved to sit on the other side of Gavin, watching him cross reference several lists of names. Tearing off a piece of paper from his pad, Gavin handed it to Matt.

"I have four names so far that are similar enough to names from some of the other lists. I've only gotten through five of the murders, though. This is slow as molasses." Standing up in a long stretch, he searched the table for the next stack of lists representing one of the other murders.

"I feel like we're just making lists of lists and not making any headway here." Matt pulled a stack in front of him and settled down to read.

"OK, Matt, what do you think? Is this what you want?" Sandy handed her pad to him. Thankful for the distraction, he seemed surprised at what she had managed to accomplish.

"Yes. This is exactly what we want. There are several things here that match up with the list of people who have moved here in the last year." Tearing the paper from the pad, Matt slapped it down on the table in front of Gavin.

Gavin glanced over at it, but stopped to really look when it clicked. Standing up, he arranged the groups of lists into a circle around Sandy's list. Certain words she had written on the outside of her circle matched a stack corresponding to those words. He arranged the list of principals who were new or resigned in the town where the murders took place next to the paper where Sandy had written the word "Principal." Next to the word "Coach" was another stack of lists containing names of coaches who had either just moved to town within a year or left soon after the murders. On and on, her list pointed to different stacks.

"This works." Gavin circled the table. He turned back to Sandy.

"Can you do another association using school activities as your focus?" As he continued to slowly circle the table, assimilating the information like parts of an exercise, the ideas formed a pattern for him.

"Sure, I can do that." She wrote "School Activities" in the center of the pad and began the process all over again,

circling words associated with the key word. Gavin caught Sandy smiling up at Matt as he leaned over her chair.

Gavin and Matt worked on the other lists, matching want ads to names of men who had moved to a city before the murder took place and then moved again afterwards. There would be a connection between all the cities where the killer had murdered a young girl. They just had to find it.

Sandy finally stood up and stretched before handing her note pad to Gavin.

"See if this will help." Walking to where Matt leaned over the table, reading, she hugged him from behind, leaning her head against his back. "What time will you get home, do you think?"

"Hmm, not sure, Hon. I'll call you in a little while."

Sandy smiled toward Gavin with a wink before moving her hands lower around Matt's waist until she could tease him by running her fingernails lightly over him. He immediately groaned and turned around in her arms to hug her back. He kissed her on the forehead and smiled.

"Don't cook anything. We'll fix ourselves something when we get home. You've just given us something major to work with here." He kissed her again and would have let her go, but she hung on instead.

"I don't mind warming up something for you guys, Matt." Her eyes clouded a bit and she frowned at him.

"I know you don't, Sandy. You've already put in a full day's work with those kids. We can fend for ourselves for one night." He kissed her lightly on the lips, then turned her

around to face the door and gave her a pat on the butt.
"Home, woman. Rest!"

Gavin tried to ignore them as he looked over the second list Sandy had created. One item jumped out at him right away. "School Play" was on her first list as well as the second one. Plus, it was on just about every other list they had created. The other activities she had listed included football, basketball, band, cheerleading, chorus, and school paper. On the second list, she'd gone even further to add notes on the side of each of the activities. Next to "School Play," she had written cast, director, stage hands, scenery and lighting. Each of these jobs, with the exception of the director and maybe another teacher, would be filled by other teenagers.

Gavin added the new items and circled "School Play" in red. Each of the murdered girls had some part in the play, either working behind the set or as one of the actors. It was the only activity all the girls had participated in. They had to find out who had done this in the other towns. Somewhere in all of this lay the answer to who was killing these girls.

Matt walked back over and sat across the conference table from Gavin after Sandy had left. Without looking up, Gavin continued connecting names between the lists with everything they had. He double checked the stacks to be sure he hadn't missed anything and started connecting names and jobs between the two lists.

"Damn if you haven't figured it out!" Matt jumped up and circled the table to read over Gavin's shoulder. He pointed out the common names between the lists.

"The school play and the empty or filled positions of English Teacher, History Teacher and Counselor show up most often."

"True, but School Paper also connects to all three of them." Gavin pointed out the line that went across all three areas, trying to be sure they didn't jump on something too soon.

"You're right, and look at assistant principal. It maps to history teacher, English teacher and school paper as well." Matt traced each of the lines and shook his head. "I think it'll all come down to timing now. We need to find out exactly when each of the positions was vacated and filled at each of the murder sites."

Grabbing one of the half dozen or so pads from the table, Matt tore off the top page and started yet another list. "We need descriptions of each of the men on your list. My deputies can start making calls to try to get these, but pictures would really be more accurate, especially for the ones we have that are four and five years old."

"Year books," Gavin said out of the blue. "You need the school annuals from each of the schools the girls went to. That will just about eliminate a lot of the paperwork, if we can match a face."

Matt looked at Gavin before dropping his list on the table and sprinting out of the conference room. Gavin figured Matt was going to ask Gail about the annuals before she left for the day. As he pulled the notes he had made from Rhi's last dream toward him, the vague worry that they were missing something kept eating at him inside. Normally, important

things just popped out at him, but this time it seemed beyond his abilities. It frustrated him to know something was missing and not be able to see it.

Matt interrupted his musings when he plunked several annuals on the table in front of him. "Gail will start making calls to locate annuals from these other schools first thing in the morning. We might get lucky and have a couple of those albums by tomorrow afternoon. If just one face shows up in more than one album, we could have our killer." Matt's excitement at finally have something to work with wasn't rubbing off on Gavin.

"Hey, what is it? You've managed to unearth some solid leads here. What gives?"

"Matt, there's something we aren't seeing. I can feel it." Gavin looked over at the board again. "I think this is too easy. There's something we haven't taken into consideration yet and it's going to catch us by surprise."

Matt closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. Some of his initial excitement leached from his face, but he looked hopeful. "We'll just have to look harder at it tomorrow, then. We need to get some rest and start over in the morning. Meanwhile, maybe Rhi will recognize the boys from her dream in one of these annuals so we can keep a watch on them. Someone dropped the books by a few minutes ago. Let's hope those boys had their pictures taken."

"Let's hope the boys are from here and the bastard hasn't moved on somewhere else already." Gavin grabbed the stack of annuals.

"If he's working in the school system, he hasn't, because according to my checks, everyone has shown up for work so far. They had two call in sick, but both are women, so he's got to still be around."

Nodding absently, Gavin looked over the diagram one last time before following Matt out of the conference room. He headed outside and leaned against Matt's truck while the sheriff locked up his office and checked with Sam, who had night duty. The night air helped to clear his thoughts. He'd stop by the motel to check on Rhi, make sure the hotel staff had replaced the window, and let her look through the annuals. Matt and Sandy could probably use some alone time if he'd understood Sandy's wink earlier. He could give them a little more time if he tried the word association out with Rhi. It might trigger something useful. He told himself he wasn't justifying spending more time with her.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

Rhi adjusted Toby's weight on her chest so she could prop her book against the cat. He was the perfect book prop, as she had discovered a long time before when trying to read around him. All it required was the obligatory chin rub and body massage to put him in the mood to sleep and she could read just about as long as she wanted after that. As she was getting into the first chapter, she heard a bike in the parking lot. It took a good deal of effort to move Toby, who was quite happy where he was, but she managed to get up without rolling out of the bed or dumping him.

She was sure it was Gavin, but she peered around the curtains to watch him walk up. He'd parked a few spaces out and was already off the bike by the time she made it to the window. He moved with a lethal grace as he locked up the helmet in the saddle bags, his shaved head reflecting the light in the parking lot until he covered it with a cap he had exchanged for the helmet. He stiffened abruptly before slowly and deliberately looking her way. She could swear he knew she watched him. Then he turned and pulled what looked like books from the other side of the bike.

Rhi couldn't resist watching him walk toward her. She'd much rather watch his ass when he walked away, but she wasn't going to complain. His long legs ate up the distance between his bike and her room, cutting short her visual treat, but she enjoyed it while it lasted.

Letting the drape fall back in place, she unlocked the door and had it open by the time he made it to the walkway. "Hi," she offered softly. "Any progress?" Standing a little behind the door, she jerked her head for him to come inside.

"Actually, yes." Stepping inside the door, he paused while she closed and locked it. "I wanted to run some things by you and try something. I also brought the annuals to see if you can pick out the boys you saw in your dream."

Gavin walked over to the bed to stroke Toby, almost smiling when the cat rolled his chin up for more attention and purred with the missing-engine sound effects. One side of Gavin's mouth lifted, making his 'almost' smile a weird cross between a scowl and a smirk. Rhi thought it was cute, but would have loved to have seen a true smile on his face.

Realizing she stared at Gavin as he stroked the cat, Rhi collapsed on the opposite bed and sat cross-legged. "What do you want to do first?"

Gavin straightened and pulled a small table between the beds. Stacking the annuals on the table between them, he sat across from her next to Toby.

"Word association. You were almost in a trance this morning and I wanted to try that again, but give you words to focus on and see if you can pull anything more for us to work with."

"OK, let's try it." Rhi rolled her shoulders and relaxed so her hands rested lightly in her lap. She had no idea if this would produce anything or not, but she was game to try just about anything to catch the man responsible for the murders before he struck again.

"English class or English teacher?" He watched her face as she thought about this.

"Nothing."

"What about cheerleader or chorus or ball games?" Gavin repeated the items from the lists and when she shook her head no, he continued, "school paper, history or journalism?"

"No, those don't feel important. The only activity I keep feeling any connection to is school play."

"Ok, let's use that for now. When you think about school play, what adults do you see around the play—anyone who stands out in your mind?"

"I don't feel he's a part of this play. He has been in the past, though. He watches them on the stage, but he doesn't directly participate." Rhi shook her head in frustration, opening her eyes. "I could be wrong, though, and he could be the director of the damn play!" As she rubbed her hands nervously up and down her thighs, tears stung the back of her eyes, but she wouldn't give in to them.

"I don't know what I'm doing, Gavin. I'm scared I'm going to make a mistake that costs someone their life."

"You're doing fine, Rhi. Neither one of us knows how to handle your dreams. It's a learning process for everyone, so don't be so hard on yourself." Gavin sat on the edge of the other bed and leaned forward.

"Just relax and let your mind wander around those memories and thoughts from your dreams. See what comes out."

Gavin's deep voice led her through the word associations again. It soothed her, lulling her back into her dream and

before she knew it, she was sitting in that dark smelly place that felt like a basement. She described what she was feeling and seeing as those huge hands with the long fingers touched and moved the objects around the table.

"He wishes that she hadn't failed him. She was who he really loved, but there has been another and another. He's thinking he's already lost so many of them. He's in that cellar or basement where he keeps his treasures. He's remembering the first one, his first love. How watching her walk across the stage made him want to be up there with her. He wanted everyone to see them together, but he wasn't in the play."

Gavin watched Rhi's breathing deepen as she moved among the memories inside the murderer's head. Using the table between them to write, he recorded everything she said and how she sounded when she said it, hoping something would stand out.

"He thinks that now he will be able to keep her perfect like she was meant to be. It wasn't her fault, but that boy's fault. The boys are always there, trying to touch her." Rhi's breathing became more erratic.

"He needs to take care of the boy before he contaminates her with his dirty ways." She shook her head, her brows knitting with confusion. "He bounces back and forth between the first one and the one he's chosen now. I can't tell who he is thinking about. His thoughts are so wild and angry."

Gavin hesitated, unsure about interrupting her now. She was in and out of some sort of trance or vision. He hadn't meant to start something like this after her last dream, or had he? Gritting his teeth, he drew in a deep breath to calm his

thoughts before asking softly, "How does he see them? Where is he that he can see the boy with her?" Hoping he hadn't made a mistake interrupting, he waited. Turning her head slightly sideways as if looking through something, she frowned.

"He sees them in the hall at their lockers between classes. He watches the boy trap her against her locker, pushing himself against her and laughing." Rhi gasped, her hand at her throat. "He's so angry. I've never felt this much hate or rage before."

"The boy at the locker is not one of the two boys from the last dream. I can't see his face; he has his back to me. I just know he isn't one of them. It's the same girl, though. I just can't see enough of her to get a good idea of what she looks like."

Rhi's voice sounded strained to him, and Gavin wasn't sure if he needed to intervene or not. When her hand shook at her throat, Gavin wanted to stop her, but knew they needed more information. He was torn between wanting to keep her from harm and wanting to find out all he could about the bastard who was out there killing teenagers.

"What does he do? What is his job at the school?"

"He's there to protect her. It's his only reason for being around the hedonistic brats. Most of them are already corrupted and sinful. He's always around the halls between classes and sees everything that goes on." Rhi's breathing became harder until it was closer to panting. She trembled all over, but Gavin steeled himself to let her continue even though every instinct inside him said to stop her.

"I can't tell what his job is through all the rage he's projecting. He's had so many, they all run together." Rhi's face paled, going nearly white, with her arms crossed over her chest, hugging herself and rocking.

"Is she in one of his classes? Is the boy in one of them?"

"He's going to kill him. He's going to kill anyone who gets close to her."

"Does he help with the school play?" Gavin kept his voice low and even, trying to influence the direction of the trance. Hoping to learn something more before Rhi had to stop.

"Oh, God, he'll kill them and I'll have to watch and feel how it makes him feel to do it." Rhi cried softly, the tears streaking down her cheeks unchecked.

"Who is he going to kill, Rhi? Can you see who it is?"

"We have to stop him because *he* isn't going to and I can't watch him kill over and over again. I just can't!" She dug her nails into her arms as she rocked, her teeth chattering until her words were nearly impossible to understand anymore.

Gavin couldn't stand it. Guilt washed over him as he pushed the table out of his way to kneel on the floor in front of her. Reaching up, he gently took her face between his hands and leaning closer, whispered, "It's just you and me here now. You're not with him. You're with me in your room. We're going to stop him, Rhi. Leave him there. Be here with me now and let him go." Gavin felt it when she made the leap outside of the killer and inside of another type of monster, him.

Standing up quickly, he jerked his hands away from her face. He'd felt her in his mind. She had moved quietly into his

memories before he could react quick enough to break contact. He'd been in hers for that same instant. Saw what she'd been subject to. But what had she seen in his mind? Gavin was shaking now and couldn't remember when he'd ever trembled in fear.

Rhi gasped for air, coughing and wheezing; she opened her eyes to look up at him as she struggled to catch her breath. He read the confusion in her eyes first, but right behind it was the hurt and rejection.

"Why did you do that?" Rhi sputtered, still gasping. "I wouldn't have pried into your thoughts. I didn't dig into your secrets!" Her breathing calmed some, but the trembling was getting worse and she drew her knees to her chest. "You drew me in and it felt so safe. Then you threw me out like garbage!" She began to shiver so violently her voice was almost too jumpy to understand.

Gavin cursed and pulled the blanket back from the bed to wrap around her. "I'm sorry, Rhi. I didn't expect you to get inside my head like that. It startled me," he managed, which was partly the truth. Just not all of it.

"Besides, you already have enough nightmares running around in your head. You don't need to add mine to them." He bundled the coverlet tighter around her, holding her until the shivering eased.

Gavin held her through the covers, changing the subject with a question. "You said he saw them in school, between classes and after classes, so he has to be someone always at school. That give us teachers, the principal, assistant principal, and who else, coaches?"

"Janitors or maintenance," Rhi added in a distracted tone.

"OK, janitor is a good one. He would be around every part of the school and not be noticeable to anyone." Gavin watched her closely for any clue to what she was thinking. Her facial expressions had shut down as soon as he had slammed down the link between them.

"His hands are expressive to me," Rhi added, still not hinting at any emotions. "They don't look work-roughened like a maintenance worker or a janitor." Shrugging without looking up at him, she licked her lips, biting her lower lip.

"Of course, earlier they didn't look like his hands when I saw them. They seemed, I don't know, wrong, different—so maybe I'm getting them confused with someone else's hands. I don't know. That's the trouble with dreams. You're limited in how you interpret them."

"True, but they make sense once you have all the parts of the puzzle," Gavin agreed.

"But by then, it's too late," she whispered.

"Don't give up on me, Rhi. I need you strong so we can figure out who he is."

"I can't come up with anything right now to narrow down who he is." She finally looked at him and shrugged. He couldn't read her now. She'd closed off everything about herself from him and he couldn't blame her one bit.

Sighing, she let the cover drop from around her. "Maybe I can try to connect with him again in the morning."

"Look through the annuals when you feel better and see if we can put a name to any of the teenage boys. We can keep

an eye on them once we know who they are." Gavin moved the table back where it was and walked to the door.

"I'll be back early in the morning and bring you breakfast. Don't try anything before I get here. You need someone to watch over you when you do that." Unlocking the door he turned to leave.

"Gavin?" He stopped with his hand on the door to look at her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to slip in there, in your thoughts." He nodded and left, closing the door softly behind him. He knocked lightly on the door once he closed it behind him to remind her to set the locks. He waited to hear them engage before he got on his bike to head to Matt and Sandy's.

Rhi was up and dressed by six o'clock the next morning. She'd slept okay once she'd finally relaxed, but it had taken time. Rhi felt equal parts excitement and reluctance at the prospect of spending more time around Gavin. He stirred feelings and emotions inside she'd managed to keep buried for a long time. What little she'd seen while they had been connected the night before had only made her want to know more. He was a very complicated man. The connection she felt when he was close to her remained a mystery and she knew it bothered him as much if not more than it bothered her. She hoped to figure out some of the answers to her questions before she returned home.

When she once again heard Gavin's bike turn in the parking lot, she had the door open for him before he knocked. He nodded to her as he walked in, but his face was a stone slate without a hint of what he felt.

"Hungry?" he asked without looking directly at her.

"Starved, actually."

Gavin nodded and asked what she wanted before calling in the order. Rhi picked up the annuals and opened them to one of the pages she'd marked the night before.

"I found their pictures last night before I went to bed. You might want to let the sheriff know while you're out." Gavin took the books and nodded, careful not to touch her.

"Good work. I'll run by the office first then and be right back." He reminded her to keep the door locked and not to try anything while he was gone.

He was back within twenty minutes with her breakfast. He drank coffee while she ate scrambled eggs, bacon and toast with jelly. Finishing her juice, she put the empty containers in the garbage.

Gavin watched her from across the table, but Rhi didn't look up to catch him. Instead, she concentrated on cleaning off the table and waited for him to break the silence. She felt the tingle of their connection and wondered what he felt, if anything. She knew he was uncomfortable that she'd been in his mind, worried about what she'd seen. He startled her when he finally spoke.

"I gave Matt the annuals and showed him the pictures of the two boys. He's setting up surveillance on the boys until we catch this guy." Dropping his head when she turned to look at him, he added, "He said thanks."

"Good, maybe for once I've been able to prevent something horrible from happening."

"You're doing fine, Rhi. You have to remember it's not your fault no matter what happens."

Rhi couldn't accept that entirely. She worried that something she said or didn't say would make the difference whether someone lived or died. She made mistakes just like everyone else.

"I'm ready to try and connect with him if you are. I'm ready to catch this bastard and go home." Climbing up on the bed, Rhi sat cross legged again and got comfortable.

"Do you need anything?" Gavin looked uncomfortable now and Rhi knew it meant he was worried. He didn't show his feelings easily.

"I don't think so. I'll just concentrate on something from one of my previous dreams and it seems to pull me in. The stronger the emotion, the quicker it happens." Rhi smiled shyly towards Gavin and steeled herself for the ride. Closing her eyes, she focused on his emotions and his devotion to the girls he'd selected. She followed the connection to him like a string until she became aware of him just as he walked into the school.

There were halls with lockers on both sides between doors, which probably led into classrooms. She strained to catch room numbers or locker numbers to get her bearings as to where in the school they were, but wasn't able to focus well enough. He stopped outside one of the rooms and unlocked it. Rhi still couldn't see anything to identify where they were. Frustrated, she pushed a little harder to see what was in his mind and felt herself fall.

Suddenly she was there in his mind, but she wasn't in the school anymore. He was thinking about the boy he'd killed the night before. Raw anger clogged her throat, but she fought it. She needed to learn more if she were going to stop him. He was focused on the boy and what he'd had to do. She wasn't sure she could bear the direction his thoughts had turned.

"He killed a boy last night. The one who kept harassing the girl he's watching. He didn't have a choice if he was going to keep her safe this time. It was up to him to stop them before they changed her into one of them." Rhi drew in a ragged breath.

"Is this something that's already happened or that's going to happen?" Gavin asked, a thread of urgency in his voice.

Rhi slowly shook her head. "I don't know, I can't be sure yet." She forced herself to relax and float with the vision. "The boy was looking for a place to take her. It was how he always found out what was going on in their minds. Only he stopped it soon enough this time, before he'd managed to corrupt her. The boy was out of the picture now and wouldn't be bothering her again."

Rhi fought to keep from being drawn as deep into his mind this time, but she wanted something that would identify him. When he thought about the boy and how he'd screamed in pain, it excited him to hear it. Rhi shuddered at the image and would have pulled away, but she was caught in his excitement and felt the knife in her hand as it cut into the boy's chest. He was in a near frenzy when he cut the boy's heart out, throwing it in the fire. He didn't even pray over him before or after he burned the heart. He just looked up at the

sparkling above him and smiled as he rubbed his bloody hands over his body.

"He's insane. Nothing in his head makes sense right now. It's all jumbled up and he's excited, sexually excited by all the blood and the power. He'll kill them all if he believes they are going to bother his girls. Girls. He's focused on more than one now."

"He's out of control, he'll make mistakes now.

"If he makes a mistake, we can catch him faster." Rhi breathed in and out to try and clear her mind of all the pain and anger. "But how many more will he have to kill first?" Her eyes open now, she stared directly into Gavin's and let him see how scared she was that he'd already killed again. She closed her eyes and moved back into the monster's head to look again.

"There's another he has to find and bring back now. He's already prepared the place so all he has to do is catch him alone. I can see the spikes with the ropes already attached to them. He hopes it will be tonight." Rhi jumped when his thoughts changed, becoming darker and more difficult for her to handle.

"He wants to feel the boy's fear and pain when he castrates him. *You won't be using this on my girl!* He's screaming it at the dead boy now, kicking him." Rhi desperately tried to pull out. She couldn't find anything to hold onto to save herself. She wanted to call out to Gavin, but her voice wouldn't work. It was caught up in a silent scream as he roared through her in his memories.

Desperate to find something to make the pain and horror worth it, Rhi searched, pushing at his mind with everything she could. The play! He was connected to the school play. She pushed harder at his memories to bring up the play in mind and it worked.

He calmed down some as his mind caught hold of what he enjoyed. The arts, he loved the arts, but he was a perfectionist and couldn't manage to control himself enough to participate. He had to be satisfied watching, sometimes directing, but never where he wanted to be. She could feel his mind wander as he forgot about the knife and the boy he wanted to kill.

They needed to work on that last scene in the play. They didn't understand how it should go. They were such inept actors, anyway. They didn't have a true appreciation for the play at all. It frustrated him to watch and listen to their pathetic attempts at imitating the classics. It was just a game to them, nothing important at all, a way to get out of classes and get their pictures in the paper. His anger returned and his focus shifted again. Rhi couldn't keep it on the play or who was in it.

His thoughts returned to the other boy he wanted to kill. He imagined wrapping his hands around the boy's neck and squeezing until he couldn't breathe. He wouldn't kill him that way, though. He needed to go through the ritual. But squeezing the life from him felt so good. Rhi didn't have the strength to pull out of his mind now and her own breath slowed, slipping away. He was too strong for her to fight.

Then she felt him shaking her, his hands tight around her upper arms. Squeezing the breath from her, squeezing her arms until she gasped for breath, fighting to get away from him. She felt trapped—suffocating—he was going to kill her now. Then she heard the voice, Gavin's voice.

"Rhi, wake up! Dammit, you're not breathing, pull out of it. NOW!"

Rhi felt the sharp sting on her cheek. She opened her eyes and her mouth at the same time, realizing he'd slapped her. Still fighting to breathe, she could only stare up at him. *He'd hit her!* She felt relieved and a little angry, but not scared. She didn't feel scared at all. Why wasn't she scared of him when he'd hit her?

"Rhi, can you hear me? Are you OK?" Gavin's knees straddled her on the bed. She gasped, trying to breathe when he held tissues to her face, pinching her nose closed. Thinking she would suffocate if he did this, she tried to reach up and stop him, but her arms wouldn't move yet. He softly shushed her.

"Hey, it's okay, your nose is bleeding. Just relax and breathe through your mouth for a few minutes. Let me get the bleeding stopped." His voice was soft and she realized his touch was, too. She concentrated on slowing her breathing down and tried to relax, but being so close to him was nearly as suffocating as her dream had been.

She was hyper-aware of him, the feel of his hand against the back of her head as he held pressure on her nose. The feeling of safety and comfort poured into her from somewhere. He was safety for her. His touch calmed her. The

realization that he could take away all the pain and fear just by touching her was as big a shock as what she'd just been through.

She found she could move her hands now and almost of their own accord, they moved up to his chest, not to push him away but to feel him breath, to feel his strength. When he carefully released her nose to see if it had quit bleeding, she inhaled the scent of him. It stirred the heat inside her and she wanted to taste him in her mouth. She took one of his hands and pressed the palm of it against her parted lips. She let her tongue taste his hand before he drew it away from her.

She boldly met his gaze as he bent over her and slowly closed the distance between their lips until his touched hers with the barest of kisses. Then his mouth pulled greedily on her bottom lip, taking it into his mouth, his tongue teasing it until she moaned. He took her mouth with his, demanding her response, leaving her breathless. She felt him push against her until she fell back on the bed and he was over her. His hands cupped her face as his mouth explored hers with an urgency that matched her own. Her hands were trapped between them and she wanted to feel bare skin under them.

Just as suddenly as he started, he stopped and pulled away, fighting to control his own breathing. Eyes glazed with passion quickly closed, and when they opened again, were back to black pools. She felt his withdrawal like the slap in the face from before.

"You're not bleeding anymore." He stood up, grabbing the bloody tissues in his hand.

She watched him retreat across the room, confused, but relieved he had pulled back. She wasn't used to these feelings and she didn't want to become used to them, either. He was so different from anyone she had ever met. Even before, she thought, and then vanquished the thought. She wouldn't remember that. It had taken her a long time to forget.

Gavin turned back around once he'd managed to regain control. She watched his face—devoid of expression—change to a worried look.

"Are you okay? Can you move?" He was by the bed in an instant and looking at a loss as to how to help her without touching her.

"I'm okay, just really stiff and sore." She wanted to laugh at his awkwardness and realized she was close to being hysterical after all that had happened. "How long was I out?"

"Nearly two hours. I was getting worried anyway and then you stopped breathing. I couldn't get you to wake up or react to me, so I slapped you. I'm, um, sorry. I really didn't know what else to do." He was really worried that he'd hit her and it showed on his face. She had to swallow before she could reply.

"Well, as much as it pains me to say it...thanks." She smiled at him and then realized once again how tired and stiff she was.

"I need to take a shower and loosen my muscles up. I'm usually really cold after I dream or have a vision, if that's what I'm doing now, but I'm not cold this time." She wondered why for just a minute, but had a feeling it was because of that kiss. She wasn't about to bring it up, though.

"Right, I'll turn the shower on for you and then help you in there." She followed him with her eyes until he disappeared into the bathroom. When he returned almost immediately, he helped her stand and hovered over her as she made her way to the bathroom.

"Are you sure you'll be okay to stand up? Maybe you should take a bath instead."

"I'll be fine. I think we've already had this conversation." When he didn't smile or respond, she sighed. "I do this quite a bit. I'll be fine." She closed the door behind her, not waiting for Gavin to move back. She was beginning to lose her bravado now and didn't want him to witness her breakdown.

"I'm going to run over to the grocery store," he called through the door when she'd been in the shower a little while. "Shouldn't be more than a couple of minutes. Toby's here if you need anything."

"Okay, tell Toby to guard the door." She called out to him from where she stood letting the water beat down on her. It helped to hide her tears.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

Rhi leaned into the hot spray of the shower with her hands planted on either side of the stall to keep her balance. The water soothed the aching in her muscles and helped her relax physically. Mentally, though, she was bundle of nerves. Why had she touched him like that? She'd started the whole thing, for God's sakes. Even worse, she had enjoyed it. It had been so long since she'd felt the stirrings of lust that she'd nearly thrown herself at the man, begging for him to take her. Disgust left a bitter taste in her mouth and she rinsed it, wanting to rinse away her embarrassment with it.

She turned in the shower and let the water beat into her neck and shoulders. She was so tired now. She really needed to sleep, but she needed to write all of it down first. Normally, she would have done that before her shower, but she'd gotten a little distracted and needed time to compose herself. Aware that she could easily become distracted again, Rhi turned her thoughts back to the killer and the teenage boy he'd killed. She didn't think he'd actually killed him yet, but it wouldn't be long.

Rhi tied the sash of the bathrobe around her waist and, after squeezing as much water from her hair as she could, towel dried it to take out the rest. She needed to either brush it dry or use the hair dryer on it. Since she didn't have the energy to hold either the hairdryer or her hairbrush, she decided to just let it dry naturally and hope for the best. She could deal with a few unruly curls.

When she opened the bathroom door, she realized the room was empty except for Toby who stood—well, reclined—guarding the bathroom door. He stretched and yawned, jumped up on the bed and settled on a pillow to watch her. He knew her routines nearly as well as a lover would. *Scratch that thought...* Rhi quickly pulled on a new pair of sweats before Gavin made it back.

A knock at the door startled her. Rhi figured it to be Gavin, but lessons learned hard had taught her better safe than sorry. Standing to the side of the door, she called out, "Who is it?"

"It's Matt, is Gavin there?"

Rhi opened the door after securing the chain and, seeing it really was Matt, she closed it hurriedly and removed the chain.

"Come in, he should be back in a minute. He went to the store while I showered." Rhi closed the door behind him and put the chain back in place. He looked tired and there were deep shadows under his eyes.

"Has he been gone long?"

"No, just a couple of minutes, but he should be right back. Is something wrong? Have you found anything yet?" Rhi knew they hadn't found anything before she asked. She sensed his frustration without touching him. It made her realize how much she'd limited herself by not venturing out around people except when she worked. *What else could she do?*

"I didn't mean to barge in, but I need to catch up with Gavin." Matt remained standing by the door, obviously

uncomfortable around her. "I'll be out of the way as soon as he gets back."

"Matt, sit down. You look tired." She indicated the chairs by the table, but he shook his head.

"I'm fine. Gavin should be back soon and I need to get back to the office."

At a knock on the door, Matt grabbed it, jerking it open before it was stopped by the safety chain. Gavin, startled by the sudden noise, had his gun in his hand and jumped quickly to the side of the door.

"Matt, what are you doing in there?" He lowered his gun and stuck it back in the waistband of his jeans. "Is something wrong?"

Matt cursed, rubbing his shoulder before he closed the door to remove the chain and open it for Gavin to come in. With what sounded like a growl, he grabbed the bag out of Gavin's hand and set it on the table.

"What is all this? You plan on moving in or what?" Matt didn't notice the quick start by Gavin or the intake of breath from Rhi. "I need you to help me with something."

Gavin pulled a box of muffins from the bag, followed by bananas. He pulled one off the bunch, handing it to Rhi.

"Thanks," she said, and immediately peeled the skin back to eat it as she retreated to the bed and out of their way. The two men together were difficult to deal with. With Matt being on edge about something and Gavin uncomfortable with everything, she was having trouble breathing again.

"So what is it? Have you gotten something?" Opening the muffins, Gavin bit into a blueberry muffin and handed one to Matt, who took a bite, apparently without thinking.

"I've got the list of men down to four possibilities." He took another bite before continuing, talking around the lump in his cheek. "One is the junior English teacher, one is the assistant principal, one is a bus driver who also works as one of the janitors at the school and the other is a counselor at the school. They all have opportunity and they all are between thirty-five and forty-five years old." Matt finished off the muffin. "I'm going to interview them all today and I need you to sit in and give me your opinion on them."

Gavin nodded, wiping his hands on his jeans. "No problem. How did you manage to narrow them down so quickly?"

"Well, actually, they sort of did it for me," Matt said, smiling. "Several of them were out of town with one of the church youth groups at a choir festival or something." He watched as Gavin poured fresh water out for the cat and then leaned against the door facing.

"One was in the Emergency Room all night with kidney stones and another was in a compromising situation with another man who is married and hopes we don't have to go any further with the information." Matt shook his head.

"Damn, some things I would really rather not know about, you know?"

She saw the realization hit him that she knew exactly what he meant.

"Yeah, guess you know exactly what I mean; sorry." When Rhi only smiled and took another bite of her banana, he turned back to Gavin.

"Anyway, the first interview will be about one-thirty." He opened the door and looked at Gavin. "Can you make it?" He didn't look over at Rhi this time.

"I'll be over there about one, and you can fill me in on what you have. I need to finish going over what Rhi managed to come up with this morning first; it might help us with the interviews."

"Good enough," Matt agreed, closing the door on his way out.

Gavin set the deadbolt. "We have less than two hours to walk through the vision. Ready?"

"I suppose so. I sure hope I haven't lost anything by waiting to write it all down." It was a major break from her normal routine.

"I took notes on everything you said, but I could tell there was more."

The two of them struggled to put down on paper what she'd seen and felt during the vision. Rhi stumbled through some of the vision, now uncomfortable talking about the sexual part in front of Gavin. He didn't look at her or say anything—trying to make it easier, she knew. But it wasn't.

"He's somehow connected to the school play. I don't know if he directs it or what, but he was disappointed in how they were doing." She could remember his anger over how little the students seemed to know. Gavin nodded, and continued to write.

"Does he sound violent to you? Or is he just emotional about the play?"

"He's very emotional, but I really don't feel rage in him, just anger. I don't understand, because sometimes he is filled with rage, but not this time." She thought back and tried to remember how he had felt.

"He isn't in a rage at first, he's annoyed he had to kill the boy and angry that the play isn't turning out to be the success he wanted it to be."

Gavin seemed to think about it for a moment before asking, "Is it the same person you felt earlier? When he was so angry and in a rage? Is it possible they are two different people?"

Rhi closed her eyes, thinking hard. "No, it's the same person; he's different at times. Maybe he has a personality disorder. Not separate personalities, but separate personae." It sounded plausible to her because it felt like the same person to her, but he tended to behave differently depending on what he was thinking about.

"I think he keeps himself under control, but when something happens to upset him, he loses control and the rage seeps through. He despises that part of himself because he likes things to be in order. He likes to be in control." Rhi was sure of that part.

Gavin continued to write as she talked. He stopped her occasionally to ask a question or clarify something she'd said, but for the most part, he let her talk while he wrote.

"I can't get a feel for how he's connected to the school." She rubbed her eyes and kept trying to figure out what she

was missing about him. "I really don't think he's a teacher, though." Getting up, she walked around the room and tried to pull more from her memory.

"Rhi, don't try so hard; sit down and relax. I think you're pushing so hard to remember that you're actually pushing it further away. Let me ask some questions and you just answer with what comes to mind. Ready?" he asked and, at her nod, began asking questions.

"Does he believe in God?"

"Yes"

"Is he Catholic?"

"No"

"What does he want to accomplish?"

"Keep her pure of heart and body." Rhi hesitated before continuing. "He sees himself as her salvation and he's failed in the past, but he has the answer now."

"What is the answer?"

"Keep her safe by keeping them away from her."

"Keep who away from her?"

"The boys who tempt her. They have to die."

"Where is she now?"

Rhi's face crumbled in confusion as she thought about it.

"At school, in class, I think."

"Where does he watch her?"

"On the stage."

"She's in the play?"

"No. She's not in the play."

"Does she live in Casper?"

"She lives outside of town. She rides the bus to and from school."

"Does he want to keep her pure for him?"

"Yes. She will be his when she's ready."

"When will she be ready?"

"I...I don't know." Rhi was again confused and troubled by the question.

"Who is bothering her now?"

"That Jennings boy; he has to die."

"When will he kill the boy?"

Rhi stopped breathing for an instant and then, opening her eyes wide, looked straight into Gavin's.

"He plans to kill him tonight. He's going to take him tonight! Tonight!" Her voice grew louder as she bordered on panic.

Gavin jumped up to calm her. Kneeling in front of her, he gently took her shaking hands into his. They were icy cold and she was beginning to shake all over again. He pulled her off the chair down into his lap to hold her tighter against him.

"It's OK; we're going to stop him. Relax. Take some deep breaths. You have to calm down. I have to go, but I can't leave you like this. I'm not leaving you upset like this."

Rhi nodded shakily, willing herself to calm down. Dear God, she didn't want to see him kill anyone else. This was eating her soul. She focused on Toby, sitting on the corner of the bed, and visualized the two of them walking in her garden. As if he knew what she was thinking, he jumped down from the bed and, pushing Gavin's arm over, pulled himself up into her lap.

Gavin chuckled softly, and then seemed to catch himself doing it and stopped.

"I think Toby has decided that you need him right now, so I'm going to carry you over to the bed and cover you up to rest, okay?" Rhi struggled to move out of his lap.

"I'll get up. You don't need to carry me." She tried to move, but Gavin simply tightened his arms around her and stood up. She felt the strength in his legs and then his arms when he carried her and Toby over to the bed. Tucking the cover around her, he put a pillow behind her head to make her comfortable.

He let his fingers touch the unruly red strands that fell in her eyes and tucked them gently behind her ear. Then he stopped in mid-motion when he seemed about to rub his knuckles down her cheek. Gavin backed away from her and picked up his notes from the table. Without looking back, he drew the deadbolt and, with his hand on the door knob, told her he'd be back.

"If you need anything, call either one of us. I'll be back as soon as we've finished. I think with what you've given me, we can figure out who the boy is and protect him. So don't worry about that right now; you need to rest." He closed the door behind him just as her first tears began to fall.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

When Gavin walked into the building, Matt was sitting in his office, talking to someone sitting in one of the chairs across from the desk. Gavin stopped by Gail's desk before heading back and found out it was the Chief of Police in Matt's office. When he stopped just outside the office door, Matt waved him in and continued listening to Chief Wilson.

Gavin nodded at Matt before stopping next to an empty chair. Matt introduced him as a friend from the service who was helping with investigation. Gavin nodded and said, "Chief." The man surprised him when he leaned forward and offered his hand. Gavin hesitated, but shook hands with him. He couldn't help wondering why the Chief accepted him without questions. Something to ask Matt about later.

"Gavin, I was just talking to the Chief here about these interviews. He's sitting in on as many of them as he can. Chief Wilson and I work together as much as possible since we both only have a few bodies in our offices. Helps to be able to count on back-up when you need it." Matt smiled at the Chief. Gavin just nodded and listened.

"He went over the list of suspects for me and agreed with the names I focused on. He's leaning toward the assistant principal." Matt opened a folder. "Seems he has a past accusation of sexual assault by a seventeen-year-old student from eight years ago. The charges were dropped when the student admitted she'd made it up." Matt stopped to pick up another folder.

"We need to keep it quiet since the charges were dropped and taken off his official record. Besides, there's always the possibility the girl tried to railroad him. That does happen, unfortunately," the Chief added.

Gavin nodded, leaning over the desk to hand Rhi's notes to Matt. "Here are the copies of those reports you needed. I thought you might want to read them before the interviews." Sitting back down, Gavin turned to Chief Wilson and asked. "Did you uncover anything on the others?"

Wilson shook his head, "Not really. The English teacher is in the middle of a nasty divorce. Seems the wife is accusing him of abuse, but can't come up with any proof on that yet. If something shows up, we'll get a copy."

Gavin nodded, watching to see when Matt finished looking over the notes. "What about the counselor? Did anything show up on him?"

"Nah, nothing at all. He appears to be clean. He's worked as both a counselor and an English teacher and he's moved around, but so have the other three on the list. The assistant principal has taught history and English."

Chief Wilson shrugged his shoulders. "They all seem a little off to me, but I tend to be overly suspicious of anyone who moves around that much."

Matt caught Gavin's eye and finished up the list. "The bus driver-slash-janitor used to teach art appreciation, music, and history. He isn't teaching now because he has scars on his face and hands from a fire at the last school where he taught." He read over something before handing it to Gavin and looked at the chief. "Have we confirmed this yet?"

"Yep, they had a fire in the Chemistry lab about fourteen months ago and he was across the hall teaching a history class. He got burned when he helped get the kids out. There were two deaths and several minor burns," Wilson said.

Gavin shook his head after reading the report and wondered if they needed to remove him from the list all together. He'd been in that job for two years, according to the report. Picking up the other folders, he looked through them. In fact, all four men had been in one or more of their jobs more than a year. If that were true, they didn't have him in this group. He was getting a bad feeling about this.

"Matt, this guy had to move around every year, right?" he began, hoping Matt was thinking along the same lines.

"Yeah, if he stalked each of the victims before he killed them, he had to have lived in the area for some period of time." Gavin felt sure they were thinking the same thing. They either didn't have their guy on the list or he had managed to do some professional resume work, complete with an actual work history that checked out. They needed photos of the teachers at the different schools where murders had taken place.

Gavin was about to ask Matt what the progress was on getting the annuals when the phone rang. Matt answered it and stood up.

"OK, our first interviewee is here, Assistant Principal Todd Duncan. They all think we are just trying to find out more about the kids, so we need to be careful at this point not to alarm any of them." Matt led them out of the office to the interview room down the hall.

"I'll be right back; let me talk to Gail real quick in case any of the others come in early." Matt looked pointedly at Gavin and walked off. Gavin and the Chief stood outside the interview door for about thirty seconds before he got back and, nodding, opened the door.

They walked in and shook hands with a possible murderer. He was about five-foot-seven with close-cut dark brown hair and a thin, angular body. He didn't look frail, but in good shape, like a biker or swimmer. He was thirty-nine years old and, according to their information, right-handed—which fit the few forensic clues they had thus far.

Matt started the interview, sitting down across from the man. "Thank you for helping us with this, Mr. Duncan. We're trying to find out all we can about the kids before they were killed." Nodding to each of the other two in the room, he introduced them and began to ask some easy warm-up questions.

"Did you notice anything out of the ordinary concerning either of the kids during the last week or two they were alive?"

"No, I didn't but, in all honesty, there are nearly four hundred and fifty students in our high school between all four grades. I knew both the kids, but the only real contact I had with either of them was with Carol Ann. She was on the school paper and in the school play this year. I helped with both when I could." The assistant principal looked at all three men.

Gavin noted that he didn't look the least bit nervous, but then their guy had gotten away with murder for nearly twenty

years; he would feel in control. He looked at the man's hands and noticed they were clean and well-kept. His fingers were long, but not overly so. The interview continued with nothing much uncovered.

The three men took a quick break as they waited for the bus driver and janitor to come in. The chief of police headed to the john and Gavin took advantage of it to talk to Matt quickly.

"I'm worried about this, Matt. We might not have this guy narrowed down like we thought," he admitted.

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing." Matt glanced down at his feet for a minute, a disgusted expression crossing his face before he looked back up.

"Do we have any of the annuals to look at yet?" Gavin asked.

Matt shook his head. "Gail is working on it. She said she knows that three are on the way. She's still trying to get in touch with the right people at some of the other schools." He quickly added when he heard the bathroom door open, "I put one of my men on Jennings for now."

Nodding, Gavin walked over to the opposite side of the hall just before Chief Wilson made it back.

The outside door opened and a tall man walked in who had to be the bus driver/janitor. He had a burn scar across his face from his left temple down to the corner of his mouth. Gail greeted him and, after a brief conversation, led him toward the back where the three men stood.

"Sheriff, this is Roger Mims." She smiled at the man and left him with them, returning to the front. Matt made the rest of the introductions and indicated the room down the hall.

Once they were all seated at the table, Matt began the interview. "Mr. Mims, we really appreciate your time and help with this. We're trying to find out everything we can about those teenagers so we can find out who killed them."

Gavin watched the man's face, but didn't see anything to indicate he was nervous or uneasy.

"Didn't Tommy ride the bus to and from school?"

Roger nodded his head, "Yeah, he did on occasion. He had a truck, but it seemed to break down a lot." He smiled a little at this, but didn't let the smile stay on his face. "Probably rode with me more than he drove. I think he got a ride sometimes with some of the kids down the road when he managed to get up early enough."

"Did you see much of Carol Ann at school when you were around the halls or other buildings?" Gavin asked.

"Nah, not much, really. I usually stayed out of the halls during school hours. I cleaned the halls and rooms after the bus route and cleaned the other buildings during school hours." No hint of worry or anxiety.

"So, the other buildings you cleaned during school hours were the gym, the auditorium, and what else?"

"That's about it. Oh, I sometimes got a head start on the library during the day if they weren't having a class of some sort in it." He smiled, but the scar at the edge of his mouth kept it from looking relaxed.

"Mr. Mims, do you remember anything odd going on at school or even among the kids on your bus route during the weeks prior to the murders?"

Gavin looked at the man's hands which were large and noticed that, despite the scars, they were really clean for a janitor, albeit a new one. His fingers were long, but discolored from the scars.

The man shook his head, then stopped and appeared to think about something. "I don't know if this is of any use, but when I was cleaning the auditorium one day about...um—" he squinted, his eyes making the scar on his face appear to stand out more. "Guess it was the week before they were killed, I noticed there was some mud on the floor in the back row of seats in the auditorium. Figured at the time it was a kid who sat in the back to watch. I was just angry they hadn't bothered to scrape their feet before they came in. Thing is, I'd had to clean up mud from that back row a few times over the last month and had gotten them to make an announcement to the kids about cleaning their feet before they walked into the auditorium. See, it's the only building that has carpet in it and it's pretty hard to keep it clean."

Matt nodded again. "What types of activities are held in the auditorium, Mr. Mims?"

"Oh, well, they have the chorus rehearsals there, the school play, and the band practices when they're getting ready for a concert or something." Mims seemed to be thinking again. "The school paper committee meets there when they can't meet in the library." He shook his head. "Can't think of anything else that meets there right now."

They hadn't found anything new from Mr. Mims by the time they were through. He seemed pretty clean, just like the assistant principal had. Matt and Gavin were getting antsy about their suspects. The Chief of Police received a call and excused himself from the rest of the interviews to take care of something at his office.

Matt and Gavin met the third suspect, the English teacher, Bill Jefferson, and ushered him into the interview room. Matt made the introductions and began in much the same way he had with the other two men and wondered, once again, if they were wasting time with these interviews. This time they took turns asking questions.

"Mr. Jefferson," Gavin began, "did you have either of the two teenagers in any of your classes?"

Nodding his head, the teacher said both of them were, but in different periods. "I really didn't even realize they were dating until after they were killed. I usually notice things like that because they tend to hang around each other and I have to shoo one or the other off." He smiled.

"Did either of them act oddly during the week before they were killed?" Matt asked.

"No, I don't remember anything different about either of them. They were both average students and turned in their work on time. Carol Ann seemed to take a little more interest than some of the other girls her age. Tommy was about as interested as most of the boys his age."

Gavin watched the man's hands and saw they were clean and well manicured and he used his hands when he talked. The fingers were long, but his hands weren't all that large. He

also didn't appear to have anything to hide, as his body language was open and relaxed.

"You direct the school play, isn't that right, Mr. Jefferson?" Matt was getting a little more direct now.

"Right, Carol Ann was playing a minor role in it."

"Do you have a list of the students who are either helping with it or acting in it?" Gavin asked out of the blue.

The man started slightly. "Um, yes, I can get you a list. I can probably name most of them right now if it's important, but some of the ones working backstage I might not remember offhand." He recovered quickly.

Matt nodded and said that would be fine; they would be happy to wait for a list if he could get it to them that afternoon. They continued with questions for another few minutes and then escorted him out of the room with thanks for his help, asking him to please call if he thought of anything that might help. And to please send that list over as soon as possible.

Matt looked at Gavin once the teacher had left. "Do you really want a list of them or was that just to see how he reacted?"

Gavin was silent for a minute as he let a thought complete in his head. "I want that list. The girl he's stalking now will be on that list."

Matt took a deep breath and ran his hand through his hair.

"You need a hair cut, Matt." Gavin said the obvious.

"Screw you, bud." Matt laughed, and then sighed. "Maybe I need to shave my head like you do. Then I wouldn't have to figure out how to get to a barber to get it cut all the time."

Gavin ran his hand over his smooth scalp and actually smiled at Matt. "You wouldn't look this good."

Their next interviewee came in about ten minutes later. It was the school counselor, Benson Pratt. He shook their hands and apologized for being late. He had had an unexpected student conference that lasted longer than he'd anticipated. They began the interview the same as the others, but Gavin noticed Ben was a bit nervous.

"Did you have any counseling sessions with either of the two teens before they were killed?" Matt was asking.

"No...um...I did talk with Tommy about a month ago concerning his frequent tardiness to classes. I basically have to do that with most of the boys. They all mess around between classes and arrive late." He seemed out of sorts with that, Matt noticed.

"Boys tend to do that," Matt agreed. "Was Tommy any worse than any of the other boys?"

"Not really," Ben said, "He might have been a little less worried about it than some of the others, but he didn't have a tardy count any higher than any of the others."

Gavin picked up on the 'less worried' part and asked, "What do you mean by being a little less worried?"

Ben started a bit and looked over at Gavin.

"I mean he just said okay and didn't try to make excuses or say it wouldn't happen again. He just didn't seem worried about it, I guess is all I'm saying."

"What about Carol Ann? You didn't see her at all?" Matt asked.

"Oh, no, I did see her two times during the year. I see all students at least once to discuss their plans for after graduation." He smiled. "I try to steer them toward college and find out what they're interested in career-wise. They have testing done for that in their sophomore year and I try to feel them out during their junior year to be sure they're taking the courses they need for college." He smiled again, obviously proud of his role in helping them select their careers.

Gavin cocked his head. "You saw Carol Ann twice, you said? What was the second time for?"

The counselor sat up a little straighter before answering. "Well, normally I couldn't tell you that information, since it would be privileged, but since she was killed..." He paused before continuing. "I suppose it can only help now." He looked at Matt, addressing him instead of Gavin. "She came to me to discuss some problems she was having with a boy in her class. He had been harassing her and she was uncomfortable around him." He paused, seeing them look much more interested.

"Now, he wasn't really bothering her with anything I thought was out of character for boys that age. She didn't tell me his name, either, only that she didn't know how to discourage him without being ugly."

Matt looked at Gavin. "What exactly did she say this boy was doing to bother her?"

"Well, she said he would stand close to her when she went to her locker and try to get her to talk to him. Sometimes he followed her to some of her classes." He shrugged and waited for the next question.

"Mr. Pratt, you said she didn't tell you his name; did you ask her?"

"Oh, yes, I asked, but she said she really didn't want to get him in trouble...that she just wanted to know how to talk to him and tell him she wasn't interested without being rude about it. She is... was...a very nice girl and sincerely didn't want to hurt his feelings, I think."

"When was it that you talked to her about this, Mr. Pratt?" Matt asked cautiously.

"Oh, maybe two months ago; I'm not sure exactly. I can look up the date for you. I do know it was after I had talked to her about her career testing, so it was after the first six weeks of school for sure."

The two men sat in Matt's office after they had seen Mr. Pratt out. Neither of them was too happy with the outcomes of the interviews. Matt sighed and clasped his hands behind his head.

"Guess I expected one of them to say something that would give him away," he complained in a disgusted voice.

"Well, it doesn't usually work that way no matter what happens on TV, buddy." Gavin couldn't shake the feeling there was something they'd missed. He had the feeling he'd looked right at a clue, but hadn't seen it for what it was.

Matt walked over to the door to his office and called out, "Hey, Gail, anything yet on those albums?"

"None of them have made it here yet, but I know you have five on the way," she called back to him. "And, you have an intercom system if you would just use it, Sheriff."

He waved her off and sat back in his chair.

"Once we know who all is in or working on the play, we should have the list of his potential victims."

Matt stood up again and walked over to the door for the second time. Gavin stopped him. "Use your intercom, Matt. This jumping up and down is getting to me."

Matt winked at him. "I like hearing her fuss."

"Asshole," Gavin said under his breath as Matt yelled out at Gail again.

"Has the English teacher—what's his name, Jefferson?—sent over a list of students yet, Gail?" He waited to hear her yell back at him, but when she didn't answer, he frowned and walked out to the front. Gavin followed behind him to see what happened.

Gail was steadily typing away on the daily reports and didn't appear to have heard him. Leaning over the counter to her desk, he cleared his throat.

"Gail? Did you hear me?"

She looked up, smiling, and nodded her head. "Yep, but if you want to talk to me, either come out here or use your damn intercom. That's what it's for!" She smiled and continued typing.

Matt chuckled and asked again. "OK, Gail. So, did he send over the list of students yet?"

Gail nodded, tapping her finger on a folder on the edge of her desk. "Now, if you would learn to use your intercom, you could save yourself all those extra steps."

Matt winked as he picked up the folder. Gavin met him at the door and grabbed the folder out of his hands.

Scanning the list of students, he counted ten females. He wondered if one of the boys on the list would be the one Rhi had seen dead in her dream.

"I'm heading home after I check on who's watching that Jennings boy tonight. It'll be one of the Chief's men, since mine grabbed him first."

"How will you explain needing to watch him?"

"Don't need to. We've been working on trust for several years and as long as it's not something really way out, we don't ask questions. It's worked so far to both our advantages." Matt locked his office and followed Gavin to the front.

"I'm going to pick up some burgers from that drive-in around the corner. Figure Rhi could use something besides the peanut butter sandwiches she's had the last two days. Should have thought about it before now..."

"Damn, you're right!" Gavin winced when Matt slammed his hand on the door facing. "I all but had you kidnap her and bring her here and then I don't even think about feeding her. This case is getting to me. I'm not thinking straight."

"Don't sweat it. I'm watching her." Shrugging his shoulders, Gavin pointed out, "You have the entire department to worry about, along with these murders. I can manage to feed one scrawny woman." Following Matt outside, he waited for him to unlock his truck before he headed to his bike.

"I'll be at the house later. Give you and Sandy some quality time."

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"I think both of us are pretty worn out." Chuckling, Matt shook his head. "But, hey, you don't have to hurry over on my account."

Gavin ignored him and strapped on his helmet. He didn't need that kind of complication. All he wanted to do was take some of the pressure off Matt and keep Rhi from getting in too deep with those visions of hers.

Cranking the bike, he headed to the drive-in for burgers. He could stop by the Quick Stop next to the motel for cold bottled drinks, feed her, be sure she wasn't having trouble with the visions and head to Matt and Sandy's for some rest. That was his plan for the night.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

When Gavin knocked on the door, Rhi let him in with a nervous smile. She hadn't heard him drive up this time. She'd been engrossed in going over her notes, trying to figure out how to connect with the killer so she could control the vision. They needed more information and getting into his mind was the only way she knew to look for it. She knew the moment Gavin noticed the table covered in notes. He went absolutely still. Then he handed her the food while he carried the two drinks to the table.

"Thought you agreed not to try anything alone." His voice dipped lower than usual, scraping along her spine. She could hear the disapproval in it, though nothing showed on his face.

"I haven't! I mean, I've just been going back through some of what I remember, trying to see if I missed anything, is all." Rhi hastily gathered the papers, stacking them to one side so there would be room to eat.

"It's not safe for you to try it on your own, Rhi. You're not even sure if you can control it." His eyes bore into hers until she was sure he knew what she'd been doing. "These visions aren't something you can play around with."

Rhi watched as he set her hamburger and fries out, but she wasn't really seeing it at all. Something stirred in her mind and she had to fight to focus on what Gavin was doing.

"Did you learn anything from the interviews?"

"Not really. I think Matt's worried that we don't have him in the group. I'm not so sure, though. Something bothers me

about one of them, but I can't figure out which one." He had his cheeseburger unwrapped and in his hands when he noticed she hadn't sat down.

"If you don't want the hamburger, I can eat it and I'll get something else for you."

She didn't say anything right away. Trying to keep from falling into the vision, she struggled to stay in control. She had to be able to control them or she'd go insane. She saw Gavin drop his cheeseburger onto the table to get up.

"No, it's fine. I just thought of something and then lost it." She smiled nervously, quickly sitting down to eat. She'd been hungry when he walked in carrying the food, but whatever she'd just felt had wiped away her appetite.

She did manage to eat half the burger, but she didn't try the fries. Gavin ate most of them without a problem and didn't seem to notice she wasn't eating. When he'd finished, she simply gathered everything up and threw it in the trash before he did notice.

He filled her in on what they had managed to uncover on the four men, which wasn't much. She drifted in and out, trying to pay attention and thinking she had fooled Gavin until she jumped when he reached across the table and touched her hand.

"Something's wrong. What is it?"

"I don't know. Maybe nothing. I just feel like there's something wrong. I'm not getting something important." She frowned and shook her head. "I'm probably just tired and reading too much into it."

"Maybe, but you've been on the nose with pretty much everything you've felt strongly about so far."

"What if I'm wrong about all this, though? What if I've wasted your and Matt's time, letting a killer get away while you've been following what I've told you?" She couldn't stop the desperation from leaking into her voice. She was beginning to feel consumed by it. Hours of sitting alone with nothing but her notes and the fear of another dream or vision had left her shaky and scared. Scared to sleep and scared not to.

He stood up, walking around the table to stand behind her. She felt him behind her and knew he had his hands resting just above her shoulders, wanting to touch her, but unsure.

"I'm so afraid he'll keep killing and we won't catch him before he moves on. Then I'll dream about them and have visions until I go insane." She closed her eyes, wanting him to touch her. Willing him to touch her, but afraid for him to. She'd never felt so close to someone, so connected, yet still not knowing anything about them. She could sense the violence in him, knew it was there just below the surface, and yet she wasn't afraid of Gavin.

"I'm still not so sure I'm not already there sometimes." She shook her head and sighed.

His hands rested lightly on her shoulders and she nearly sighed out loud. They lay there as if he were getting used to touching her. The warmth of his hands felt so good on her shoulders, not moving, just...there.

"You're not crazy Rhi. I don't know how you deal with what you do without going crazy, but you're not crazy." She felt

him hesitate. "You need to sleep. I have a feeling the next twenty-four hours are going to be rough."

Rhi sighed and opened her eyes. When she stood up, his hands slid lightly along her arms, sending chills down her spine. She turned around to face him and his hands stilled, settling back to touch her arms once again. Yet when she looked up, he wasn't looking down at her, but out into nothing. His face held no hint of where his mind was or of what he felt.

She knew if she tried she could probably feel or even see what he was thinking about, but she didn't. She'd never knowingly intrude inside his thoughts. She waited for him to make the first move. Away or closer, she wasn't sure which she really wanted now.

"I need to go." He looked down into her upturned face and dropped his hands from her arms, taking a single step backwards and away from her. "You need to get some rest. I'll go by the office first in the morning to see if there's anything more to work on for Matt. If you need anything or think of anything, call us there."

"I will."

She followed him to the door with the intention of setting the deadbolt and sliding the chain once he'd left. Suddenly, he swung her around and pinned her against the door with his hands flat against it on either side of her face. When she slowly raised her eyes to meet his she gasped, a little afraid at the intensity in them. Black obsidian pools drew her forward and she bit her lower lip to keep from whimpering.

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Then he kissed her as if he would eat her from the inside out. His hands never touched her, remaining flat against the door, but his lips—needy and desperate—his tongue—demanding and wild—took possession of her mouth. A low growl escaped from deep within his throat, warning her that he was close to losing control. She felt the edge of his teeth against her lips and then her chin before his mouth returned to explore hers again. She couldn't tell anymore if she were responding or making her own demands.

Her body burned as if starved... and maybe it was starved. It had been so long. She pushed away from the door and into him, wanting to feel his need against her. Needing to feel his body hot and pushing into hers, but he arched away from her and slowly pulled back from their kiss. His eyes—smoldering with passion—closed as he briefly bent his head to touch hers. Then, without saying a word, he grabbed her arms shoving her away before yanking the door open, pausing only long enough to close it behind him.

Rhi stood where he'd left her until she could no longer hear the roar of his bike. Without letting herself think, she locked the door and climbed into bed, not even bothering to change clothes. She wouldn't think about anything until she had to.

Gavin's mind was a mess. He couldn't think, didn't want to think. He skipped the turn to Matt and Sandy's place; instead, he found the turn-off for the highway, intent on riding until he could think. The miles passed by faster than they should have and when he almost lost it in a curve, he finally slowed down.

Anger boiled inside him for what he'd just done to Rhi, and for what he'd almost done to them. Riding full out wasn't

going to do him any good and he knew better than to allow emotions to rule his decisions. He'd learned at an early age to control his emotions so he could control his life. In a matter of a few days, he'd all but thrown that hard-won control out the window.

"What in the hell have I done?" What had gotten into him? He knew better than to get involved with Rhiannon. He'd already had this conversation and knew he'd made the right decision. He couldn't allow anything to happen between them because he'd only hurt her or, worse, help drive her insane. If she saw inside of him, saw what he'd seen, what he'd done, she'd never be able to look at him or Matt again. He couldn't allow that happen.

Turning the bike around, he headed back to Casper. He needed to get some sleep. Matt was depending on him to help bring the son of a bitch down before he killed again. He intended to do just that and nothing more. Then he was out of there. Any thought of sticking around in Casper wouldn't be possible now. Not with her so close. Not when he wanted her more than he wanted to breathe.

The garbage can flew across the floor of Matt's office, strewn with balled-up papers and empty water bottles along its path, landing with a loud clang against the far wall. Gavin didn't bother lifting his head from the list of job ads and employee names he scanned. He knew just how Matt felt, frustrated and discouraged. Nothing had panned out so far from all their searches or the interviews from the day before. Dead ends, all of them.

"Dammit, Gavin, there are too many coincidences for us to be on the wrong path! I don't believe in them, anyway, and sure as hell not this many! What are we missing?" Gavin did look up this time and watched as Matt paced among the balled-up paper.

"We need those annuals to compare to faculty pictures." Gavin didn't add they needed the one with Martha's picture—the first girl murdered, or so they believed. It wouldn't do any good and only stir Matt up more.

"Look, let's start here in Casper and go backwards. The more recent information will be easier to track, anyway." Gavin pulled the largest pile toward him, pushing the one he'd been working on to the side. "Where's that list of employees who moved here less than fifteen months ago? We'll work backwards and see if we can trace any of them back to the murder prior to this one."

Matt ran both hands through his hair before sitting back down. Gavin ducked his head to keep from smirking at the huge tuft of hair still standing up on Matt's head. The guy desperately needed that haircut.

"Here it is." Matt pulled it from under one of the folders.

"Has anyone verified their last place of employment yet?" Gavin skimmed down the list of names quickly before pulling the help wanted ads from the town where the last murder prior to Casper's had taken place.

"They were all verified at employment, but I have Sam working on verifying information right now. I'll check and see if he's gotten to them yet. If he hasn't, I'll tell him to work them next." Matt picked up the phone to page his deputy.

While Matt talked to Sam, Gavin compared the ads posted prior to the murder to those looking for employees after the murder. Two different positions were listed in both sets of ads, one for a career counselor position and one for an assistant principal.

Gavin then went back a year and did the same thing for the next town. Again, there were several positions listed in both the pre-murder ads and the post-murder ads. This time there was an English teacher, a social sciences teacher and a Spanish teacher. Even though none of the parallel positions matched, they already knew the killer had to have switched job titles and names in order to avoid discovery all this time. Gavin was about to start on the next town when Matt got off the phone with Sam.

"He's verified all but one of them so far. They all check out. Mr. Odom's previous employer hasn't returned his call yet, but Sam's going to call them back and let us know."

"Maybe we need to check their employers from the previous job to be sure it checks out. Not just that they worked there but that the dates are correct. He could have doctored the dates," Gavin suggested. Then he showed Matt what he'd discovered about the ads so far.

"OK, I'll take the oldest and work forward while you work back. When Sam calls back, I'll have him verify the last three of their employers, including the dates, to see if they match." Gavin nodded, already working on the third town's ads. His mind turned briefly to thoughts of Rhi and what she might be doing, but another set of before and after ads caught his eye and he was totally immersed then in looking for the killer.

She leaned over in the truck, unable to move her arms or legs. The pain in her head was unbearable and she felt blood trickling from her nose. Breathing was so hard. She knew she needed to keep fighting to breathe, but she wasn't sure why. Why even try when it was so hard and when her head hurt so much? She'd done all she could to help them find him. He was here and she knew at any minute he would be dead, as would she.

Rhi jerked awake from the dream, her breath coming in gasps along with the familiar pounding in her head. A rough wet tongue licked frantically at her cheeks and she became aware of Toby's funny mewling noises he made when he was agitated. Forcing her arm to move, she reached her hand up to feel her face and found it sticky with blood. Her nose was bleeding again. The tears already falling from the effects of the dream renewed as she struggled to stand from where she'd been sitting, propped up by pillows on the bed.

After tossing and turning all night, afraid to sleep because of the dreams, she'd finally managed to sleep for several hours until hunger woke her around nine in the morning. After fixing something to eat, she had tried reading through her notes to look for clues, but became frustrated and decided to read one of her books she'd brought with her. Sitting up on the bed with pillows, she must have dozed off at some point.

Using the bed to help keep her upright, Rhi managed to slowly walk to the bathroom for a wash cloth. Weak, frightened and alone, it finally sank in what she'd dreamed and she slid down the wall to the floor with the cold bath cloth

and cried. She felt like a coward. Sitting on the cold tile crying and holding her nose, knowing she'd just dreamed about her own death and all she could think about was that she didn't want to die alone.

The unmistakable sound of Toby's purr broke into her misery, reminding her she wasn't alone now. Wiping her face with the cloth, she let the fat feline crawl into her lap and purr with his broken motor soothing her until she felt better able to stand and walk again. She had work to do and there wasn't much time. Gavin would be back sometime and she needed to be ready for whatever came next.

A hot shower and a change of clothes did wonders to make her presentable, but they couldn't conceal the dark circles beneath her eyes. It was after eleven and though she'd only had a muffin that morning, she had no appetite to eat now. Instead, she sat at the table and wrote out what she'd dreamed—only, she left out the last part. The part where she knew she was going to die. It wouldn't help anything and didn't give any clues to who the killer was. No sense in upsetting anyone else over what couldn't be changed.

After what seemed like only a few minutes of writing, she finished, finding she'd written several pages of notes and nearly an hour had passed. Before she could begin re-reading them, she heard the now-familiar sound of Gavin's motorcycle as it roared into the parking lot. Smiling, she realized she no longer felt nervous or uneasy being in his presence; instead, she looked forward to it. She knew her destiny and the idea of having a connection with him wasn't something she needed

to fear. It would help to find and stop the killer soon and there wouldn't be a need to worry about what happened later.

Gavin fought back the smile threatening to take over his mouth when he took off his helmet and found Rhi standing with the door open, waiting on him. Something about that felt right. In fact, it felt damn good to him. Stowing his helmet in the saddlebag, he used the opportunity of having his back to the motel to regain control of his emotions. He had a job to do and it didn't include seducing Rhiannon. It did include finding out who the bastard was killing teenagers and that meant dealing with her as a professional and that was all. It didn't help to hear the little voice in the back of his head reminding him he'd never been a professional in the first place.

He noticed right away that something was different about her when he walked into the room. As she closed the door behind him, sliding the locks in place, he tried to put his finger on it, but all he could see was that she looked as if she hadn't slept at all the night before. Guilt inched into his mind that how he'd left the night before might have had something to do with her lack of sleep. He also reminded himself she was prone to nightmares that just happened to come true. He might not be the reason she looked so tired at all. The dark shadows beneath her eyes made his fingers ache to smooth them away, so he picked up the notes she'd obviously been working on to give them something to do.

"You had another dream."

"Yes, I just finished putting it down. I haven't gone back over it yet to be sure I didn't miss anything, so you got here

at a good time." He looked up from reading to find she had a soft smile on her face as she pulled out the other chair to sit down. "It really helps for you to write for me while I go over the notes and concentrate on the dream"

"I'm sorry I wasn't here to help you. We made a little progress today on narrowing down some leads, but we still don't have anything to give us a clear picture of who he is." Sitting down, he looked over her notes.

"Matt's people did a check on the four men we interviewed yesterday and all their references check out, including the dates. Something is still bothering me about them, though, so I'm not ruling any of them out yet. I think Matt just about has, though."

"He has to be under a lot of pressure with this. I'm not helping him any by giving him bits and pieces of information that only confuse things more." Rhi bit her lip, shaking her head. In her tired expression, he could clearly see the guilt that she felt.

"None of this is your fault, Rhi. You're doing all you can." Handing the notes back to her, he moved the pad so he could use it to write on. "More than you probably should be doing. It's only been five days now. Longer than any of us would like, but he's been out there killing kids for nearly twenty years. We can't expect to figure it all out and stop him in only a few days."

Nodding her head slightly, she looked directly into his eyes and he felt her resolve all the way to his bones.

"So, let's get started. I have a feeling from this last dream we don't have much time left."

Gavin didn't ask her what she meant because he had the same feeling. Time was running out and something major was in the works. His other senses always knew when danger was near and they were screaming now.

As Rhi concentrated on her notes, reading some out loud, Gavin watched her face change with the emotions triggered by the memories from the dream. Her eyes looked so dark now, the shadows beneath giving her an unhealthy cast that worried him. All of the stress and the visions with the nosebleeds and headaches had to be harmful, maybe even dangerous. She needed someone to watch out for her and check on her. When this was over, he'd be sure Matt took care of that.

Realizing she'd grown quiet, he watched her more closely. She stared off into space, her face totally void of expression—almost lax. Even her eyes appeared empty of life. Not sure if he should say anything, he watched in silence until he saw her eyes fill up again, as if her life force returned from another dimension.

"What is it, Rhi? Is something wrong?" Gavin wasn't sure if she heard him at first, but when she turned toward him her eyes were bright with unshed tears.

"It may already be too late for one of the boys." Saying nothing more, she pored over her notes and continued where she'd left off, a renewed determination in her voice.

"The second boy, the one with the brown hair and blue eyes, is the older of the two. They aren't related to each other, but are very good friends." She kept one hand

outspreed on the notes as if drawing meaning through the contact.

"His name is unusual, not like John or Mike." He watched the struggle on her face, her eyes moving back and forth as if trying to see what she couldn't. Focusing so hard on learning the name of the teenager, her lips moved with her thoughts.

"Something earthy or meaning earth." Gavin interrupted her for the first time.

"Clay!"

"That's it!" Jumping to her feet, she dropped her notes back to the table. Crossing her arms and rubbing up and down as if chilled, she began to pace.

"His name is Clay. Short for Clayton. Call Matt and tell him he has to find him quickly."

Gavin already had the cell phone to his ear, waiting for Matt to answer.

"What does he need to do once he finds him?"

"Find out who his best friend is, because he may already be dead." Her voice was softer and she continued to pace back and forth in front of the table. She was no longer aware of him. He knew what she was doing. She was inside her mind, looking for the other boy. He was out there somewhere and even though she knew without a doubt he was dead, she continued to look.

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Chapter Thirty

She became aware of Gavin standing in front of her and pulled back to hear him. He was telling her Matt was on his way to the house where Clay Wright lived.

"He wants to talk to you, Rhi. When he gets a name from Clay, he wants you hear it and be sure it sounds right." Gavin repeated it again when she looked, eyes puzzled, her brows drawn together.

"OK." Taking the phone from him, she moved to the end of the bed and sat down with the phone at her ear.

"I'm here, Matt."

"I'm about to pull into their drive. Damn it, looks like half the high school football team is here." She heard noises over the phone as if he had his window rolled down.

"Just say yes or no when you hear the name and I'll take it from there. You can hand the phone back to Gavin, OK?"

"OK. I will." Shaking inside, she wasn't sure how she held the phone without dropping it, but on the outside there wasn't a sign of her inner turmoil.

Gavin sat on the bed next to her and she turned towards him and waited. She listened as Matt gave his official spiel on needing to ask a few questions. He asked for Clay, and when Clay came forward, must have drawn him away from the others to talk, because the background noise lessened. She heard the teens' promise they weren't causing problems, just hanging out and talking about football. Her heart plodded heavily in her chest, waiting for the name. When Matt finally

asked Clay that question, the answer stopped it dead for what seemed like an eternity.

"Chip, yes." Hearing the name from the teenager's mouth immediately rang true and, without uttering another word, she handed the phone to Gavin. He had never stopped watching her.

"Matt?" The obvious question in his voice eluded Rhi as she walked over to the window and peered outside from the edge of the drapes.

"Yeah, she was pretty sure it's going to be too late. Need me to come in now?" Rhi peered around the drapes as he ended the call with Matt. Closing the cell phone, he slipped it back into his pocket.

"Will you be OK alone for a couple of hours?" Pulling on his leather jacket, he waited for her to turn back from the window.

"Yes, I'll be fine." She turned around to face him. "You'd think I'd be used to it by now." Her voice was bitter as she moved away from the window and took her seat at the table again. "They always die and I'm never able to change any of it. So you'd think by now, I wouldn't feel so much like I'd failed them."

"I don't think you can ever get used to it, Rhiannon. If you could, you wouldn't be totally human anymore." She looked up into his face and knew he didn't consider himself human and it broke her heart all over again. He hesitated and then covered her hand with his for a brief moment before he opened the door and tapped the lock in a silent message to set it, closing the door behind him.

Matt pulled up outside the motel just as Gavin closed and locked his saddlebag. Climbing up into the truck, Matt filled him in on what he'd found out from Clay concerning Chip. His voice was neutral, but that didn't keep the strain of the previous few days from showing on his face.

"Clay said Chip was supposed to come to his house right after class, but never showed up. He wasn't too concerned, because he also had to be sure his sister got home after play practice. Clay figured his buddy was just waiting around for her so he wouldn't forget her and get in trouble about it."

As he turned the truck toward the high school, Matt's grip on the steering wheel had his knuckles almost white.

"I just talked to his sister, Jillian. Their parents aren't home yet. She caught a ride home with a friend. Said she told Chip when he showed up at the beginning of play practice and he left soon after that."

"So we know he was alive and at the school at what, three o'clock?" Gavin scanned the campus as they pulled into the high school's parking lot. "Play practice was over at what time?"

"Jillian said she and her friend left around four because some of the crew hadn't shown up. She said a few members of the stage crew stayed to work on props."

Jumping out of the truck, Matt grabbed his hat and shoved it on his head as Gavin joined him on the sidewalk. The lights in the parking lot were all on and working, as were those leading to the auditorium. The shorter days had the kids leaving after dark from the after-school activities. It was close to five.

"I'm hoping there's still someone here we can talk to." Matt tried the auditorium doors, but they were locked. Smothering a curse, he headed to the back. Gavin followed close behind, keeping an eye out for movement anywhere on campus.

"Shit, Gavin, we had to have just missed them! How did everyone leave so damn fast?" Slamming his hands against the locked back doors, Matt spun around to look at the obviously deserted campus.

"You'd think it was still a little early not to have someone around."

Gavin nodded, but continued watching the shadows. "Need to get a list of everyone who was here tonight." They jogged back to the truck, aware of the seconds ticking by.

"Right, I have the numbers at the office. I sent Sam over to Chip's house to wait on his parents. I was sort of hoping he might call with the news Chip had shown up, but guess that was a wasted wish."

Gavin barely had his door closed before Matt reversed and headed back toward town and the sheriff's office. While Matt looked up phone numbers, Gavin headed back to the conference room to have a second look at the board and their multitude of lists, but they gave him no answers. There had to be something there with all the information they'd accumulated over the last few days. Turning on the overhead lights in the conference room, Gavin felt drawn to the maps on the wall. They had each of the murdered kids pegged with a tack to show where the killer had struck. One of the maps was of IZARD County, Arkansas, and the spot where Carol Ann

and Tommy had been found was marked along with the location of the school and each of their homes.

Looking back at the notes from Rhi's dreams, he located what bugged him and looked over the map again with the beginnings of an idea. She'd said there were sparkles all around them. It was dark where they were. There was no sky, but sparkles like diamonds all around them. Maybe that was it, he thought as he focused in on an area on the map not far from the school. Just maybe it was that easy after all.

"Matt!" Turning from the map, Gavin nearly ran into him as he headed through the conference room door. "What about the caverns marked over here on the map just outside of town?"

Matt dropped the papers he had on the table and hurried to check the map. Nodding his head excitedly, he slapped Gavin on the back, taking the big man by surprise.

"Great! I hadn't thought about the caverns. They're real close to the school, so we've had trouble with some of the teens trying to sneak off during classes." He traced several of the routes with his finger before settling on one. "We even went so far as to block off the access road."

Tapping his index finger on the caverns closest to the blocked-off road, Gavin's mouth thinned in a tight line. "The killer would have to knock his victim out so he could carry or pull him around the tunnels to get to a cavern large enough for him to work in."

"What made you think of them?" Matt was already rummaging through a cabinet, excitement and dread fighting to claim his expression.

"Rhi's dream had sparkles all around them with no sky above them. The sparkles could be crystals." Handing Matt his notes from her dream to read, Gavin headed to the break room for flashlights and supplies. He remembered seeing the supplies on the shelves when he'd gotten drinks from the machine over the last several days. Flashlights, rope, first aid kit, and flares all went into the duffle bag he found on one of the shelves. Matt had a topographical map in his hands when he met up with him in the hall.

"I'll fill you in on what I didn't find out from the phone calls, on our way out there." Grabbing his jacket as they passed the front desk, headed for the door, Matt added, "I'll call Sam and tell him where we're going so he can keep his radio on in case we need back-up."

Matt contacted Sam on his radio and brought him up to speed as he raced toward the caverns outside of town. Sam was having some trouble with Chip's parents, from what Gavin heard over Matt's phone. They were demanding he call the FBI and everyone in the state government to find their son. Signing off, Matt winced at the loud demanding voices in the background.

"Got a list of who showed for practice, but it was skimpy. Jefferson was actually calling around to find out why they didn't show when I got him on the phone. He was a bit pissed about the no-shows, but now he's worried." Matt pulled the folded paper from his shirt pocket and shoved it at Gavin while he maneuvered the curves in the thickening dark. Gavin read over the list, trying to compare it to what he

remembered from the original one listing all the students taking part in the play.

"So, Jefferson says Chip left the auditorium around four after talking to his sister. That means if he was grabbed just after that, he's been missing for..." Pushing the little button on his watch to check the time, Gavin whistled. "He's been gone almost two hours now. I'd hoped we would be a little ahead on this."

"Me, too, buddy, but we have more than we would have without Rhi's help. If I'd kept her out of this, like I'd wanted to, we wouldn't even know the kid was missing for another several hours." Slowing to make a curve in the road, Matt swore softly as a deer lunged, just missing his front bumper.

"Damn whistlers on the grill must be turned around again."

Reaching the turn-off for the first set of caverns located on the map, they slowly wound down through trees along a gravel path. It was difficult at night to tell if another vehicle had been down it recently. Gavin banged his fist on the door, realizing they hadn't thought to look for the truck on the way out there.

"What about his truck? You said he drove a small Ford Ranger and it wasn't at the high school."

"Damn!" Matt swore as he slowed for another sharp turn. "Soon as we get to a clearing, I'll radio in for them to put out an APB on the truck. Sam can get the license plate and call that part in for us. Damn, I should have thought about that earlier." As he swerved suddenly to miss a hole in the middle of the road, something flashed brightly ahead and to their right. "And then again, maybe we know what happened to it."

Matt shook his head as the headlights picked out the back end of a blue Ford Ranger off to the side of the clearing when they emerged from the tree line. Pulling up to the side of it so Gavin could shine the flashlight into it, he could see the door wasn't locked and it didn't look wrecked.

"Looks like you nailed the location, Gavin." Matt's voice lacked any triumph. "We'll check it closer on the way back out. Let's head over to the cavern opening."

Pulling as close to the cave's entrance as he dared in case there were tracks or other marks on the ground, Matt positioned the truck so the headlights illuminated the immediate area. Both men jumped down from the truck to search the ground for any sign this was the right cave. The lack of natural light and the gravel surface at the cave's entrance made it difficult to locate anything substantial.

"It's too rocky around here to pick up much in the way of foot traffic." Gavin crouched on the edge of the clearing closest to the cave opening. "If the killer dragged him, there should be some newly turned rocks, but I don't see any."

Matt searched just inside the cave's entrance where there was less rock and a small area of dirt. There were no footprints or drag marks over the dirt.

"I don't know, Gavin. This looks too set up to me; it doesn't feel right. There's another one a little further down. Let's check it out first before we waste time in this one."

Nodding in agreement, Gavin followed him back to the truck where Matt turned around in the clearing and headed another half-mile further down the gravel road. Turning the truck onto another road even less traveled than the last one,

they wound around tight curves upward until it widened into a small clearing of sorts in front of an opening in the rock face of the mountain.

The opening itself looked more like a split in the rock just wide enough for a large man to squeeze through. The truck's headlights washed all the color from the rock itself and cast shadows along the edges of the tree line. Matt cut off the headlights since the truck was parked at an angle that had them shining too high on the rock's face to do anything other than blind them. The two men set out, with flashlights, in opposite directions around the clearing. Being careful to keep their lights from crossing each other's path, they inched forward searching for signs of activity.

"Here we go," Matt called finally. "Got drag marks here that start from this edge and head toward the cave opening." He was a good fifteen yards from the cave entrance. "We can trace them backwards after we clear the cave."

Checking his Glock to be sure it was loaded and set on safety, Gavin moved toward the cave entrance across the clearing at the same time Matt picked his way along the drag trail to keep from walking over the evidence. They both stopped just short of the cave's opening. Matt checked his revolver, a Ruger .357, before approaching the large slit-like entrance. In a soft voice, he radioed their position and plans to search the cave before signaling for Gavin to follow him in.

From the cab of the truck, the long crack had looked much smaller, when in reality it was wide enough for two or three men to enter side-by-side. The sheer magnitude of the mountain and the angle of the headlights had provided the

illusion of a tall diagonal thin crack in the mountain's face. Crouching for about the first quarter mile into the cave, both men ended up crawling on hands and knees a short distance before the path opened to a height that would accommodate even Gavin's tall frame. The killer had to be strong to pull a good-sized teenager through this way.

Gavin stopped instantly behind Matt when the sheriff signaled, holding up his hand. Turning around, he whispered, "Look around; let's be sure the killer isn't still here before we do anything else."

Gavin didn't need to see what was ahead because he could smell it and that provided a fairly accurate picture in his head. Now, he concentrated on making sure they were alone. Swinging his light in an arc going right, he knew Matt would be doing the same heading left. Nothing appeared unusual, but he edged right, checking all possible hiding places with his gun drawn and resting on the wrist of his left hand, holding the flashlight. Nothing moved.

"Clear."

"Clear," echoed from the opposite direction just seconds later. "I don't think he's still around. This cavern appears to be a dead end, so he had to have gone out the same way he came in."

"There weren't any passages other than the one we came in, either." Gavin looked higher up the cave's walls to be sure there wasn't a hidden opening above them.

"Damn, I wanted to find him in time!" The roughness in his buddy's voice hinted at the emotional seriousness of the scene he'd yet to focus on.

Approaching at an angle once he'd satisfied himself there was no other entrance or exit, Gavin paid careful attention where he stepped to avoid contaminating any evidence the killer might have left behind.

"He hasn't been gone long, Matt. This is fresh." Gavin didn't need anyone to tell him the time of death. He could just about smell it. "Probably less than an hour ahead of us. We might have even passed him on the highway as we came in."

"Don't remind me of that just now. I feel bad enough already."

"Hey, you're doing all you can, so don't blame yourself with this." Never letting his eyes leave the area ahead of him, Gavin refused to let Matt kick himself. There was nothing he could have done to save Chip.

"Nothing stands out so far; you find anything?" Matt sat crouched near the remains, looking for answers.

"No, but it'll be easier with better lights."

"Calling it in then; might as well get the show on the road." Matt stood up and headed toward the tunnel. "You gonna stay here?"

"Yeah, want to look around some. I'll be careful and not tramp over evidence, but I want to have a closer look." Moving the flashlight over the scene, Gavin tried to work out how it had gone down as Matt turned around, heading out the way they'd come in.

The body was spread eagled, the hands and feet tied with old frayed rope to spikes buried in the rock floor of the cave. It would have taken a great deal of effort and special tools to bury those spikes, so the killer had planned this well in

advance. The boy's chest was splayed open, a gaping hole where his heart should have rested. There wasn't much blood for a chest wound, so he'd been dead when the heart was taken.

The flashlight illuminated only the immediate area Gavin pointed in, making the body appear unreal, and if it hadn't been for the smells associated with death, he could almost fool himself into believing it wasn't real. Moving the light downward, he grimaced and winced, even knowing ahead of time what he would see. The genitals had been brutishly hacked off, leaving only a mangled bloody mess that had slowly drained Chip of his life's blood. Gavin's resolve to find the monster responsible strengthened, knowing the unbearable pain and fear the teenager had suffered.

Swinging the flashlight out again, he searched for the heart. *The killer couldn't have built a fire in there without an oxygen source and with no exit for the smoke. He had either taken the heart with him or left it there somewhere.* His flashlight beam crossed something to the side that glinted, reflecting the light back at him. Instantly on guard, he crouched and moved at a right angle before swinging the light back around to the area.

There was an identical set of spikes adjacent to those in use, with rope already fastened to them, coiled and ready around each of the four spikes. Gavin inched closer to them. Rhi's dream played back through his mind as he looked. So he'd planned to bring them both there, but he either jumped the gun on Chip or...

Turning back in the direction of the entrance, Gavin quickly picked his way across the cave towards to the entrance and Matt.

"Hey, Matt!" Gavin yelled ahead he ran and then crawled, trying to make his way through the tunnel before Matt made those calls.

"Matt, wait up, man!"

"What have you got?" The radio at his mouth, Matt put a hand over the mouthpiece as Gavin all but ran into him.

"What if he's planning on coming back? He has no reason to think we know where this place is unless he's spotted us. He has another set of spikes in there set up and ready." Matt's face grew still and he slowly lowered the radio, his hand over the mouthpiece. Gavin nodded and continued.

"We know from Rhi that he planned to kill both Chip and Clay. He realized after dealing with Tommy and Carol Ann he wouldn't be able to handle both boys at one time, so he grabbed Chip first because the opportunity was there." Watching Matt's face as he processed the information and determined what to do next, Gavin added, "I think he plans to grab Clay next and bring him back. Probably tonight."

Matt brought the radio back to his mouth. "Hey, Sam. Change in plans."

"What's up? Not him?"

"Yes, it's Chip, but we think the killer is going to make an attempt on Clay and bring him back here, so we don't want to alert him that we found Chip in case he makes it back here with Clay or someone else. It's cold enough that nothing's going to change much in the next couple of hours, anyway."

Gavin could tell Matt was thinking ahead and making plans in case they missed him and he managed to slip away with a victim.

"Okay, where do you need me?" The voice on the other end was instantly on alert. The deputy must have moved out of range of Chip's parents' hearing.

"Head over to Clay's and keep low. The killer is probably going to look at snatching Clay next. Don't use the cruiser; either pick up your truck or go on foot. We don't want to alert the killer we're on to him if we haven't already."

"My son's truck is over there. I'm going to call him to stay put with Clay and I'll go over on foot. I can use his truck if we need to move quickly." Sam's voice was clipped and to the point. He had obviously moved further away from his audience.

"Good idea. Don't alarm them, Sam, but be sure your son knows to stay in the house and keep the group together."

Matt threw his keys to Gavin as they sprinted for the truck. Matt would continue to coordinate the men while Gavin drove back to town. While he notified Terry to round up help and move in to watch the cave, Gavin worked out in his head all the possible scenarios they might have to deal with.

"Matt, he may already realize we've found his spot and change his plans, but I'm pretty sure he planned to come back here with Clay." Gavin interrupted him before Matt made the next call, worried they'd missed their only opportunity to catch the killer.

"Terry should be at the cave in the next ten minutes." Matt's face betrayed the fatigue both men felt, but his eyes remained sharp.

"He's going to try for Clay. He's feeling pressured now, especially with the Jennings boy being watched. He's caught on to us on that one. But I don't think he knows we found his cave or that we're this close to him." Gavin was back in combat mode, his facade of eerie calm belying the energy coiled and ready to strike. It was time to push Matt there, as well. As much as he didn't want to do it, he knew this was going to take extreme measures and both of them to stop it. Matt's next statement caught him totally off guard, though.

"Let's talk to Rhi. We have to stop him. Now. I think she's the key to our being one step ahead of him, or at least on even ground." Dropping the radio into his lap, Matt pulled out his cell phone to make the rest of his calls.

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Chapter Thirty-One

Rhi sat on the loveseat, her legs curled beneath her and her notes spread out on the opposite cushion. Toby lay stretched across the back in a sphinx position, lending an occasional tail flick of disapproval. She ignored the cat's thoughts on what she'd been doing. People's lives depended on Matt and Gavin being able to find the murderer. To do that, they needed to know who he was. She'd managed to learn more about her abilities and how to control them—something she should have done a long time ago instead of hiding like a coward. Now, before it was too late for someone else, she needed to find a way to direct her visions. She couldn't worry about the cost to her.

Relaxing against the back cushion, she caught her breath and gathered the notes into a stack. It took two tries for her to stand and another five minutes of using the furniture for support in order to make it to the bathroom. The face reflected in the mirror barely resembled her own. Sunken eyes with purple shadows beneath them seemed much too large for her face. Not much she could do about it, she admitted to herself, but she could wash the blood from her face and hands and change her clothes. Gavin would be back soon and he'd need her help. Time had run out.

Gavin roared into the parking lot on the bike after leaving Matt at the office to open up. They'd work from the office where all the information lay out on the conference room table. Gavin hadn't bothered with his helmet on the ride over,

but pulled out both helmets of the saddlebags before knocking urgently on the motel door.

His thoughts were already on what lay ahead and when she opened the door to let him in, his first impulse was to just grab her and go, but one look at her face and he switched gears.

"Damn, you look tired." He shook his head and walked inside. He should have known she wouldn't rest. She'd work on finding answers, just like they'd been trying to do.

"I'm okay. What about you?" Her question caught him off guard.

"Uh, fine." He didn't know what to think about that. Instead, he used the opportunity of being near a bathroom to wash away the stench of death and the dirt from crawling around the caverns.

"I'm going to wash all this dirt off real quick and then we need to go over to the sheriff's office. Chip's dead and we're pretty sure the killer is working on taking his next victim." He washed his hands first and then bent over the sink and put his whole head in spray, washing his face at the same time. When he stood up to grab a towel, Rhi had it ready for him.

"I'm sorry," she almost whispered. "He's already got someone else." Gavin cursed and, shaking his head, threw the towel at the tub before pushing past her to the door.

"We need to go, then." He waited for her to follow and shut the door. "Who?"

"I don't know who. Just that he has her." She strapped on the helmet and climbed on behind him as he started the bike. The short trip was over before she managed to settle on the

bike. He didn't give her a chance to worry about how to get down, but lifted her off and almost dragged her through the door while he pulled off his helmet. He took hers as soon as she had it off and left them both on Gail's desk at the front.

"We don't have much time, then. I'll show you what we have and maybe you can help us with the rest. He has a cave outside of town and Matt's deputies are out there watching it now in case he makes it that far."

Rhi nodded, instantly connecting that part of the vision. Gavin watched her when they entered the conference room. Matt was on his cell phone, talking to one of the deputies. At Gavin's questioning glance he, shook his head "no" and continued his conversation. They hadn't spotted anyone yet.

"I've figured out a few things, I think. The bastard's smarter than I gave him credit for. A tactical error on my part." Gavin watched Rhi pull out a chair at the table and sit down. She was shaky all over, but he didn't say anything about it. "He doesn't just change names and move, he assumes the identity of another person from another city or state and applies for a job using their credentials."

Matt closed his phone and remembered to take it off silence before he took the chair across from Rhi. "Nothing moving yet anywhere along any of the roads leading to the caves. I have Terry, Ross and Rick along with two of the city's men posted up there, so that end is covered."

"You're saying he finds someone who is changing jobs somewhere that appeals to him and he copies all his information so he can apply for a similar position somewhere else?" Gavin watched the shock on Rhi's face. She hadn't

thought he would be so organized. To her, he was crazy. This insinuated more than just simply disappearing when he needed to. It meant he planned into the future. Somehow, that realization made it all worse. Gavin didn't see any difference; crazy or not, he was a killer.

Matt pulled out the annuals again with the pictures of the members of the play's cast and crew marked and pushed them across the table to Rhi.

"Look at the pictures we have marked with the sticky slips and see if any of them are familiar to you. These are the people working on the school play. Some of them didn't show up at practice tonight."

Rhi groaned, her hand at her throat. Gavin watched as she took a deep breath and, after glancing his way, opened the first book to look. She picked out two of the girls from the play list, but she wasn't sure which one.

"Both of them were in my visions, but I don't know which one he's targeted. They were together each time I saw them." Gavin just nodded without changing his expression.

"Matt, can you check on them to be sure they're okay?" Matt nodded and picked up the phone to make the first call when his cell phone rang. Dropping the other phone, he answered the cell.

"Gavin, I'll be right back." Rhi got up and headed toward the restroom, leaving Gavin staring after her, worried.

"Damn, Gavin. We've got three missing girls! That was the Chief. They just had two calls about them not coming home after school. One was attending play practice and the other

two were supposed to be at the library finishing up their English papers."

"We've got to figure out who this son of a bitch is!" Gavin looked down the hall where Rhi had disappeared. They needed her help, but he didn't know if she could do it or not.

"What about Rhi? Is she okay? She looked pretty washed out." Gavin winced.

"Yeah, she's been trying to figure out what she can do with this psychic stuff and has been experimenting some. I'm not sure I like it, but we need all the help we can get to find this guy."

"Okay, supposing he is one of the guys we've talked to, who are you leaning toward?" Matt asked, taking the chair next to him. Gavin thought about it and tapped the interview with Benson Pratt, the school counselor.

"He's hiding something." He opened the folder. "He'd be my guess, but it could be that what he's hiding isn't that he's a killer."

Matt nodded, "I was leaning toward him, as well. Something about him gave me the creeps. I get the feeling he's a little more interested in the student's personal lives than their career choices. The Chief has men trying to keep an eye on them but, so far, they haven't found three of them to watch."

Rhi walked back in the room, but bypassed the table to stand next to the map and the bulletin board where the lists had been tacked. She didn't say anything for a long time and Gavin held his hand up when Matt would have asked what she looked at. Her eyes darted back and forth between the lines

that connected the various pieces of information. Then she started talking, almost too softly for them to hear.

"I kept wondering what it was that connected him to me. Where had I touched him? What was I doing when it happened?" Rhi took a deep breath and turned back to where the men were sitting with puzzled looks on their faces. "I think I know now how to find out who he is. I just need to look back to where we met."

"Rhi, you're already exhausted. I don't think it's a good idea to push too hard." Gavin got up with the intention of having her sit back down, but he saw the determination in her eyes and in the stubborn set of her chin.

"Gavin, you don't know me. We only met a few days ago and somehow I don't think you know any more about this than I do. Let me do what I can to find this man. Until he's caught, he'll just continue to kill and I won't rest. I keep waiting for the next dream, the next bloody nightmare." Rhi's voice had grown stronger and louder. Gavin realized she wasn't waiting around anymore. She'd decided to take control of her life in the only way she knew how, forcing the dreams and visions under as much of her control as possible. If there was a way to figure out who he was, she was damn well going to find out.

Gavin backed up a step, holding his hands out by his side. Gritting his teeth, he nodded and waited for her to make the next call. He wasn't sure what to expect, but both he and Matt were totally unprepared.

Rhi sat across from where Gavin took his seat. He held out his hands for hers, hoping she would trust him enough to

See How They Die
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anchor her. She smiled softly toward him and placed her hands in his before she closed her eyes. He felt her focus and hung on as she set about finding the thread that bound her to the madman they chased.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

Rhi focused on the connection, visualizing a thread as fine as a spider's web that ran from her to him. She followed it as it grew thicker until it was a rope she used to pull herself toward him. By the time she found him, the rope was rotten and frayed. She reached to pull one last time and met his hand on the rope. It was discolored and scarred; she'd found her connection.

He was busy with something, distracted with chaotic thoughts, but not angry. She was suddenly afraid of what she was going to find when she made the final connection. Rhi dug down deep into her past for the strength that had kept her alive when emotionally she wanted to die. All those years ago when the pain was greater than she could stand, she'd escaped inside herself and lived one more day. Tonight, she summoned that inner strength and blind determination to see her through this. She knew that something terrible was ahead, but she wasn't sure until she opened her mind to him.

At first, Matt wasn't sure anything was happening. She just sat there with her eyes closed, not making a sound. He could barely make out the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed. He watched her face closely for any sign of distress, but it wasn't until he saw the way her nails dug into Gavin's hands that he knew she'd made the connection.

Matt watched the blood well up from Gavin's hands, but his friend didn't say a word or move. He didn't appear to even be aware that she marked him. His face held nothing of what

was going on. Matt knew his buddy well enough to expect he'd show no reaction to the pain, but still he worried.

She could smell the blood before she focused on the room around her. The metallic taste already clung to her tongue and she nearly choked. Then she could focus and she was no longer blind to what was happening. Why was the taste of blood so strong? Had he tasted the blood? Then she saw him standing over her and she knew she was no longer connected to him. She was linked to his victim.

She couldn't stop the soft cry before she uttered it out loud. Unsure how long she would be able to speak, Rhi quickly described everything she could, hoping Matt was getting it all down.

"He's a master at changing his appearance. He can be anyone. He has so many faces and names now. Even he's not sure who he is anymore." She listened to the thoughts of whoever she was connected to now trying to distinguish one connection from the other.

"I can see him, but I don't know him. She knows him and is afraid, but she's trying to keep from falling apart. The others need her to be strong for them." She gasped and faltered briefly. Gavin was in her head, trying to give her strength, offering comfort. She refused the comfort, but drew on his strength. She couldn't afford to lose sight of the horror. It kept her focused and determined. He couldn't see what she was seeing, but she knew he felt much of what was inside her.

"There are other girls in the room with us. I don't know who they are and can't see them right now. Someone is dead.

She saw him kill her and knows he will kill them all. Her mouth hurts where he hit her earlier and her head is bleeding from where she hit it." Rhi struggled to stay centered. The splintered mind of the killer was overwhelming. She wanted to hold on to the one thread already in her grasp. She needed to find out who she was connected with.

"He's standing over me, smiling and saying something about how easy it was to find them. He hadn't expected there to be so many here." Rhi shivered, knowing Matt would notice her nose had begun to bleed. She could taste it in the back of her throat, but she had to stay connected.

Rhi reached out around her to try to figure out how many were in the room, but couldn't tell. She tried talking to the woman whose mind she had connected with, but it was like having a one-way connection and she was only able to 'hear' what the woman was thinking.

"I can't tell who I'm with, but she isn't a teenager. She's trying to stay calm and figure out what to do, but she's scared." Rhi relaxed and let the emotions and feelings wash through her instead of trying to communicate. "She knows he will kill her and the others." Rhi was beginning to have trouble breathing now. Two different minds trying to push into hers overwhelmed her, confusing her with all the different feelings and heartbeats and breathing. Rhi didn't think she could hold on much longer and nearly let go.

"I shouldn't have come, but I did and now I have to figure out how to get away. Those girls are depending on me. God, I wish Matt was here. He'd know what to do." Rhi gasped for breath as her eyes flew open, searching for Matt as thoughts

of him flooded her mind...thoughts only someone very close to him would have.

"Oh my God," Rhi whispered hoarsely.

Matt didn't get it at first, concentrating on writing every word Rhi uttered, but when he read back over it and looked up to meet Gavin's eyes, he knew. *The bastard had Sandy! He had his wife*

"Where are they, Rhi?" he yelled, grabbing his cell phone and fumbling with the speed dial to call home. "It's almost ten o'clock, for God's sake! She's in bed. You're crazy!" But when the phone just rang over and over, he dialed her cell phone next. The message that the number he was trying to call was not in service sent him close to the edge. He threw the phone across the room.

Gavin let go of Rhi's hands, tearing away from her grip to stop Matt before he lunged across the table to grab her and shake her.

"Easy, man. Calm down. We need you here. We'll find her!" He grabbed his buddy's face with both his hands and made Matt look him in the eyes before he whispered, "I'll get you that shot and you'll take it, just like always. We'll get her home." Matt took a deep breath and nodded stiffly.

Rhi knew what she had to do. She had to find out where they were. She had to connect with the killer again. She had to open her mind to his and listen to what it would tell her. Rhi grabbed tight to the thread belonging to the monster holding Sandy and the others and followed it all the way home.

She knew she was there by the fragmented thoughts jumping around in her head. He was excited to have all his precious angels around him now. Why had he always thought there would be only one for him? He had three and one to cleanse. He glanced over at the dead one and frowned at her. He could have had four, but she wouldn't quit screaming. He tried to tell her she was special, but then she'd called him all those vile names. She had to be cleansed.

Rhi choked back the bile threatening to overwhelm her and began to search inside his twisted mind for a clue to where they were. She wasn't aware that her nose was bleeding again or that she had clawed bloody lines into her arms to keep from screaming in pain. His twisted thoughts ate at her mind, sending splintering pain down her neck and spine. She wanted nothing more than to pull away, but she was going to find him first. Find him and Sandy and those girls before he killed them all.

Gavin struggled to calm Matt down, but just when he thought his buddy had gotten hold of himself, Matt's eyes grew wide and he gasped Rhi's name. Gavin tried to force him back down in his chair, but Matt grabbed Gavin's shirt and twisted him around to see Rhi. She was covered in blood from her nose and from the scratches she had made on her arms. Gavin pulled away from Matt to kneel in front of her.

She was digging her nails into her own palms when Gavin reached her and made contact again. The pain he felt from her tore at him and he tried to jerk her back, but she wouldn't come with him. Instead, she tried to push him away. Knowing she was doing this with or without him, Gavin gritted his

teeth against the pain and offered his strength. If she was going to do this and they were going to find Sandy and the others, he had to ignore his instinct to save her and help her endure instead.

Rhi tried focusing on the man's memories to see if they could tell her how he'd gotten there, but he was so far gone that most of what she got were metaphors and pieces of plays repeating over and over in his mind. He focused on one play and then another so that they became mixed in his head. *The Taming of the Shrew* had scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* in it. The *Phantom of the Opera* had verses from *The Canterbury Tales*. Rhi was getting dizzy and weaker trying to pick something from the mess his memories held. Finally, she gave up on his memories and tried to talk to him in his head.

"Were you followed?" she whispered, waiting to see if he reacted. At first, he showed no sign he heard her, but when he bent down to kiss one of the girls, he hesitated and stood upright. She whispered again.

"Maybe you should have taken a different road." He turned around and around, looking for who spoke to him. She hoped it wasn't making things worse. "What road would have been safer, do you think?" She felt him become worried about someone following him and then he was worried that they were already there in the room with him.

She listened as he talked to himself. "No one could have followed me here. No one is here but my girls and the one they called to them."

Rhi latched on to this and used it, "You're sure no one followed her? How can you trust that she didn't lead them here?"

She held her breath, praying this wouldn't drive him to kill Sandy immediately. When she felt his anger rising, she swallowed the panic.

"This place isn't safe. You need to move them to a safe place," Rhi whispered in his mind and backed away. He screamed in frustration and looked around the room, desperate to assure himself that no one was there. Rhi absorbed all the details she could about the room. It was small and she saw three teenage girls sitting against one of the walls with their hands tied behind them, their feet tied in front. They were all crying quietly, but didn't appear to be hurt. A rack of clothes stood to one side. The body of a girl lay in a pool of blood on the floor by the far wall. Her chest and abdomen were covered with stab wounds.

In front of a dresser against another wall, Sandy sat tied to the chair, her hands behind her back, her feet tied to its legs. The table behind her was a mess of makeup. Mirror! Rhi quickly looked into the dresser's mirror and finally saw the face of the man who had murdered so many teenagers over the years. She didn't recognize him, but then she hadn't met anyone since she'd been in Casper. Just as quickly as her eyes caught sight of his face, he was turning in another direction.

Now, he looked at the door and she willed him to open it so she could see what was out there. But he only turned back to the three girls sitting on the floor against the wall. He

twisted his head this way and that way, trying to see them for who they were. His precious jewels or tarnished baubles—he couldn't tell just by looking. He needed to see their hearts first. That was the only way to know for sure. He bent and picked up one of the girls, carrying her to where the body of the dead girl lay cooling. She screamed again and again.

Rhi's heart stuttered and then raced as she searched for something to stop him. Sandy screamed from where she sat tied to the chair, yelling at him to leave the girl alone.

"What was that noise?" Rhi whispered in his head. When he shook his head and ignored her, she tried again. "Yes, there it was again; are you going to risk someone finding you and losing her again?" She nearly cried out with victory when he ran for the door to check for the noise. He hesitated and she held her breath. If he didn't open the door to check out the sound, she wasn't sure what more she could do. She was so weak.

He was panicking. He couldn't let someone find them. He needed to know which one was pure. He opened the door and stepped out into a dark hall. Rhi kept quiet, afraid she would lose hold of her connection with him before finding out where they were. He headed down the hall and out into an open area where the ceiling was so far off she couldn't focus on it. Where were they? When he pushed through something that felt like material she knew just as he walked out onto the stage, they were in the auditorium at the high school. He had them in one of the dressing areas.

"It's the high school auditorium. They're in one of the dressing rooms." Matt jumped to his feet the moment Rhi

uttered the words. Gavin pulled away from Rhi for an instant to call out to Matt.

"Wait, he'll kill them all if you barge in and corner him. You know that, Matt." Gavin tried to pull Rhi out, but she wasn't leaving until she was sure they were going to be OK. He cursed and then took a deep breath, going back to the mission and his goal.

"Matt, get your gear and meet me at your truck. We have a job to do." He watched Matt visibly fight to control his emotions. Then he nodded at Gavin, heading to arm himself.

Gavin picked Rhi up in his arms and carried her out to the truck. Sitting her in the middle, he helped Matt load up before climbing in next to Rhi. Pulling her nearly limp body back to lean against him, he braced them both while Matt headed toward the school with a determined look on his face. Gavin could tell that he was holding on by a thread right now and he felt that Rhi's connection with the killer was tenuous at best. He searched his own mind for a plan and realized that in all the missions he and Matt had been on, he'd never once considered that one or both of them might not make it back. Suddenly, he was worried about more than just the two of them.

Rhi knew she was sitting between Matt and Gavin in the truck, but she also looked out through the killer's eyes from the stage to the auditorium seats. He searched the seats for the sound she had planted in his head. As long as he was out here, the girls were a little safer. She could tell he was worried, but instead of walking further on stage, he turned and headed back to the dressing areas.

"NO!"

Matt nearly lost control of the truck when she screamed. Rhi felt Gavin trying to reach her, but she was too weak to stay connected to the killer and to him as well. She didn't have a choice. He'd returned to the room where the girls were, and rage exploded into her.

The room spun as he turned around, looking at the girls again—one on the floor next to the dead one and the other two sitting against the wall. Where was the woman? She was supposed to be sitting at the dresser. He'd tied her to the chair; how had she gotten away? He lost control and grabbed one of the girls by her hair, shaking her. The girl screamed and he dropped her to the floor, turning back to the broken chair Sandy had been tied to. He grabbed up the broken chair and threw it against the wall above the dead girl. The chair splintered on impact, with some of the pieces landing on the sobbing girl curled up as far from the body and all the blood as she could move.

Rhi felt him change; the rage melted away to nothing but emptiness. He walked over to the girl where she lay curled up and sobbing. As he knelt next to her, Rhi felt him smile softly and run his hand down her hair. Rhi knew in that instant he would kill her. Helplessly, she watched as his hand grasped the girl's blouse and ripped it down her chest. She didn't scream and Rhi had a second to wonder why before she felt the blow to the back of his head.

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Chapter Thirty-Three

Gavin jerked at the blow he felt through Rhi, hitting his own head on the passenger window. Matt quickly glanced over at him, yelling, "What is it? What happened?"

Gavin shook his head, stammering, "Don't know, felt like something hit her."

Matt cut the lights before he turned into the parking lot beside the high school auditorium. Pulling up to the back of the building, he cut the engine. Turning to where Gavin sat with Rhi pulled tight against him, he waited on Gavin.

"Does this place have a balcony?" Gavin asked.

"Yeah, want me to set up there?"

"Right, set up for a shot center stage and I'll draw him out to you." Gavin carefully sat Rhi back against the seat.

"You know he's gonna have someone with him when I get him out there. Chances are good it'll be Sandy because she's taller than the girls. You've got to take the shot or he *will* kill her. Take the shot." Gavin looked in Matt's eyes and saw the old Matt looking back at him. Could Matt see the old Gavin in his eyes? He sure as hell hoped so because, right now, he didn't feel at all like the old Gavin.

Matt moved out, heading for the balcony. Gavin knew Matt would make it there and set up in less than three minutes. For himself, he had to find which room they were in and flush the killer out to the stage. Making sure Rhi was as okay as far as he could tell, he headed for the building. He nearly jumped when Rhi spoke to him in his mind.

"Sandy got untied... hit him on the back of the head, but he isn't out. He grabbed one of the girls...has a knife to her throat. Sandy's afraid he'll cut her throat. I can feel him wanting to, but he wants to save the girls in case one of them is pure. He's still sure one of them belongs to him." Rhi's voice in his mind was weak, a mere whisper, and when she didn't speak again, he knew he was on his own.

He had to figure out how to draw the man out into the open. Hugging the wall, Gavin eased down the dark hall toward what he hoped would be the dressing rooms. The floor was new enough that he didn't announce his presence with creaks and scrapes. The first door he approached was open and the room inside dark. He carefully crossed it and continued down the hall. A light further down the hall drew his attention. Once he was within ten feet, he heard voices. The male voice, loud and wild-sounding, bounced off the walls and into the hall. The other voice Gavin recognized as Sandy's. He heard crying as he moved closer to the door. Relief in the form of a cold sweat poured from him; at least some of the girls were still alive.

Sandy lost her footing when he charged her after dropping the teenager. He still had the knife and she knew that when she went down, he would stab her. She hit the floor hard and instinctively rolled, but he was on her in a second. She didn't feel the hot pain of the knife as she expected. Instead, she felt his weight on top of her. He actually growled in her ear as he brought the sharp edge of the knife against her throat. She held her breath, afraid that if she breathed it would push her neck against the blade. When he didn't pull it across her

throat, but held it there, she realized he wasn't going to kill her right away.

Instead, he jerked her up as he tried to stand. Sandy gasped for breath, still very aware of the knife at her throat. She had no idea what he was planning to do, but whatever it was, she knew she didn't want to find out. Thinking frantically, she talked to him.

"Mr. Mims, Roger, you don't have to do this," she said trying to catch her breath as he pushed her toward the dressing table. "Why are you hurting these girls? They haven't done anything to you." She tried again.

"You don't know anything about them? They're your children!" He gasped, still out of breath from their struggle. "Most of them are tainted with sin and have lain with men." He pushed her over onto the dressing table, leaning hard into her as he frantically searched the drawers for something.

"They aren't my children," Sandy gasped. "I don't have any children. I can't have children," Sandy tried to distract him.

Hesitating for an instant as if thinking about what she'd said, he continued rummaging in the drawers. "You're lying," he screamed at her.

Finding what he was looking for, he pulled her away from the dressing table and applied a pair of handcuffs to one wrist. Then, changing hands with the knife he kept tight against her throat, he pulled her other hand behind her and snapped the cuff closed over that wrist, as well. Sandy kept talking, her voice hoarse from her raw throat.

"You're killing the girls and they haven't done anything. Why?"

"They were supposed to remain pure for me. I'm their Prince Charming, their knight, and when I come to claim them, they have given themselves to someone else. They didn't wait for me to come."

He was yelling, turning around with her in the room, still holding the knife to her throat, and it dug in as he yelled.

"Maybe you're wrong," she whispered softly, exhausted and feeling the blood trickle down her neck now. "Maybe they did wait for you and you're the one who isn't worthy." She doubted it was the right thing to say, but she had to keep him talking and thinking. She knew that as long as he was doing that, he wasn't killing anyone.

"No, I've waited for them all this time," he growled. "I haven't wavered from my devotion once in all these years. They're all like her. Weak." His words were no longer as shrill now that he'd caught his breath. Sandy felt the knife bite into her neck again as he grew angrier, gripping the knife tighter.

"She might have been weak, but these girls aren't! How can you compare her to them?" she demanded. "What was her name? Can you even remember?" Sandy kept talking despite the pain and the blood she knew oozed down her neck.

"Martha," he said quietly. "Her name was Martha and she was so beautiful. I loved watching her up on the stage, practicing." His voice was a mere whisper against her ear. The knife no longer pressed as tight against her throat.

"She and I talked a lot about the play and she would practice her lines with me." Sandy didn't say anything as he talked. As long as he talked, they were all okay. "I could tell she liked me." He stiffened again. "Until he showed up and asked her out." He jerked Sandy back against him, using the cuffs. "He kept after her and wouldn't leave her alone. She was wearing my locket and he still chased her when I wasn't around."

Sandy needed to calm him down again, but how? She was tired and she couldn't think with the knife biting into her neck again. Then, she remembered he was calmer when he was talking about the play. "What was the name of the play?"

"*Send Me No Flowers*," he said after a second. "She played Judy Kimball and was great!" He seemed to be remembering and then, "Do you remember the play?"

"Yes, I remember it," Sandy replied, searching her memories.

"Do you know who starred in the movie?" he asked, allowing the knife to drop slightly from her neck.

"Yes, Doris Day and Rock Hudson," she breathed out, trying to relax a little with the knife gone from her neck.

"Yes, yes, that's right," he said softly. "Tony Randall was in it, too." He suddenly pulled her over toward the door.

"Did you hear something?"

"No." She didn't know what to do. "I didn't hear anything; what did it sound like?" She tried to remain relaxed against him. He still hadn't put the knife back against her throat and she wanted to keep it that way. He was quiet and she couldn't tell if he was listening for another sound or if he was thinking.

"We're going to look out front to see if there is anyone out there," he told her finally. "Don't try anything or I'll gut you, do you understand?"

At Sandy's rapid nod, he pushed her forward into the hall, staying close against her back, the knife held at her chest. His other hand held tightly to the cuffs, using them to steer her in the dark hallway. A sound stopped him and he leaned down to whisper into Sandy's ear.

"Who's out there? Who did you tell to follow you here?"

"No one," she whispered back, afraid to speak any louder than he did. "I didn't tell anyone; I thought I was just going to pick up the girls and take them home."

Matt inched his way up the back steps until he made it to the landing of the balcony. He crawled on his belly much like he had on so many other missions in the army. Moving only an inch at a time until he settled in the best spot to target his prey, he made sure he wasn't seen or heard. Easing up slowly to look over the edge of the balcony, he located the sweet spot on the stage before moving as far to the left as he could to sit in the shadows and still have a view to make his shot. By moving to the left on the balcony, he improved two things. One, he was further in the shadows, making it less likely he'd catch the target's attention and, two, he had a better chance hitting his target's head from the side with less of the victim's head in the way.

Matt stubbornly referred to Sandy as a victim because he knew thinking of her as his wife, his other half, would cloud his judgment and he couldn't afford to make a mistake with her life on the line. He had never imagined he would one day

have to make a shot to save her life. During all those missions, he didn't once allow her name or image to enter his mind when he set up to shoot. Somehow, he thought it would spare her this. How wrong he'd been.

Once again, he risked looking over the balcony to set up the scene in his mind. Once he was ready to take the shot, all he had to do was move and site the killer in on his scope. His sniper rifle was covered in black material so that nothing would reflect off of it and alert the target. Now all he did was wait for the target to line up for him. Gavin took care of this part. He lured them out and maneuvered them to the X, letting Matt know over a wire in his ear to take the shot. So now he waited.

Gavin moved soundlessly from the hall to the stage and then down into the orchestra's box without alerting the killer he was there. Then he initiated his series of planned noises intended to draw the killer out of the room.

He'd placed a series of small pebbles from the parking lot along different areas of the stage so when he pulled a string, a rock would fall and make a tiny noise that echoed along the stage. The noise wasn't loud enough to startle, just enough to make you stop and listen, wondering where it came from.

Once they were at the back of the stage, he pulled the last string and another pebble fell closer to the front of the stage. He did this just as Sandy answered a question the killer had asked her. It worked perfectly. The killer's sharp intake of breath could be heard all around the room. Gavin waited to see what he would do. He needed to get him out to the center.

The noise was subtle, like a shuffle, or maybe someone kicked something. Sandy felt him push the knife a little harder against her abdomen. She knew her clothes had her protected for now, but it wouldn't take much to pierce them and then her skin. She held her breath and waited for Roger to decide what he was going to do. She prayed he would move out onto the stage, because now, she knew that they were out there somewhere waiting for him. She trusted Matt to keep her safe.

Sandy panicked when he hesitated and then pulled back on the cuffs, taking her with them. She knew he wanted to go back to finish what he'd started with the girls. She had to do something to keep him there and get him further out on stage.

"Roger? Did you ever have a part in the play?" she asked, praying she sounded calm.

"What?" he demanded, no longer moving.

"Where you ever in the play, *Send Me No Flowers*?" she tried again.

"No, I never got picked to be in the plays. I worked with the props and I've directed several in my day." He'd stopped pulling her toward the back and relaxed just a little.

"Didn't you ever want to be on the stage and act in the plays?" Sandy asked quietly. "I was never in a play, either, but I've always wanted to be."

"I practiced the lines with Martha all the time. She used me to help her memorize her lines, but I already had them memorized." He seemed to get lost in the memory. "She'd say... 'Michael, I don't know how I would ever learn all these

lines if you weren't helping me. You cue me just right and they spill right out!" He seemed to be listening to some voice in his head. He looked around, but there was no one.

Sandy heard the words in *her* mind now. How did she know those lines? She'd never studied them or even helped with that play. She didn't take time to question what was going on, but repeated what she heard in a soft voice.

"Michael, I'm still having trouble with Act Two; you know the scene I mean." He pulled Sandy closer to him with his hand, the knife no longer pointed inward at her abdomen. She felt him relax against her and knew it had been the right thing to say. He was responding as if she were his Martha.

"Martha, you know that scene by heart. You're just nervous is all. I'll help you." He moved further out on the stage, pulling Sandy along with him.

"I know, Michael. I just don't know how I'm going to remember them if you're not here when I say them." Sandy continued following the voice in her head.

Gavin couldn't believe what he heard. Rhi was taking what she could glean from the killer's memories and feeding it to Sandy to play the part of Martha. He didn't know how she managed it. He couldn't even sense her presence, as weak as she was, and as much as he wanted to help her, he had no idea what he was doing. He admired her determination, how she continued to discover how to use her abilities. She'd been so afraid of living when they had first met and now she was risking everything—her life, her sanity—to help them.

Gavin quietly moved to his left to be ready in case he could pull Sandy down to safety. He knew that more than

likely there wouldn't be a chance and Matt would have to take the shot with Sandy standing there, but he would be ready just in case. Maybe, with Rhi giving Sandy lines to repeat, she could tell her to jump wide or something. He would have to see when the time came what choices they had.

Sandy repeated her lines exactly as Rhi fed them to her. She didn't try to move away from her captor, but stood as still as a statue. Instead, he urged her to move a little, getting into their play acting. Gavin listened closely as it all unfolded on stage. The man was living in his memories of practicing scenes with Martha. The other girls in the dressing room no longer mattered because he'd found his Martha, the jewel of his dreams. She was still untouched and perfect in his mind.

Their actions moved them further onto the stage and soon they would be in the spot perfect for the shot. Gavin had his hand on his ear piece, ready to alert Matt. Roger and then Sandy moved around the spot, never stopping close enough for a clean shot. Sandy was beginning to tire from the stress and the emotions of the whole nightmare. Roger was wild in the role he played and the madness shone through his eyes.

Rhi felt Sandy's fear beating against her, afraid no one was going to be able to help her. She felt Gavin's frustration when the killer didn't move into the right spot for Matt to take the shot. She didn't know how much energy she had left, but if she was going to do something, she had to do it soon. Once she lost her hold, Sandy would be on her own with no coaching. She really had only one choice and she knew when she took it, there would be no going back. Literally, she might

not have the energy to leave once she moved again. Sandy faltered and stumbled, Rhi made the leap and everything happened at once.

When Sandy stumbled, Roger grabbed her to keep her from falling. He cooed over her and asked her if she was okay. Sandy didn't know what to say; she was lost without the voice in her head to whisper her lines. "I'm not sure. I don't feel well, Michael," she bluffed, afraid of what would happen next.

"Oh, Martha, we've been practicing too long. You need to sit down and have a glass of water." Roger had one hand around her waist and the other, still holding the knife, moved to take her hand. When he saw the knife, he faltered and looked confused. Then the voice in his head calmed him.

"Roger, I don't need a piece of cake right now, I need some water. Put the knife down and pour me some water from the pitcher over there." Rhi struggled to stay alert by directing him. He still looked confused, making no effort to let go of Sandy or move to the other side of the stage.

"Roger? I feel so weak; please get me a glass of water. I need to sit down."

He looked down at Sandy, who was swaying, and helped her sit down on the stage. When he moved toward the other side of the stage, he realized there was nothing there. Turning back around in confusion, he saw Gavin pop out of the box at the edge of the stage, grabbing for his Martha. Screaming "NO" at the top of his lungs, the killer leaped across the stage as Gavin gave the signal into his mouth piece.

See How They Die
by Mary Alice Pritchard

"Take the shot!"

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Chapter Thirty-Four

Gavin moved away quickly when Matt pulled Sandy into his arms. He knew that instinct had taken over and his buddy would have attacked him if he'd tried to approach them then. Instead, he checked the crumpled body center stage to confirm death. Not much need, since most of the right side of the man's head was gone. As he headed toward the back where the girls were still tied up, he pulled out his cell phone and called 911 to report what had gone down at the high school. When the voice that answered sounded familiar, he realized it was Gail from the Sheriff's office. Smiling to himself, he couldn't help but give her some grief, since he knew she hadn't really approved of him being there.

"Gail. This is Gavin, Matt's friend. We're at the high school in the auditorium and all hell broke loose. We need several ambulances and you might call the city boys since it's on their turf." Gavin waited for her to let him have it and demand to know if Matt was okay and what was going on, but she surprised him.

"Hello, Gavin, I'm calling them up now and the ambulances are on their way. You okay there?" she asked calmly.

"Ah, yeah, I'm fine." He just shook his head and smiled; maybe he hadn't read her right, after all. He was getting soft.

"Good, cause if Matt's hurt, you're toast when I get to you. You understand that, Mr. Tall, Dark and Quiet?" Her voice was calm, but he heard the steel behind every word. Nope, he

hadn't read her wrong, just hadn't given her enough respect was all.

"Yes, ma'am. I understand just fine, but Matt and Sandy are both fine, so don't think you need to build a bonfire yet." He closed his cell phone with a snap as she started demanding to know what Sandy was doing there. Smiling to himself, he walked into the dressing room where the smell of blood was still potent and untied the hands of the girls still kneeling and crying. He didn't look toward where the body of the fourth one lay. There was nothing he could do for her now, and he didn't need another innocent face to dream about when he slept at night.

Moving the three remaining girls out into the back of the stage where he'd turned the lights on, he heard sirens blaring as they headed through town toward the school. As soon as someone made it into the auditorium to take over the care of the girls, he would be free to check on Rhi out in the truck. He hadn't felt her in his mind since everything went crazy. He knew she was exhausted and had nearly passed out earlier, so he was sure she was out now. He didn't think she needed to be alone like that. Once this was all over, he really needed to analyze his feelings about her. He was pretty sure he wasn't going to like what he came up with, either.

The police stormed the auditorium, guns out and shouting for everyone to put their hands up. Once a semblance of order was established, Gavin climbed into Matt's truck to check on Rhi. She leaned back against the seat in the shadows, so at first he didn't notice how pale she was, but when he moved to pull her against him, he saw the blood and

felt the cold skin of her face against his hand. Panicked, he yelled for an ambulance and, scooting out of the truck, picked her up to carry her toward the nearest one.

Her face was covered in blood. Her nose and ears were bleeding and she was cold as ice. He thought he could feel a faint pulse in her neck, but wasn't sure he felt her breath against his face. When he laid her on the stretcher, she looked dead and he went totally numb for a minute. *No, she would be all right!* But watching the paramedics begin CPR, he wasn't sure anymore. She'd known there was a good chance if she was in the killer's mind when Matt pulled the trigger, she wouldn't make it out. She'd known and that was why she'd pulled away from him in that moment.

Matt and Sandy walked up beside Gavin as they worked on Rhi. It was Sandy who took Gavin's hand into hers and squeezed it. Another paramedic pulled her away again to tend to her neck and Gavin felt his partner's fear and relief beating against him as he watched them fighting to save Rhi's life. He couldn't seem to wrap his mind around anything now. He could only breathe and watch and will her to live.

When one of the paramedics yelled he had a pulse, everyone working on her began strapping her in and loading her into the ambulance. Gavin went to get into the back with them and the paramedic stopped him. "There's not enough room for us to work with you in here. You can ride up front." And Gavin was in the front seat closing the door as the ambulance peeled out of the parking lot.

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Epilogue

For the next week, the combined forces of the Sheriff's department and the Casper City Police Department sifted through the evidence from the auditorium and Michael Hinks', a.k.a. Roger Mims', home. Once they found the cellar and his treasury of trophies, the FBI showed up. After all, he was a serial killer responsible for more than fifteen murders across five states in the past nineteen years. That was going to clear up a lot of open cases over several states.

Roger Mims worked as a janitor in Slidell, Louisiana. He had applied for the job and moved there as soon as he was out of the hospital and released from care on the burns he'd received trying to save those kids in northern Arkansas. When Casper High School called his last place of employment to check on his references, they were only too glad to give him glowing references. He had burn scars to the left side of his face and both his hands—scars easily created with theater magic.

Once this was discovered, they found the killer had used the same method at each of the schools he'd applied to for jobs over the years. Tracing his bloody path, they confirmed in each case, he'd assumed the identity of a teacher moving from or to Louisiana when he applied for a job at the next school. He picked a town and, using the Internet, accessed the local paper to find what positions were available in the school system. Then he found a teacher who was leaving

another school and researched their history to assume their identity and apply for his next position.

If anyone had ever noticed that one of the teachers who'd left after the murder of one of their teenagers never had references checked, they might have been able to identify their killer sooner. But, a new school year was starting when those teachers not wanting to work there anymore gave notice and changed jobs. Several teachers left at each of the schools after the murder and no one ever questioned them once they left. Had he not chosen a second girl as a possible replacement for his Martha, he might not have been caught this time either, the FBI said. But Matt knew otherwise. They'd had an advantage in Casper at the time—Rhi.

Gavin sat beside the hospital bed, holding her tiny limp hand in his and reading through the paper about the events unfolding around him. He knew Matt was covered up in paperwork and meetings beating the dead body of Michael Hinks one last time. That was something he was glad to have no part in. He never had liked the politics that often came with an official job. Give him his silent orders and paperless commands.

Both Matt and Sandy spent much of their free time there in the hospital with him, sitting beside Rhi's bed. No one ever said much, but they all had the same thoughts. She had saved Sandy's life and the lives of those teenage girls. There just wasn't much more you could say outside of that.

No one would ever know about her part in the whole thing. Her medical record was a total mystery as far as the doctors knew. She'd suffered a mild stroke and some sort of seizure,

perhaps from the stress of the events of that night. It was just assumed she was Gavin's friend and had been in town with him. After all, she was seen with him at the diner and he was in and out of her motel room often enough, and Gavin never denied any of it.

It had been over two weeks since that night and the doctors were saying that her chances of waking up were dwindling as time went by. Her brain scans showed some activity and her CT and MRI were both negative for any new bleeds. So all there was left to do for her was maintenance, as they called it—custodial care that should be handled by another type facility, according to the good doctors. Gavin knew they were discussing putting in a feeding tube and sending her to a nursing home. He just ignored all of it and talked to her in his head. She would hear him eventually and wake up; until then, he would postpone their good intentions.

"Rhi? You need to talk to me, honey. Toby is driving me crazy to feed him all the time and I don't know how much to feed him. He's gaining weight, you know. Much more and I'm going to have to cut a bigger hole in the door for him to get in and out." He sighed and looked out the window. It was close to Christmas and there was snow predicted for the next few days. He could almost smell the crisp cool air that was just outside those windows. The sun was beginning to set and he knew the temperatures would be dropping.

He hated that Sandy would show up in a little while and insist he run back to their house and shower and change clothes. He didn't want to leave Rhi's side, but they'd finally convinced him if he started smelling ripe the hospital would

run him out, so he didn't argue but made the trip quick and hurried back to sit next to her again. During all the time he spent by her side, he never once allowed himself to think about what she meant to him. He couldn't deal with that. Right then, he was the one responsible for her and he'd let her down. She'd trusted him to keep her safe and grounded, be her anchor, and he'd failed that part of his assignment. So, it was his duty to watch out for her until she could watch out for herself again. That was all he allowed in his mind.

"So, I'm the albatross around your neck, am I?"

He jerked up and realized he'd fallen asleep while staring out the window. He'd actually dropped his head onto the bed next to her and was dreaming she was awake and talking to him. Gavin searched her face for any sign and, finding none, continued to stroke her hand and wait for Sandy.

"Gavin? Can't you hear me?" The voice in his head asked quietly. "I thought you wanted to talk."

Gavin felt the slightest movement against his hand and dared to look down. He could barely see it, but there was a twitch to her little finger.

"Rhi? Is that really you I'm hearing?"

"Who else have you been talking to in your head lately?" came the quiet admonishment. "If you're talking to another voice, you need psychiatric help."

Gavin squeezed her hand tightly and laughed out loud—a sound he'd rarely made before he met her and only seemed to make when he was around her. Bending over, he kissed her forehead and fussed.

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"I've been sitting here for weeks talking to you and beginning to think I was crazy when you didn't talk back! You have to wake up now or they're going to put a tube down your nose and ship you off to a nursing home."

Gavin heard the tingle of her laughter in his head.

"I'll haunt you for the rest of your life if you let them do that to me!"

"Then you best start moving some fingers and toes when the docs are here, or Toby and I will be visiting you in the old folks' home." Gavin drew in a shuddering breath and felt his body relax all over for the first time in weeks. She was going to be okay.

"I've heard you talking to me, but I couldn't reach you." She seemed to hesitate before she continued. "I thought I was dead and just in between worlds or something. I was afraid I'd never see you again."

"You can see me right now and for the rest of our lives. Open your eyes, Rhi. Just open your eyes."

He watched her eyes for any sign of movement, conscious of every breath she took. The flutter of her lids left his heart fluttering along with them and when she finally opened them, he stopped breathing for several seconds. The rich green of her eyes filled his heart to the brim and her hesitant weak smile couldn't compare to the massive one he felt take over his face.

THE END

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