



PulsePoints

Barbara Valletto

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by

Barbara Valletto

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by Regal Crest
Tennessee

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Dedication

For loved ones, both living and deceased.

Chapter One

MAYA HOLWORTH HID in the shadows waiting, watching. The winter night loomed frigid and ominous. A sliver of moon hovered like a sickle poised for attack in the blackened sky.

She'd kept this silent vigil for three nights straight as she braved the elements, driven by an obsessive need for closeness to Donia Thorne. Sneaking into the back of the New York University amphitheater to hear Donia talk of paranormal phenomena hadn't quelled Maya's curiosity. The subject matter initially caught her attention; Donia's presence had held it. Maya never considered herself the obsessive type, but Donia exuded an energy, a life force that drew her like a magnet. For years, Maya had yearned for answers to as of yet unexplored secrets, and she sensed Donia could help her understand much that she didn't in her own life.

For three nights the tiny colonial house, a block from the main campus, sat quiet and lightless. On this fourth night, Maya expected much the same. But she held out hope she might get a glimpse of Donia through a window, even if only a silhouette. Much to her surprise, as it neared the midnight hour, the front door opened and Donia came out of the quaint abode wearing a long, black, wool coat with its hood covering her shoulder-length, salt-and-pepper hair. The click of her heels echoed through the night as she moved along the home's narrow cobblestone path to the street. With her heart beating loudly in her chest, Maya carefully stayed to the bushes lining the walk between them and waited for Donia to get far enough away so she could follow her unnoticed.

Donia had gone a short distance before she turned and spoke in a voice hardly above a whisper. "Are you intentionally following me, or do you favor lurking in the shadows?"

Embarrassed the woman spotted her so soon, Maya emerged from behind a grouping of Leland Cyprus trees and waist-high shrubs. "I mean no harm, Professor," Maya said.

"That isn't a concern for me. You are following me, though. Why?"

Maya stammered. "I'm... intrigued by you."

"How so?"

"I'm intrigued by your presence, your aura."

"What do you know of such mysticism?"

"I don't claim to know much, but I sense you can teach me."

Donia pondered her admission so long Maya feared she'd turn her away. Instead, Donia pushed back her hood and moved beneath the glow of a light post. "Come out of the shadows so I can see you."

Obedying her request, Maya walked to within three feet of her. Donia's penetrating gaze made Maya squirm. She felt embarrassed by her frayed black pea coat and worn jeans.

Up close, Maya found Donia younger and her attractive features more defined than what she'd observed from a distance. The premature gray hair had thrown her off. Beneath the lamplight, she could truly appreciate Donia's sea-foam green eyes, high cheekbones, and full, supple mouth. She's beautiful, Maya thought.

“Ah, just as I suspected,” Donia said. “You’re the curious one who’s made it a habit of sitting in the back row during my teaching sessions.”

“You noticed me?”

“You’re difficult to miss with your raven-black hair and piercing blue eyes. But I don’t recognize you as a student.”

“I’m not.”

“Do you have a name?” Donia asked with bemusement.

“Maya. Maya Holworth.”

Donia extended her gloved hand, and Maya took it. Maya felt a tingling in her fingers from the strong grip. The sensation traveled up her arm and radiated across her chest. Overall warmth suffused her body. Strange, she thought.

“I sense you’re a wayward soul, Maya Holworth. Do you search for answers to your future through psychic realms? Is that why my class interests you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Knowledge is power. Psychic knowledge can be dangerous power. Dealing with the unknown is not for the weak at heart.”

Challenged by her words, Maya jutted out her chin. “I don’t fear insight.”

“Even if what you learn leads you into dark passages?”

“I’ve seen my share of darkness.”

“Hmm, I must say, you’re a quite interesting sort,” Donia said. “I find myself drawn to you as well. I see potential.”

Donia again stared at her long and hard. Finally, Donia released the top two buttons on her coat. Maya noticed her slim fingers as she reached inside and pulled a black scarf from around her neck. She handed it to Maya. “You’ll need this.”

Maya stared at her, confused.

“You’ll use the scarf as a blindfold. Take my hand, and I’ll lead you to where others of my kind meet. Do not remove this blindfold unless I tell you to. If you do, your journey towards insight ends here. Do you understand?”

Maya gave an eager nod.

“Consider this your first lesson, Maya Holworth.”

“Lesson?”

“To trust me without any reservations.”

“I do.”

“We’ll see. Trust is the first lesson. There will be many.”

DEPRIVED OF SIGHT and with Donia as her guide, Maya moved alongside her through the night’s stillness. The path Donia selected took many turns and covered much ground. Neither spoke as they travelled with purposeful strides through quiet, suburban streets. Maya felt lulled by the sound of Donia’s breathing and her steady grip on Maya’s elbow.

After many minutes, Donia’s footsteps slowed. “We’ve arrived,” she said.

Maya heard four quick knocks resound against a hard surface. A door. An awkward silence followed. Instead of feeling anxious, Maya’s body thrummed with excitement. I’m dreaming, she thought. This can’t possibly be happening. For weeks, Donia’s presence at the college had drawn Maya to her class like a moth to a flame. Now, blindfolded in the night, Maya found it hard to

fathom that she was standing beside the same woman—a woman who trusted Maya enough to allow her entrance into this unknown place.

A waft of warm air flowed across Maya's face as the door opened.

"Professor." A female voice.

"I've brought a charge," Donia said.

"As you promised."

Maya felt Donia move in front of her.

"You'll need to follow behind me," Donia said. "In a few moments, we'll approach a stairwell. Remember what we spoke of."

"I haven't forgotten. What did the woman mean when she said 'as you promised'?"

"Shh. In time."

Maya's body brushed against Donia's back as they descended the steep, narrow staircase. She flinched each time a step creaked, splintered, or groaned beneath her weight.

"Relax," Donia said. "I won't let any harm come to you."

Maya heard muffled voices coming from below. She sensed anticipation and wondered if it could be for her.

The aroma of incense hung heavy in the air but didn't totally mask a dank, mildewy smell. A basement, she thought. When they reached level ground, Donia gently pulled Maya beside her and slid an arm about her waist. Again, Maya felt the tingling sensation. She leaned in closer.

Donia spoke. "I stand before the committee with my charge. She has sought me out and comes of her own free will."

A throaty female voice, not the one Maya heard at the entrance, spoke. "Can she be trusted?"

"I believe so."

Another voice, quiet, unassuming asked, "Will she allow us to stream?"

"She is open to exploration," Donia answered.

Still another voice, authoritative in tone, spoke. "As always, time is of the essence. We must begin."

ONCE DONIA SEATED Maya in a straight-back chair, she said, "I'm right beside you, Maya. All that's required of you is to extend your arms forward with your palms turned upward. A few chosen committee members will place their hands in yours and come away with insight. It's called streaming. It's a form of telepathy."

"Will they read my mind?"

"Only to the extent you allow. It's important for you to remember that what's revealed isn't meant to frighten you, only to understand your plight."

"I'm not afraid."

"Good." Donia squeezed her shoulder.

Seconds later, someone placed their hands on top of Maya's.

"I see a home lacking love. Three children, two boys and one girl, reside in this home, not all of the same race and varied in age. A domineering figure stands close. A caretaker. He rules with a heavy hand and reeks of addiction. Another caretaker, a female, skulks in the background."

Maya flinched. But when she felt Donia's hand strong and steady on her shoulder, she relaxed.

Another set of hands rested in hers. Maya felt tremendous heat emanating from the source.

“Wait. Someone stands apart from these children. She’s not a child but a girl on the verge of womanhood. She’s consumed with rage but must remain subservient. She’s biding her time. She is who stands before us. Our charge.”

A lump lodged in Maya’s throat.

“Our charge has made a promise to the girl child who cowers beside one of the boys. By fate’s cruel hand, that promise will never be kept. Our charge is left bitter and disillusioned. A darkness festers inside her that craves for release.”

The woman could read her innermost thoughts! Maya’s heartbeat raced and her body trembled.

She felt a displacement of air. Someone knelt beside her and clasped her hands.

Donia spoke. “You’ve searched for me out of need and yearning. I will be many auras to you. Together we can avenge a promise unfulfilled, but you must be willing to transcend normal bounds in order to do so.”

Maya didn’t hesitate. “I am willing.”

“You answer too quickly, Maya. Only time will tell just how willing you’ll be.”

Once they’d gone enough of a distance from the secret place where the committee met, Donia undid Maya’s blindfold. Maya blinked once, twice to adjust from the blindfold’s pitch blackness to the night’s muted grayness.

“Were you frightened by what the committee could see?” Donia asked.

“No. I felt accepted by them. I’ve been lonely for so long and have had no one interested in me enough to care.”

Donia patted Maya’s shoulder. “Your search for inclusion is over.”

“What did the one committee member mean by ‘streaming’?”

“Streaming is probing a charge’s subconscious and pinpointing events that torment them. Streaming is riding brain waves, what we call pulse points.”

“And that’s how the committee could read my mind? By riding my pulse points?”

“Yes, but only because you allowed them to merge with your inner psyche.”

“I didn’t realize my thoughts were so transparent,” Maya said.

“It depends on the level of trust achieved. The important key to remember is you’ve arrived at your crossroads and have made a life-altering decision. A new life awaits, but other matters take precedence. Where are you staying?”

“At a women’s shelter, until I can get on my feet. I work at the campus library, trying to save as much money as I can to afford a place of my own.”

“You’ll stay with me from now on,” Donia said. “We’ll collect your belongings from the shelter in the morning.”

Maya clutched a worn satchel suspended from one shoulder and slung across her chest. “No need. All that I own, I carry with me. Shelters have their fair share of theft when it comes to personal belongings.”

Donia appraised her scant clothing and tiny bag. “You’re a survivor, Maya Holworth.”

“I haven’t been given much of a choice.”

“Many weaker in spirit couldn’t have endured such hardship. You see, I’m able to stream deeper than the others. I suspect it’s because you feel the closest to me. You’ve been a ward of the state your entire life, haven’t you?”

Donia’s perceptiveness didn’t confound Maya. She’d experienced enough that evening that defied reason.

“Yes.”

Donia continued to scrutinize her. “Transferred from one foster placement to the next, until you reached the age of majority and were cast out into society to fend for yourself.”

Tears welled in Maya’s eyes, and she tried, to no avail, to blink them back.

“I know about the man with the heavy hand. I know how he beat you and your foster brothers and sister whenever he drank. I know how child welfare disregarded your allegations. I know how you prayed for the day when you’d age out of the system so you could start a new life. The girl child...”

“Emily.” Maya’s voice hitched.

“You promised to return for her, to adopt her once you achieved personal and financial stability.”

Maya hung her head. “I was too late.”

“What happened, Maya?”

“The bastard killed her. I saw it in a nightmare. He threw her down a flight of stairs during one of his drunken rampages. Police report stated she fell. No one questioned foul play because of his status as a respected member of the community. No one knew him as the monster I lived with for five years.”

“You want him to pay, don’t you?”

In a voice laden with malice and contempt, Maya said, “I want him to die.”

“And so he shall.”

Maya fixed Donia with an eager, hopeful expression. “When?”

“In due time.”

AS SOON AS Donia opened her home’s front door, a strong sense of familiarity overcame Maya. Although she’d never set foot in the house, she felt she belonged there, that she’d finally reached her sanctuary.

Donia removed her coat and hung it on a burnished metal hook by the front door.

“The bathroom’s upstairs to your right. You’ll find a set of loungewear laid out for you on a stool beside a vanity. Please feel free to bathe or shower. When you’re finished, come down and I’ll fix you a light fare to eat. You must be famished.”

Maya’s stomach grumbled out a reply.

“I’m confused, Donia. How did you select clothing for me to wear before you left the house? You didn’t know I was outside watching you.”

Donia reached out and stroked Maya’s cheek. “You are the curious one. You’ll question much more once our lives become entwined. I promise to answer all your questions. For now, wash away the day’s worries. Although late for some, the night’s young for those who seek insight.”

AFTER MAYA LUXURIATED in a hot bath, she dressed in a pair of flannel pajamas and wool socks. She returned to the living room, where she found Donia seated on an oversized cushion in front of a blazing fireplace. Maya couldn’t be certain what drew her in more, the fire or the beautiful woman sipping a gold-toned liquid from a crystal glass.

She found it difficult to gauge Donia's age. She guessed Donia had at least ten years on her. It didn't matter. Maya found her ageless. Timeless. An enigma.

A tray of various cheeses and fresh, sliced fruit sat on a coffee table. A glass containing the same colored liquid Donia poured for herself sat next to the tray.

The magnitude of how far she'd come in the space of a few hours astounded Maya. This night, she wouldn't be shivering from lack of heat and bedding on a stale-smelling mattress, on the floor of the women's shelter. This night, Maya believed she'd sleep the sleep of babes, innocent and unhindered, in proximity to the woman who'd saved her life.

At the sound of Maya's approach, Donia turned toward her and patted the cushion beside her. Maya hungrily eyed the tray of food.

"Don't be shy, Maya. Eat to your fill. I've poured you some whiskey. It'll help take the chill of winter out of your bones. I assume you're close enough to legal age to imbibe."

"I'm twenty."

"Close enough."

Once Maya sated her appetite, her curiosity returned. "Donia, will you tell me now what the woman meant by 'as you promised'?"

"You're not the only one who's attuned to another's presence. I've anticipated your need to reach out to me for a long time."

"Are you a seer?"

"Of sorts."

"And the committee? Who are they?"

"What are 'we,' you mean. We are Psys."

Maya raised her eyebrows in question.

"Psy stands for psychic," Donia said. "We're a select group of women who strive to understand the basis of psychic phenomena. We're not witch doctors, nor do we practice voodoo or satanic rites of any kind. Psys delve into such unexplained supernatural abilities as telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition."

"I'm not sure I know of such phenomena."

"Which is why you've become my charge."

"Charge?"

"My student. I very much want to teach you how to make a difference in the world for others not strong enough to take care of themselves."

"Like Emily?"

"Yes."

"Will I be able to stream others' pulse points?" Maya asked.

"In time."

"Yours?" Maya looked at her eagerly.

"Maybe. If I let you."

"I want to learn."

Donia smiled. "Tomorrow."

MAYA AWOKED THE next morning to the mouthwatering aroma of fresh-brewed coffee. She rubbed sleep from her eyes and lazily stretched on the king-sized, four-poster bed. Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined her life could so drastically change. One minute she was in

line at the neighborhood soup kitchen, hoping the attendant would ladle out more noodles and chicken than broth and fighting for personal space at the women's shelter. The next minute, she was indulging in hot baths and fire-lit conversations. Donia had opened up a new world for her that, indeed, transcended normal bounds.

Eager to see Donia, Maya kicked her legs free from beneath a down comforter. She padded into the guest bathroom, splashed water on her face, gargled, and shuffled down the hall to the living area. On her way, she snuck a peek through Donia's open bedroom door and found her bed made. Had she slept at all? Maya frowned in disappointment when she entered the spacious, combined living room-dining room area. Donia wasn't there either.

As she wandered into the kitchen, Maya grinned. A plate of croissants and muffins rested on a countertop. A coffee mug sat next to an automatic coffeemaker. She spotted a note as she filled her mug.

In fine, hand-printed script it read: "Meet me in the lecture hall at dusk. Do not turn on any lights. D~"

Cryptic. Definitely cryptic. With each passing moment, Maya's fascination with Donia grew.

When she glanced at an ornate grandfather clock, she gasped. She'd slept well into the afternoon hours. If she didn't hurry, she'd be late for work. She snatched a lemon-flavored pastry and hustled to her bedroom to change.

MAYA TRIED TO keep her mind occupied with cataloging and shelving books so that the hours would pass quickly until she could see Donia. No use. Anticipation had full rein on her emotions and refused to let go. When it came time to clock out, she jammed her ID card into the slot and bounded out the library's front door. She set off at a brisk gait toward the amphitheater.

As she approached the large, oval-shaped building, she observed the absence of interior lights. From outside, it appeared closed and locked tight for the night. She remembered Donia's note instructing her to meet her inside and not to turn on lights. Obviously, Donia had a key.

When Maya entered the amphitheater, she noted its sole illumination radiated from two battery-powered Exit signs positioned on opposite sides of the main stage. The rest of its interior remained cloaked in darkness. Using the edges of the chairs as a guide, she carefully inched her way down the sloped aisle past rows of seats. When the aisle leveled out, she fumbled her way to the raised platform and plopped down on its wooden surface.

With legs dangling and mind roaming, she didn't entertain any thoughts of vulnerability. She favored the dark and welcomed the quiet. The sensation of being out of touch with the visual world intrigued her. She closed her eyes and waited for Donia to arrive.

Suddenly, a hand snaked around her neck and pulled her backwards so fast, Maya didn't have a chance to choke out a scream. Just as she tensed to defend herself, the fierce hold released.

"You've left yourself open to danger," Donia whispered in the darkness. "Your sense of awareness should never weaken." Donia moved in front of her and massaged Maya's neck with warm hands. "Did I hurt you?"

Maya relaxed from her soothing touch. "No, just scared the bejesus out of me."

"Some lessons may be hard learned."

"Lessons?"

"Yes, Maya. Class has begun."

LATER, IN DONIA'S home, Donia lit an incense cone and placed another log in the hearth. She nestled down beside Maya on an oversized floor cushion.

The incense's pungent fragrance made Maya feel lightheaded.

"That smells so intoxicating, it should be illegal."

Donia laughed. "What you're savoring is a unique blend of incense imported from the Far East. Its purpose is to heighten awareness and stimulate the senses."

"So you do get a high?"

"Of sorts, but a perfectly legal one."

As Maya watched bursts of firelight dance in Donia's eyes, she felt the first stirrings of desire. Afraid Donia might've streamed in on her stray, lustful thought, Maya dropped her eyes. Seconds later, when she chanced a peek, Donia's expression hadn't changed.

"I imagine, Maya, growing up in foster placement, you've sometimes had to resort to physical action to achieve dominance?"

"If you're asking if I know how to use my hands, yes, I can take care of myself."

"You're a diamond in the rough."

Maya bristled. "If by that you mean I'm uncultured, so what? Do you think of me as less worthy?"

Donia grasped her hands. "Oh my dear, sweet Maya. I didn't mean to offend you. All Psys are unrefined in their gift at first. Skills are honed over time and with much practice and patience."

Maya's anger faded, and her insides fluttered in reaction to Maya's terms of endearment.

"The challenge most Psys face is physical capability. More often than not, a nemesis is male and possesses great strength. Paranormal powers are mental, not physical. You'll not be endowed with superhuman strength, thus you need to prepare your mind and body for battle."

Donia squeezed Maya's hands. "It's not enough to possess street-smarts in disarming an enemy, which Psys refer to as prey. Establishing and maintaining an element of surprise is essential in order to immobilize your prey and render vengeance. You must first learn to stalk your prey, to learn all that's needed to gain insight into its character and habits.

"Beginning tomorrow and for many days thereafter, I'll teach you basic self-defense techniques and various martial art forms. With practice, you'll learn to react or adapt in a split second and to use your weight and shifts in balance to disarm prey."

Donia surprised Maya when she leaned forward and kissed her on her cheek. "But for tonight, sleep well."

Chapter Two

OVER A COURSE of months, Donia taught Maya much in the way of self-defense and utilizing her ingrained, physiological senses to their fullest potential.

On one bitterly cold February evening as dusk descended, Donia again blindfolded Maya and led her into what felt like a desolate section of woods.

“What do you hear?” Donia asked.

“I hear nothing but the wind howling in my ears and my teeth chattering.”

“Those are peripheral sensations that hold no significance in the scheme of psychic perception.”

“It’s damn cold out here, Donia.”

“You need to control your body, Maya. Focus your concentration inward. Tap into those resources that lead to psychic insight.”

Maya distanced herself from any external stimuli that could distract her from sensing danger. She’d surprised herself at how adept she’d become at mastering control over her body and emotions.

“Now, I ask you again. What do you hear?”

“I hear a soft rustle of leaves, the sound of something foraging for food or burrowing to hide it. I sense many pairs of eyes, feral eyes watching me. Watching us. We’re being stalked.”

“Are you afraid?”

“No. I sense curiosity and fear in the creatures surrounding us. Although many, they don’t possess enough power in numbers to do us harm. They’re wary of our presence, though, and uncertain why we’re here.”

“Your perception’s keen and well-honed. Now we’ll put it to the test. Hold out your hand.”

Maya felt the weight before she recognized the appealing scent of the object Donia had placed in her palm: a thick wedge of peeled apple.

“What you now possess has altered the creatures’ perceptions of you,” Donia said. “You now possess something they desire.”

“I’ve become prey.”

“Yes.”

Maya heard a soft whishing sound behind her before she felt Donia’s hands on her waist.

“I’ve laid out a blanket for you to sit on. Tonight’s lesson is to see how close these scavengers will get to you before you sense them. I want you to remain perfectly still, with your legs crossed in a lotus-like position. Rest your forearms on your thighs with your palms upturned. You’ll continue to hold the apple in one palm, while I place a hunk of raw meat in the other.”

“Will you stay with me?”

“No. I’ll be enough of a distance away so as not to disturb your interaction.”

Once seated and in the position Donia instructed, Maya opened her fingers. She winced and tried not to gag when Donia placed a fleshy hunk of meat in her palm. She smelled blood. It made her stomach lurch.

“I’ll ask you once more, Maya. Are you frightened?”

“No.”

“Cold?”

“No.”

“Ready?”

“Yes.”

Donia lightly tugged on Maya’s blindfold. The fabric tickled her cheeks as it drifted into her lap. Donia knelt before her.

“Once we begin, you’ll need to keep your eyes closed until the last possible moment.”

“What do you mean by ‘last possible moment’?”

“You’ll know when the time comes. You’ll sense it. Remember, I won’t be far away.”

Any conception of time evaporated as Maya sat alone in the stillness, surrounded by night’s darkness.

Her senses came alive and filled her with wonder. Over the nauseating stench of raw meat, she smelled pine cones and evergreen trees. She heard soft mewling sounds and low throaty moans. She felt exposed and vulnerable but unafraid.

When the time arrived, she opened her eyes and stared into the sly, cunning eyes of a medium-sized red fox. It crouched within a foot of the hand holding the meat.

Her eyes deadlocked on the fox. Its body tensed, and the hair along its back bristled when it realized Maya’s awareness. Strangely, it didn’t retreat in fear. It held its ground. And then, ever so slowly, its eyes still fixated on Maya’s, it inched forward and with its long, narrow muzzle nudged the meat. Maya didn’t move a muscle, not even when the fox bared its teeth and began to lightly nip at the bloodied slab. It gnawed for a while before, overcome with hunger, it latched onto the thick slice and sprinted off.

From somewhere behind her, Maya heard the sound of clapping.

“Well done,” Donia said.

ON ONE UNSEASONABLY warm afternoon in early spring, Donia brought along a blanket and a picnic lunch. She set out a long, slim loaf of French bread and a large wedge of Brie. Maya’s mouth watered.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” Donia pulled a bottle of chardonnay from a backpack.

They settled in for a lazy afternoon on the edge of a lightly-flowing stream, beside a waterfall.

“Are you pleased with my progress, Donia?”

Donia flashed a smile that warmed Maya far more than the wine. “Very much so. You’re a natural.”

Maya felt her cheeks burn. “Tell me more about streaming.”

Donia brushed bread crumbs from her lap and lay back on the blanket. Maya had the insane urge to run a blade of grass across her eyelashes. Instead, she lay beside her, propped up on an elbow.

“To some extent, humans possess the inherent ability to tap into psychic streams of energy. Either they’re unaware of their potential to do so or frightened by it. Most shy away from that which isn’t understood, which is why paranormal exploration is often stigmatized. Then there are people like us who embrace the potential of such power and how it can be used to conquer evil.”

“What do you mean by inherent ability?”

“Let me give you some examples. Have you ever voiced something a close friend or lover was about to voice but you beat them to it?”

“It’s happened on occasion.”

“Or you sense the phone is about to ring and who the caller is before it does?”

Maya’s lips spread wide.

Donia continued. “Or you dream about someone from your past and shortly thereafter, they make contact with you? How many times have you heard someone say, ‘You’re reading my mind’?”

“Too many times to count.”

“Again, for many what can’t be explained is cast aside as insignificant. Throughout the centuries, many terms have described psychic ability. Some cultures refer to psychic phenomena as the Mind’s Eye, or the Third Eye, or Inner Eye. Psys rely heavily on clairvoyance or clear seeing, which is the ability to perceive what’s not physically present. Psys are unafraid to delve deeper into dream interpretation and altered states of consciousness. Many souls in need reach out to Psys through dreams. Within these dreams, there exist subtle clues. The key is to recognize them. Once this is accomplished, a Psy can stream along the pulse points of whoever has sought them out.”

“Amazing,” Maya said.

“It’s important to know that just because you possess the gift to stream doesn’t mean you can read everyone. It depends on a person’s willingness to let you in—or their determination to keep you out. Sometimes, you can’t read the people you’re closest to. It’s much like one who isn’t satisfied seeing that you’re alive but has to have a finger on your pulse at all times for reassurance.”

“So the closer one gets to someone, the harder it becomes for them to stream?”

“Sometimes.”

“Is that why I can’t stream into your thoughts?” Maya asked.

Donia met her gaze but didn’t answer. “It’s getting late. We should return to the house.”

THREE WEEKS LATER, in the home they shared for the past six months, Maya waited in anticipation for the sound of Donia’s approach. Although night had fallen, Maya hadn’t turned on any lights. Instead, she’d purposely loosened the bulbs on the table lamp beside the door and the floor lamp leading into the living area. She felt in tune with the darkness, one with it. Unbeknownst to Donia, Maya had left the library early, so she could prepare the stage for her performance before lying in wait. Now, the only sound invading the home’s silence came from the tick tock of the second hand on the grandfather clock.

Ten minutes later, she heard Donia’s footsteps on the cobblestone path and the jangle of keys as she pulled them from her black leather satchel. Maya smiled when she heard Donia humming a light, lilting tune. When the key slid into the lock and the door opened, Maya crouched lower and braced herself for action. Donia sighed and said something under her breath when she tried

the table lamp and it didn't turn on. Maya heard the weight of her bag hit the floor and the clip clop sound of feet ridding themselves of shoes. Next, the soft whoosh of a coat sliding from shoulders. Then, Donia's footsteps inched forward in the dark and made their way haltingly into the living area.

Donia tried the floor lamp, and it didn't work. "What the hell?"

As Donia's words echoed through the living area, Maya lunged at her. She jammed a knee into the back of Donia's leg, grasped her about the waist, and flung her backwards over her shoulder. She landed with a soft thud on a pile of floor cushions Maya had laid out after she'd moved the coffee table from harm's way.

Within seconds of immobilizing her, Maya was on top of Donia, straddling her. Maya flashed a victorious grin and repeated the words Donia had used that night so long ago in the amphitheater. "Why, Donia, you've left yourself open to danger. Your sense of awareness should never weaken."

"You outwitted me," Donia said.

"I seem to remember you saying something about lessons often being hard learned."

"Maya Holworth?"

"Yes, Donia Thorne?"

"You are ready."

When Donia struggled to sit up, Maya tightened her thighs against her hips and leaned in closer. "I'm ready for many experiences, and not all involve vengeance."

Maya stared deeply into Donia's eyes and this time, unlike others, Donia maintained eye contact. Whatever psychic connection had restricted Maya from reading Donia's thoughts vanished. Donia's mind opened, exposing her thoughts and emotions.

Without a word, Maya bent down and grazed her lips over Donia's. When she drew away, she found Donia's lips trembling.

"Is that how you envisioned it?" Maya asked.

Without waiting for Donia to reply, Maya leaned ever closer and ran the tip of her tongue along the contours of Donia's upper lip. "And this?"

In a throaty voice, Donia said, "Why, Maya Holworth, I believe you can read my mind."

THICK, BLACK-GREY CLOUDS thundered across a half-moon sky. Maya lurked in the shadows of an abandoned alley. She bided her time as she stalked her unsuspecting prey. An impending storm brought dense fog that made visibility poor, but Maya didn't mind. Under the shroud of darkness, she could move about without detection.

As planned, she'd dressed in a tight-fitting, one-piece, black spandex bodysuit and steel-toed black shoes. A skull cap concealed her hair. Donia had explained that clothes should never be a hindrance when in the midst of a confrontation. "Never give a prey anything to grab onto," she'd said.

Her eyes watered from the stench of stale beer and urine that hung cloyingly in the air. She shuddered and tried not to think about the squeaking and clawing sounds coming from behind mangled trashcans to her right. She shifted from one foot to the other and stomped her feet to keep potential night crawlers and disease-ridden scurriers at bay.

Her attention remained focused on the seedy-looking, two-story establishment across the street from where she'd hidden. From the outside, it appeared abandoned with its bricked up

windows that framed a black-painted front door. Graffiti-splattered houses flanking the dilapidated structure had collapsed in on themselves. Rubble and discarded car parts littered the broken sidewalks.

Maya had spent enough nights scoping out the area to know many illegal transactions went on behind the structure's supposedly condemned doors. One could get anything they wanted upon entering: drugs, booze, sex, deals with the devil. She shook her head in disgust as she watched patron after patron, some dressed in business attire, leave the ground floor from a side door and ascend a rusted and rickety, pull-down metal staircase. Upstairs a den of iniquity awaited the patrons, and energies spent would be on the clock. Time is money, she'd heard one of the prostitutes say, as she led a staggering John toward the building.

Impatience festered within Maya. She'd waited so long for this moment, had so prepared for it with every ounce of her being, that now she wanted to act. Maintain control, she remembered Donia telling her.

Do not lash out prematurely. Do not give the prey any chance to overtake you. Impulsive action leads to mistakes, and mistakes can cost you your life.

Maya took a deep breath to steady her nerves and clenched a hand around a hard metal object. Its weight reassured her. She would release her wrath of vengeance on Gerald Bradford, her former foster parent and the man responsible for Emily's death. Oh yes, on this dismal night, he'd know what it meant to beg for his life.

An hour passed since Bradford consumed his fill of drink and ascended the metal stairs. Maya was certain he'd come there to partake in sexual delights. She knew deception ran deep when it came to his nightly activities. He'd chosen this side of town, this hell-hole twenty miles from his suburban, well-tended home, because he felt confident no one would recognize him. This impoverished, godforsaken place posed no threat to mar his upstanding reputation as devoted husband, active community leader, and devout churchgoer. Oh yes, and dutiful caretaker of orphans. *Bastard*. He'd killed Emily. Maya had waited two years to make him suffer.

The night of reckoning had arrived.

She winced at the sound of a rusty hinge echoing in the night. She stared across the street at the building. A door opened on the second level, and a man's silhouette hovered in its entryway. Maya thought she heard silent whimpering coming from inside the room before the door slammed closed and the shadowed figure moved toward the stairs.

She quickly identified her prey as Bradford from his husky build and stilted gait. His bum knee must be acting up again, she thought. Too bad. In a few moments, the knee would be the least of his pain.

With nerves on edge and body poised for action, she watched Bradford hitch up his trousers and spit out a gob of bile before heading across the street in her direction. Earlier, she had spotted his city-appointed car around a corner amidst densely overgrown hedges, twenty feet from where she lay in wait.

Maya raised the cold, hard cylindrical object up to her shoulder and gripped it with both hands. She heard Donia's voice again in her mind. Timing is essential. Maintain an element of surprise. Put yourself in a position where leverage will work to your advantage. Do not let down your guard. Strike hard and fast. With precision.

Maya pressed her back flush against the alley's mucky wall. Bradford's elongated shadow move ever closer. He progressed a few feet past the alley's opening. She jumped out and slashed him hard across the back of his neck with the metal pipe. Bradford let out a startled shout and staggered forward. Maya hunkered in front of him. Using her weight, she knocked him further

off balance. His massive frame collapsed. His body sprawled inside the alleyway instead of on the sidewalk.

Once he was down, she stuffed a wad of soiled cloth into his mouth. It muffled his screams and moans of agony when she viciously swung the pipe again and again. Every time he tried to get to his knees, she lashed out at him. In a futile attempt to escape from Maya's fury, he pulled himself on his elbows farther into the alley. Certain he wasn't in any condition to retaliate, Maya held back as he struggled to flop over. He managed to get on his side, and Maya booted him the rest of the way over. Bradford stared up at her with a dazed look in his eyes. Maya tore off her skull cap. She wanted there to be no doubt who his attacker was. Seconds later, recognition flickered in his eyes. His confused, pained expression changed to pure terror.

Standing above him with her legs spread and the bloody pipe gripped in her hands, Maya said, "You lay before me as helpless as your past victims. I strike out of vengeance for innocence lost. For Emily's innocence."

Maya raised the pipe above her head and brought it crashing down on Bradford's skull repeatedly, until she knew he was dead.

LATER, MAYA SAT wrapped in a sheepskin blanket with Donia beside her. "Donia, do you think our souls are beyond redemption for what we've done? That if a heaven does exist, we'll never be allowed entrance?"

Donia placed a light kiss on her lips. "I believe in an eye for an eye. I believe we serve a higher purpose by ridding the world of evil. I do not harbor guilt for my actions. Every second of the day, innocence is dashed and loved ones are left devastated. If I can avenge one person who's met a violent end, or save a person from meeting a violent end, I will do so."

"It's not guilt that prompts me to question my commitment. I just don't want us separated in the physical world or in the netherworld. I want to go where you go. And if it isn't heaven, or someplace akin to heaven, I'll gladly follow you into hell."

"For now, my dear, sweet Maya, I want you to follow me into sleep."

DONIA'S WHIMPERS WOKE her before dawn. Concerned, Maya roused Donia from her slumber.

"What?" Donia asked.

"You were crying in your sleep."

Donia shuddered. "I had a bad dream."

Maya reached for her. "You're trembling." When she caressed Donia's face, her fingers came away wet. "And those are real tears."

Donia swiped at her eyes and buried her face in her pillow.

"Do you remember any of your dream?"

Donia shook her head. Maya pulled the pillow away.

"A nightmare that upsetting isn't easily forgotten," Maya said.

"Some nightmares aren't meant to be recalled."

"Which means what?"

"I can't talk about it."

“Can’t means you won’t.”

Donia pulled Maya close. “Isn’t it enough for you to know you rescued me from my demented imagination?”

Of course it wasn’t enough, but what choice did she have? In resignation, Maya didn’t probe further. Donia rolled on her side, and Maya stroked her back until she fell asleep.

The next morning, Donia’s mood hadn’t improved. She was quiet and withdrawn. It pained Maya to see Donia distressed, but it pained her even more that Donia wouldn’t confide in her. For the time being, Maya would give Donia the space to work through whatever troubled her.

A FEW DAYS later, over a romantic, candlelit dinner, Maya asked, “So, how did you become part of the ladies’ auxiliary?”

Donia scowled at her over the rim of her wineglass. “I doubt the committee would appreciate your sarcasm.”

“Would you rather I call the Psys a modern-day witches’ coven?”

“Careful. Witches are known to cast spells.”

“Come on. You don’t think it’s peculiar that their meetings always occur on or around midnight? Folklore describes midnight as the witching hour, the time when supernatural activity is at its peak of strength.”

“Which is why the committee meets at that time. As I mentioned before, a victim’s pleas for help are often transmitted while in the deepest realms of sleep.”

“You mean while in REM sleep?”

“Yes. It’s when the subconscious takes over and a person’s thought processes are no longer under their control. Often times, their inability to cope with real-life, traumatic events during wakefulness are relived while in this dream stage.”

“And the Psys are able to stream into these thoughts?”

“Yes, through the use of telepathy. Like a puzzle, each Psy extracts vital pieces of information in order to establish a clear picture of a victim’s torment. Once the puzzle is complete, the Psys decide the degree of retribution inflicted upon the victimizer.”

“When will I become an active participant in streaming? I feel like an outsider.”

“Patience, Maya. You still have much to learn. In time, you’ll master the ability to tap into your own inherent supernatural resources and assist us in combating forces of evil.”

THAT EVENING, DONIA roused her from sleep. Maya propped herself up on her elbows and blinked in the darkness. “What’s wrong?”

“The Psys have called a meeting.”

Maya no longer wore a blindfold as she accompanied Donia to what Donia referred to as the “safe house.” With the exclusion of the blindfold, Maya felt she’d gained their trust. She followed Donia as they descended the rickety stairs to the meditation room. The three committee members, seated in their designated positions at the room’s center, knelt with hands clasped. As before, the smell of incense hung heavy in the air. A flickering candle cast the Psys’ faces in an eerie glow. The tension was palpable. Maya searched first Angeline’s, then Margarite’s, and

finally Beatrice's eyes for any indication of why they were summoned. Their somber expressions made her uneasy. Something has happened, she thought.

Without a word spoken in greeting, Donia dropped to her knees. She reached for Beatrice's hand on her right and Angeline's on her left to close the circle. Out of habit, Maya moved toward a worn, leather divan set up in a corner.

"She must not stay," Beatrice said.

Her vehement tone stopped Maya dead in her tracks. "What did you say, Beatrice?"

"You cannot stay, Maya. Not this time."

Stunned, Maya turned to Donia for support and felt her cheeks burn when Donia kept her eyes lowered.

"You must heed Beatrice's words," Donia said. "They are spoken for your own good."

Anger and embarrassment flooded through Maya. When she glanced at the other women to see their reactions, their eyes also remained downcast.

"I see," Maya said. "Beatrice gets to speak for the coven." She felt a twinge of satisfaction when Beatrice stiffened at her choice of words. "Dare not any of you express your own opinion or risk expulsion? That's so fucking pathetic."

Maya pounded up the stairs and slammed the front door.

Fury engulfed her. She roamed the streets and lashed out at any obstacle in her path. She felt betrayed by the woman she loved and trusted and shunned by the women she thought accepted her. The realization she again found herself an orphan shouldn't have come as a surprise, but it stung just as deep as the tears that welled in her eyes. "I'm a fool to believe a better life exists for me. I deserve their loss of faith for being so damned naive."

The sound of hurried footsteps echoed behind her. She whirled to see Donia. Maya thrust out an open palm. "Don't bother."

"Maya, some things are difficult to explain and understand."

"Let's be honest, Donia. It's not my ability to understand that made them—that made you—exclude me. It stemmed from distrust. I felt their animosity as soon as we entered the meditation room. What did I do to deserve such rejection? From them... more so, from you? When did you lose trust in me? And for that matter, why did you even include me in tonight's meeting?"

"Trust is not the issue. As for asking you to come, I didn't know you'd be told to leave until we sat down to stream. Sometimes, these things are unclear until the Psys gather as one. I know it doesn't make it right."

"I don't believe you when you say you trust me. There's no other reason to shut me out. What confuses me is how circumstances between us changed so fast. Up until the night you had that nightmare, your thoughts were an open book to me. Now, all I see are blurred pages."

"Your perception's wrong. If my thoughts are hard to read, it's because my emotions are in a state of unrest."

Donia's admission of distress diffused Maya's anger and filled her with concern. "What haunts you?"

"I can't..."

Maya grasped her shoulders before she could turn away. "Talk to me."

Donia's voice quivered. "Much like you, I live with demons from my past."

"I'm here for you, like you were for me when I laid my heart bare."

"An aura of danger surrounds me. The less you're exposed to it, the better."

Maya's frustration swelled. "That's unfair. You can't decide what I can or can't handle. Again, it comes back to trust."

“I need you to respect my wishes. I promise I will confide to you my whole life story in due time.”

“That’s not good enough.”

“It has to be for now.”

Maya groaned and loosened her fingers on Donia’s shoulders.

Donia embraced her. “You are my love, Maya. Never would I betray you.”

“You don’t need to protect me, either. I haven’t gotten this far in life by turning a blind eye to things that matter or from avoiding conflict.”

Donia slid her hand into Maya’s. “Let’s go home. I need to show you something.”

WHEN THEY ENTERED the modest dwelling, Donia led Maya into her study and switched on a desk lamp. She moved toward a mounted photograph of the two of them wrapped in a warm embrace. A third-year photography student had taken the black-and-white shot at a campus-sponsored carnival the month before. Donia lifted the framed portrait off its hook and placed it face up on the desktop. Instead of a bare space staring back at her from where the photo had hung, Maya saw a metal safe recessed in the wall. Donia spun the combination lock in a series of swift backward and forward motions. When the locking mechanism released, she reached inside and pulled out banded wads of bills and a stack of certificates of deposit.

Surprise gave way to amusement. “What did you do? Rob a bank?”

Donia smiled. “Suffice it to say, I’m a descendent from wealth. I keep property deeds, bank account information, and other important papers in here, too. I wanted you to be aware that this exists and is at your disposal in the event...” She paled and bit her lower lip.

Maya’s body grew cold and her hands clammy. “In the event of what?”

When Donia remained silent, Maya gripped her wrists. “I won’t allow anything bad to happen to you. You have to believe me.”

“Please understand it’s not my intention to upset you, only to assure you that if you run into troubled times, you have the means to endure.”

“I don’t care about financial stability. I’ve survived fine without it. All I care about is you and our life together. I love you, Donia.”

“As I love you. I know it was wrong when I didn’t stand up for you within the circle tonight. For that, I apologize. I hope I can again earn your trust.”

“Donia...”

She pressed the tip of her index finger against Maya’s lips. “It’s late. We’ll talk more tomorrow. Tonight, I want to make love to you, to feel your body move beneath me.”

HOURS LATER, MAYA awoke with a start. Sweat-soaked bed sheets clung to her naked body. She shivered and wriggled free. A bad dream, she realized. Although intense, Maya couldn’t remember specifics other than feeling Donia was in danger.

Relieved it was only a nightmare, she reached across the mattress to touch Donia’s warm, tender flesh. When she found her side empty, she sat up and peered into the darkness. “Donia?”

No reply. She called out again, louder, and heard only the echo of her own voice. Panic spread through her body like wildfire. She scrambled from bed into the clothes she'd worn hours before, dashed outside, and raced through the near-dawn fog.

Maya pounded hard on the door to the safe house. When no one appeared immediately to let her in, she banged even louder. A disheveled Margarite pulled the door open.

"What is the matter, Maya? You look distraught."

"Is Donia here?"

"No. She left hours ago to try to make amends with you."

"She did talk with me, and we went home together, but something's happened," Maya said in a rush of words.

"What do you mean?"

"Something's happened to her. I can feel it. She's in danger."

The commotion woke the other two committee members. Within seconds, they surrounded Maya.

"Calm down," Angeline said.

"I can't. I had this terrible nightmare and when I awoke, I found Donia gone. If she's not here with you, where the hell could she be?"

Beatrice and Margarite stared at her, expressionless. Angeline, however, looked like she was about to jump out of her skin.

"What is it, Angeline?"

"Angeline...no," Beatrice said.

"We need to stream right now, Beatrice," Angeline said. "It may not be too late."

"We made a promise."

"No more secrets," Maya said. "You need to help me find her. Now."

To Maya's astonishment, Beatrice reached for her hand as they entered the meditation room. "You will join us in the circle because of your close relationship with Donia. It is imperative you remain silent and control your emotions. Her life is at stake."

With fingers interlaced and heads downcast, the committee called upon their supernatural powers to stream into Donia's thoughts. Maya felt intense heat and spine-tingling energy surge through her body as forces beyond her control merged.

"I see her," Beatrice said. "She's near an embankment. She walks with purpose. She will reach her destination soon."

Angeline spoke next. "I see a crumbling archway. Its exit is cordoned off with bright yellow tape. A weather-beaten sign warns in capital letters: DO NOT ENTER. CONSTRUCTION SITE."

"Where is it?" Beatrice asked.

"I see nothing more."

"Wait," Margarite said. "A huge slab of concrete lies in the rubble. It is engraved with letters. I can make out a G, an R, an A, and an M. A canvas tarp obscures the rest."

Margarite's description jarred Maya's memory. She ignored Beatrice's order to remain silent and shouted, "Gramercy Park! Donia's at Gramercy Park. Its main entrance is under construction."

"Yes," Angeline said. "She's there... but she's not alone."

Suddenly, Margarite let out a guttural scream.

Maya jumped to her feet and ignored the others as she rushed up the stairs and into the night.

GRAMERCY PARK OCCUPIED an area of two square miles on the northern edge of NYU's campus. Although a welcome place for student rallies and family picnics, once the sun went down, it became a world of drugs, sex, and criminal mischief. In the past, campus guards patrolled the area around the clock. Because of recent cutbacks, safety checks were limited to every three hours from midnight to dawn. The scarcity of security left more than enough time for college kids to get a good high or load on and for victimizers to stalk unsuspecting prey. Through the years, the park's main entrance—a massive cement archway with carvings of historic war heroes—had suffered foundation and structural damage. The previous week, a section of rubble broke loose and struck a bicyclist. The threat of a lawsuit prompted immediate restorative work.

With Angeline's words—"she's not alone"—reverberating in her brain, Maya sprinted through deserted campus streets. She functioned on pure adrenaline and pushed herself to the extreme of physical endurance in a race against time to thwart the danger Donia alluded to the night before. Margarite's blood-curdling scream provided confirmation of Donia's imminent danger.

Dawn broke behind a cluster of trees as Maya slid down the steep dirt incline abutting a side wall of the archway. She lost her footing on an uneven section of ground and fell to her hands and knees. Ignoring the pain, she struggled to her feet and staggered to the park's entrance.

Quiet, she thought. It's too damn quiet. Maybe the Psys were wrong about the location.

Suddenly, she heard a low moan coming from inside the tunnel. Her body tensed in dreaded anticipation of what lay in the shadows beyond her vision. She took a step forward. Then another. Still another. Her heart leapt to her throat when she saw a crumpled form sprawled on the tunnel's cement floor amid the death and decay of a long-past season.

"No!" Maya hurried the remaining distance and flung herself to the ground beside Donia's convulsing body. In horror, she watched blood spurt like a fountain from a gaping wound in her throat. She ripped off her shirt and pressed it against the slashed artery to try to staunch the copious flow. Within seconds, blood soaked through the thin gauze and stained her hands.

"Stay with me, Donia. Please don't leave me."

For a time, Donia's gaze remained steady and her grip around Maya's wrists strong. But as her life force bled out, her eyes began to glaze over. Maya cradled her in her arms as Donia shuddered one last time and then lay still.

Thus began Maya's journey into madness.

OVER THE MANY months since Donia's murder, Maya used violence to cope with her tremendous grief. She'd taken what she needed from the hidden safe so she could live away from the house, away from the other Psys, and away from the painful memories. She rented an above-garage apartment on the seedier side of the city and came and went under the cloak of darkness. She watched from the shadows as lives twirled in a constant state of chaos and upheaval. Absorbing others' emotions, she swam in the dark depths of victims' anguish and despair and began her quest to cleanse the world of human vermin.

This one's for you, Donia, she thought, as she lay to waste pedophiles, rapists, and murderers to appease her own suffering and avenge Donia's death. With each kill, she became more empowered.

HUDDLED IN HER leather jacket to ward off the chill, Maya was worried. He was late. The pickup was supposed to be at ten, and it was almost eleven. She let out a sigh of relief when she saw the navy-blue van pull up in the back alley. A stocky man exited and strode to the back of the van. After doing a quick scan of the area, he opened its double doors. Off to the right, a metal door opened and another man, short in stature, joined him.

"You were supposed to be here an hour ago."

"Traffic."

"Yeah, right. Just what Franco wants to hear. He's one mean son of a bitch. If there's hell to pay, it'll be taken out on your hide, not mine."

"Just get the delivery and let's be done with this. I gotta be back before my old lady gets off the night shift."

Cursing, the smaller man disappeared inside the warehouse. Seconds later, he appeared in the doorway with a frown on his face.

"What?" the driver asked.

"The box weighs a ton. It's going to take both of us to get it into the van."

The driver threw his hands up in exasperation and followed him inside.

Maya made her move. She darted from her hiding spot and sidled up to the van. She flattened her body on the ground and wriggled beneath the engine. Once she found the brake-fluid line, she flicked open a switchblade and made a slice in the rubber hose. By the time the two men wrestled the box outside, she'd returned to her stakeout behind a large metal recycle bin.

From earlier discussions she'd listened in on, Maya knew they would use the turnpike to cover the hundred miles to the drug dealer's meet-up point to make the transfer of illegal narcotics. Since they were already behind schedule, Maya felt confident the driver would push the speed limit to avoid Franco's wrath. She gauged the brake fluid would drain within the next fifteen or twenty minutes. Plenty of time. Since traffic flow would be minimal at this time of night, she didn't concern herself with the van colliding with an innocent motorist. However, she had no problem with it crashing into a guardrail or careening over an embankment.

Human filth, she thought as she left the area. When she rounded the corner to her apartment, she saw movement in the darkness off to her right. With nerves at attention and reflexes primed, she reached for the switchblade she carried in a sheath strapped across her chest. Before she could disengage the blade, a voice said, "That won't be necessary, Maya."

When she recognized the voice, her grip loosened. "How did you find me, Angeline?"

Angeline, the youngest of the Psys and the most empathetic, stepped into view. "I assure you, tracking your whereabouts has not been an easy task. Donia taught you well."

At the mention of Donia's name, Maya bristled. "Why are you here?"

"I've come to appeal to you."

"For what? Forgiveness?"

"In part. You see, the Psys failed both of you that fateful night. You deserve to know the truth behind Donia's murder."

“Why now? Why not when I was half out of my mind and contemplating suicide? Why didn’t you search for me then?”

“Because you wouldn’t have listened. You would have blamed us.”

“I still do.”

“Your recent actions concern the Psys.”

“Since when do I care what the Psys think?”

“You cared what Donia thought.”

“She’s dead.”

“Then don’t disgrace her memory with your recklessness.”

Infuriated by her words, Maya again reached for the switchblade. “Careful, Angeline.”

“Pay attention to me, Maya. You display no physical restraint or emotional control once you’ve chosen a prey. Like a circus high-wire act, you walk a dangerously fine line. You mustn’t allow your hatred of evil to cloud your judgment. Decisions made in haste come with dire consequences.”

“I don’t fear death.”

“As you shouldn’t, but you seem all too eager to welcome it with open arms. Maybe you’ll change your mind after what I tell you.”

Maya glared at her.

“Long before Donia introduced you as her charge, we’d made her a promise that when the time for vengeance arrived, she would act alone.”

“Vengeance against what? Against whom?”

“You weren’t the first to seek Donia’s help.”

“What do you mean?”

Angeline gestured toward the apartment. “May I come inside? It’s rather brisk out here.”

Once inside, Maya filled a ceramic mug with water and placed it in the microwave. From a corner cabinet, she reached for a box of tea bags.

“Herbal, right?”

“You remembered,” Angeline said.

“Yes.” While the water heated, Maya poured a double-shot of whiskey into a juice glass.

“Do you mind?” Angeline asked.

“What?”

“I think I’d rather have some of that than the tea.”

Maya smirked. “What the hell. I hate drinking alone.”

Seated across from Maya at a chipped, linoleum dinette table, Angeline began. “Her name was Nora. She was a senior at the university. Quite by chance, Nora stumbled into one of Donia’s lectures about precognition and extrasensory perception. After the lecture, she approached Donia and recounted a horrific story. A few months previous, three of her college roommates were viciously murdered.”

Maya gaped at her. “Jesus. What happened?”

“One Saturday night, while Nora crammed for spring finals at the campus library, a man entered her sorority house through an unlocked back door. Over a span of three hours, he bound and gagged, raped, then tortured Nora’s friends. When he’d had his sadistic fill, he slashed their throats. Nora arrived at the moment the killer sliced through the last victim’s vocal cords. Nora’s scream and unexpected appearance took the murderer off guard. Instead of going after her, he fled.

“Did she get a good look at him?”

“Good enough to give the police sketch artist a composite drawing. The police launched an extensive manhunt, but the killer eluded capture. He’d left no physical evidence behind. No murder weapon. No DNA. Nothing. The campus was on lock-down and security heightened for weeks on end.”

“They never found him, did they?”

“Sadly, no. In time, the shock of the massacre wore off and campus life returned to normal. But not for Nora. She lived with tremendous guilt.”

“Because she’d survived and her friends hadn’t?”

“Not only that. She blamed herself for their deaths. As it turned out, her roommates were waiting for her to get home so they could go as a group to a nearby keg party. If she hadn’t been so late studying at the library, she would have returned home hours earlier. At least that’s how Nora saw it.”

“But if she’d been on time, she would’ve been a victim, too,” Maya said.

“Nora told Donia she’d rather have died along with her friends than live with the guilt that if they hadn’t waited for her that night, they might still be alive.”

Maya shook her head in regret. “Such misdirected blame.”

“Even months after the slayings, Nora was consumed by fear that the killer would return for her, that he considered her a loose end, unfinished business. She imagined she saw him at every turn. She felt hunted. To their credit, the police did all they could to keep her safe. They relocated Nora to a dorm, placed a gag order on the media to prevent publishing her name and, for the first month, kept her under protective watch.

“Nora begged Donia to help her find her friends’ killer through whatever psychic means necessary. She wanted Donia to hypnotize her to see if she had repressed memories. Out of sympathy for Nora’s plight, Donia agreed to probe her subconscious for any clue to the killer’s identity. You need to realize that, at the time, Donia was a novice to the streaming process. She’d only joined the committee a few months before.”

“Was hypnosis successful?”

“No. Donia’s powers were too unrefined to help Nora achieve peace of mind. The day of the hypnosis was the last time Donia saw Nora alive.”

The fine hairs on the nape of Maya’s neck prickled. “What happened?”

“Later that evening, Donia had a dream apparition that depicted Nora falling prey to the same man who’d slaughtered her friends. She watched every vivid, gruesome detail of the death scene play out in her mind. Just like her three friends, the killer took Nora unaware. He bound her and performed unspeakable acts. Since Donia had no idea where Nora lived, she was helpless to save her. In the end, Nora’s thoughts merged with hers and revealed a clear impression of the killer’s face. Donia saw the knife slashing across tender skin. She experienced death through Nora’s eyes and was forever traumatized. Finding Nora’s murderer became an obsession for Donia, just as Nora had sought out the same man who’d killed her friends.”

Maya remained silent, absorbing all that Angeline had revealed. At last, she spoke. “And that night when you shut me out?”

“The committee received a telepathic stream that Nora’s killer had returned to the scene of his last crime to create a new one.”

“And through Donia’s mental pulse points, you were able to pinpoint him?”

“Yes. She swore us to secrecy. She had insisted, and we had agreed, that if ever the murderer surfaced, she would go alone to settle the score.”

Maya felt a painful pang in her chest. “You let her go alone.”

Angeline lowered her head. When she spoke, her voice was soft and filled with remorse.

“Yes, and for that grave lapse in judgment, the committee will forever be haunted by what we could’ve done to save her.”

Pensive silence lingered for a long, immeasurable moment. Finally, Maya asked, “What do you want from me, Angeline?”

“I have a proposition for you.”

“A proposition?”

Angeline reached for her hands. “Come back to us, Maya. Let us help you refine your powers.”

As Maya was about to refuse her request, someone gently gripped her shoulder from behind. Maya would know her lover’s touch anywhere. Donia was telling her it was time to let go of her anger and to move on.

“I will do as you and the other Psys ask,” she said.

Chapter Three

Ten years later...

GRATEFUL FOR THE bar and grill's dim lighting, Laura Richardson slid into the vacant booth close enough to the entrance for her to slink in unnoticed except for a waitress.

Either the waitress had seen her fair share of downtrodden-looking women for Laura's disheveled appearance not to upset her, or she just didn't give a damn. She stopped at Laura's booth long enough to plop down a grease-stained menu and splash iceless water into a plastic cup, before trotting off to her next customer.

Laura snatched the menu from the table's tacky surface and used it to hide her face. She couldn't help feeling self-conscious. Her reflection in the commuter train's window had shocked even her.

She glanced at the darkened window alongside her booth. Her appearance hadn't improved in the past three hours. Her tangled, flaxen hair clung to her cheeks in oily strands. Red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes stared back at her. Smearred mascara crusted the tender skin beneath her lashes. Although she was only two months shy of her twentieth birthday, fine lines etched her brow and corners of her mouth—evidence of stress rather than any telltale sign of aging.

She closed her eyes and took a shaky breath. The past eight years of being held captive by a sexual deviant had taken their toll. Not only had she endured physical and sexual abuse, but her tormentor's constant, vicious, verbal attack on her self-esteem, at such an impressionable age, had rendered her paralyzed with fear and brainwashed her into dependence on him for her continued survival.

Until today, when Laura decided she'd no longer be a victim held against her will but a survivor on the run from a past that could resurface at any minute, with life-threatening consequences.

Enough, her inner voice sounded. From now on, my life will be different. I didn't take the risk in vain. God couldn't be that cruel. But then again, He hadn't protected her—not as the Sisters of Mercy had told her God would.

Laura had no choice but to take matters into her own hands. Louis "Louie" Pendleton had finally gone too far and something inside her had snapped, releasing a torrent of long-repressed hatred and fury.

And the knife sat gleaming on the granite countertop.

And the wallet lay open, with all those crisp, hundred dollar bills well within her reach, and...

Laura shook her head to clear the memory of what happened next. Best not to dwell on that. She had to focus on the present and her determination to reclaim her long-lost self.

"Baby steps," she whispered. "Baby steps will get me where I need to go soon enough."

Upon debarking from the cramped train for its half-hour stopover in Verhoven, New York, she'd only intended to stretch her legs and get some much-desired fresh air. But then she spotted Percy's, a bar and grill thirty yards from the train platform.

The tantalizing aroma of flame-broiled meat and pungent seasoning wafting from its chimney enticed her taste buds. A sudden, intense hunger pang surged through her stomach, reminding her she hadn't eaten anything since her ordeal began, hours before. She couldn't have kept any food down at the time, but now hunger consumed her. She scanned the menu and selected the cheapest entrée: a cheeseburger special with "the works."

While she waited for her order to arrive, her eyes darted from the diners to the entrance door. Although fairly certain Louie couldn't have caught up with her so fast, considering the condition she'd left him in, paranoia still wreaked havoc on her emotions. It took all of her self-control not to succumb to a full-blown panic attack.

When the food arrived, it offered Laura a distraction from her fears. The oversalted, greasy fries and charred, flavorless hamburger didn't disappoint her. To Laura, the meal symbolized her newfound freedom to fend for herself and make her own choices.

Worried she wouldn't snag a window seat on the train, she hurriedly ate. She placed a crumpled ten-dollar bill on the table and scooted out of the booth as the train's conductor entered the eatery.

The look in his eyes increased her anxiety. Something was wrong. His words quickly confirmed it.

"Folks, I'm sorry to report the train has experienced a system failure. We won't be able to get power until morning."

Loud groans of annoyance erupted.

"You have two options: either sleep on an unheated train—we do have blankets and pillows available—or head into town and try to find a hotel open in the off-season."

Laura frowned at the disheartening news and watched disgruntled passengers line up, single file, at the exit.

Since the money she'd taken had to last, Laura knew she couldn't join the majority of them heading into town. Instead, she'd be spending a bone-chilling night wrapped in blankets on the unserviceable train. Although dismayed by the unexpected setback, she held fast to her resolve. She'd suffered much worse, and her body bore the scars to prove it.

Once outside, she stiffened as gusts of frigid air pummeled her.

After the incident with Louie, she'd fled the scene in a panic, wearing a thin sweat coat, threadbare jeans, and worn sneakers. Now, her scant clothing failed to shield her body from winter's vicious onslaught.

The voice came out of nowhere, startling her with its gruffness.

"A mighty fine-looking lady should have a proper escort home at this time of night."

With nerves already on edge, Laura peered into the darkness and tried to make out the stranger's features, but he stood in the shadows. She could smell him, though. The stench of stale beer and cigarettes made her gag in revulsion.

She hoped her response sounded confident. "No, thanks. I can manage on my own."

She'd walked a short distance when she heard the drunk stagger up behind her. Before she could react, he clamped a meaty hand on her narrow wrist and jerked her to his burly frame. His sweaty, pockmarked face loomed inches from hers. His fetid breath made her stomach roil.

"Listen, bitch. I know your type. Sit around a bar all night scoping out the local color, thinking you're better than everyone. It's time to show you how it's done around here, how the local women spread their legs wide to please a man like me."

A throaty, female voice shouted a warning from behind his hulking frame.

"Let her go."

The drunk pushed Laura out of the way and whirled on the unexpected intruder. Weaving, his expression darkened as he eyed the woman.

“You got no business here, lady.”

“Your unwanted advances on my woman make it my business.”

“Your woman?” he asked in an incredulous tone. “How the hell can this fine piece of ass be yours?”

A glint of understanding flickered in his eyes, and he leered at them. “Oh, I see. That type, huh? That’s not a problem. I’ve got plenty of meat in these jeans to take you both on.”

A switchblade flashed before the drunk’s watery, bloodshot eyes.

In a low, ominous voice the woman said, “And I can guarantee I’ll slice off that meat and feed it to the wildlife if you don’t leave. Now.”

The unmistakable look of fear in the drunk’s eyes reassured Laura who’d win this battle of wills.

Whatever the drunk slurred under his breath incited Laura’s rescuer to flatten the heel of her boot on his more than ample ass and shove. He stumbled but managed not to fall. The woman watched him skulk away before moving to Laura.

“I hope he didn’t rough you up too much,” she said.

“No, not much.” Even if Laura’s body hadn’t started trembling, the terror in her voice belied her statement.

In what Laura took as a comforting gesture, the woman reached out and touched her cheek.

“You’re safe now. It’s over. He’s not coming back.”

Suddenly, the day’s terrifying events caught up with her, and Laura collapsed into the woman’s arms and surrendered to huge wracking sobs.

The woman gently stroked Laura’s hair. “You can confide in me. I’ve been attuned to your torment since I first saw you.”

Startled, Laura drew back.

Through a shroud of darkness, a half-moon’s dim glow illuminated the woman’s features enough for Laura to make out the sharp, crisp blueness of her eyes.

“Where? On the train?”

“No. In Percy’s. You looked lost and afraid. My concern for your well-being compelled me to follow you outside.”

“I’m grateful you did.”

“You’re running, aren’t you? Running away from something? Someone?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“I’ve seen the look many times before. You shouldn’t be ashamed. Bad things happen to good people all the time.”

“I’m trying to take back my life, a life I haven’t had control over for way too long.”

“And the stranded train has complicated your plans?”

Laura gave a short laugh. “That’s an understatement.”

The woman seemed to ponder Laura’s dilemma for a moment before asking, “What’s your name?”

“Laura.”

“Well, Laura, I recently relocated to this area. I’m in the process of restoring an old mansion a mile or so from here. My hope is to provide shelter for women who’ve reached certain crossroads in their lives and need a place to stay until they’ve reaffirmed their paths.”

“Sounds like the perfect place for me.”

“It’d be an honor to welcome you as my first houseguest.”

Despite feeling a spark of hope, Laura hesitated. “Oh, no... I couldn’t. You’ve already gone out of your way and put your life in danger to come to my rescue.”

“There are no strings attached. Stay as long as it takes to achieve peace of mind before moving on.”

Laura shook her head. “You don’t understand. I can’t stay in one place for long. He’ll find me.”

The woman furrowed her brow. “Who’ll find you?”

Laura shuddered but offered no further explanation. She watched the woman’s expression turn somber.

“I won’t let him hurt you, Laura. I promise you’ll be safe.”

“How do you know?”

“It’s difficult to explain but, given time, it will become clear.”

The woman evoked a strong sense of inner calm and renewed hope, sensations Laura hadn’t felt since her time at the orphanage, under the care of the Sisters of Mercy. She wavered in indecision.

“If you decide to accept my offer, I must forewarn you. Although in dire need of renovation, Holworth House has great potential. One needs to look past its crumbling walls and weakened foundation in order to envision its possibilities.”

“How did you come by the name of Holworth House?”

“Holworth is my surname.”

“And your first name?”

“Maya.”

“That’s an unusual name.”

“It’s derived from the Mayans, Native Americans who built a great civilization in southern Mexico and Latin America. Your name, Laura, also possesses its own unique origin of interest dating back to ancient Rome, where villagers crafted the leaves of laurel trees into victors’ garlands.”

With a tinge of awe in her tone, Laura asked, “How do you know such things?”

“I fancy myself a world traveler. What do you say, Laura? Will you stay with me?”

“How can I refuse? You’ve been so kind to me.”

“Well, then...”

Laura couldn’t help staring, agape, as Maya moved toward a steel-gray snowmobile and smoothly swung a leg over its chassis.

“Is there something wrong?”

“You want me to ride on that?”

Maya laughed. “Of course. It’s the most practical means of travel in a town buried in snow half the year.”

The snowmobile’s headlamp penetrated the night’s stillness and provided Laura with a sharp image of Maya’s striking features: coal-black, shoulder-length hair; cobalt-blue eyes; high cheekbones; full lips; and a strong jaw. Laura thought she bore the characteristics of a Wall Street executive-type rather than a woman planning to care for the needy.

She felt mesmerized by Maya’s intense gaze.

“Come now, Laura. Don’t you trust me?”

Not wanting to give Maya the wrong impression, Laura mounted the snowmobile and scrunched against her on its molded leather seat.

Maya reached back and pulled Laura's hands about her waist.
"Hold tight. It might be a bumpy ride."

ONCE THEY'D ENTERED Holworth House, Laura's hand gently restrained Maya's when she reached to turn on a lamp. "Could we please keep the lights off? I must look a sight."

"As you wish. I myself prefer the darkness. It forces one to rely on senses often taken for granted. Please, come into the living room and take the chill off by the fire."

Their footsteps echoed on the entry foyer's hardwood floor.

Laura marveled at the oversized, high-ceilinged living area and its sparse furnishings. A rust-colored, suede couch fronted a blazing, stone-inlaid fireplace. A smoked-glass carafe and two cordial glasses sat on a round side table to its left.

"Laura, formalities don't exist within Holworth House. Please, feel free to enjoy its comforts while I prepare your bath."

Laura stared at her in disbelief. "A bath? I haven't indulged in a bath since..." She didn't think she successfully hid her apprehension.

"Don't worry. You'll confide in me when you're ready. For now, soak away your aches and sleep away your torment. In the morning, you'll awaken refreshed and ready to continue your journey to a better life."

Tears again welled in Laura's eyes. "I don't know how to repay your generosity."

"There's no need. Not all of life's pleasures come with a price."

Maya's words brought a smile to Laura's dry, chapped lips.

With her back to the fire, she watched Maya glide down a narrow hallway. After she'd disappeared from view, Laura collapsed on the couch. She glanced at the carafe. Unaccustomed to alcohol's numbing effects, she refrained from sampling. Instead, she leaned back, closed her eyes and, lulled by the fire's warmth, dozed.

She awoke to Maya's gentle touch on her shoulder.

"Your bath's ready."

The bathroom's peaceful ambience overwhelmed Laura.

She appreciated the tea lights Maya had placed along the ledge of an ornate, porcelain bathtub. Lavender-scented bubbles swirled in the bathwater and softly reflected the candles' glow.

"Take all the time you require," Maya said. "I'll prepare your bed in one of the spare rooms and provide you with clothes to sleep in. We appear the same size."

Again, Maya's kindness and attention to her needs reinforced Laura's trust. Still feeling self-conscious, she waited for Maya to leave before disrobing.

Laura moaned in delight as she eased her aching body into the tub's inviting warmth. The day's harrowing events became a distant memory as she imagined her joyful return to the orphanage and the ecstatic welcome of the Sisters of Mercy.

Submerged to her chin in thick foam and with eyelids half-closed, Laura gave Maya a contented smile when she came through the doorway carrying a white chenille robe and a pair of wool socks.

"A hot bath most suits you."

"I'm so relaxed, I don't have the energy to bathe myself."

"Maybe I can be of assistance."

Laura surprised even herself when, without hesitation, she accepted Maya's offer to bathe her.

She sat up and leaned forward while Maya pulled a padded stool to the tub's edge. With a large, porous sea sponge, Maya began with light, circular strokes across Laura's shoulders and arms before applying pressure to her taut back muscles.

"It's strange," Laura said.

"What's strange?"

"You. You're a stranger to me. How can I feel so comfortable and so much at ease in your house, letting you touch me?"

"All people are strangers until they get to know each other."

"But time hasn't allowed for such closeness."

"Time is irrelevant when it comes to matters of the heart," Maya said. "Your aura of sadness drew me to you."

"How can you be so aware of my feelings?"

"I've made it my life mission to understand and aid those who experience inner turmoil and strife."

"That's quite a mission. How do you accomplish it?"

"By remaining selfless."

"Maya Holworth, you're a knight—or should I say a maiden—in shining armor. I'm amazed by how my life's changed from this morning. A large part of it is because of you. If I'm dreaming, I don't want to ever wake up."

"Often the most life-affirming decisions occur when least expected. Tell me, Laura, where were you headed before the train broke down?"

"A place I haven't seen in over eight years."

"Is it a safe place? Is that why you're so eager to return?"

"Yes. It's an orphanage overseen by the Sisters of Mercy. They raised me until..."

Maya waited for Laura to continue. When she remained silent, Maya prompted her. "Until when, Laura?"

"Until the evil man kidnapped me."

THE MENTAL PORTHOLE Maya searched for opened ever so slightly, allowing her partial access to Laura's thoughts. What loomed foremost was a vivid image of a dark-haired man with black, lifeless eyes and a mouth and jaw tensed in anger.

"Did the evil man abuse you?"

"Yes."

"How old were you when the abuse began?"

"Twelve."

"I see his slashed and blood-drenched face clearly in your thoughts, Laura. You made your mark."

Maya knew she'd unnerved Laura with her perceptions when Laura gripped the tub's rim and tried to hoist herself out. Maya hastened to allay Laura's anxiousness.

"There's no need to fear me. I possess a gift, an ability to see into a person's troubled memories and thoughts, but only if they trust me enough to allow me access. Once I've established trust, the process can begin..."

“I don’t understand. What process?”

“The merging of our minds, our psyches.”

Maya helped Laura out of the tub and onto the ledge. She draped a towel across Laura’s shoulders as water droplets trickled from her knees and puddled at her feet.

“I’m afraid, Maya.”

Maya tenderly raised Laura’s chin and brushed aside strands of damp hair that clung to her cheeks.

“You’re so beautiful, Laura, so deserving of a better life than what you’ve come to know. I promise from this day forward, fear will cease to rule your emotions. Surrender your memories and allow me to accept their burden.”

Without a word, Laura moved into Maya’s arms and held fast while Maya probed her stream of consciousness until she attained the knowledge needed to exact her revenge.

LOUIE PENDLETON COULDN’T decide what incensed him more: Laura Richardson’s betrayal or what she’d done to him, namely his face. How dare she think she could skim off the top—a five-spot here, a ten-spot there—and I wouldn’t catch on? What the hell could she have been thinking?

He answered his inner voice. Escape, you idiot. She’d planned to escape.

“Fuck that!”

He winced in pain as fresh blood spurted from the slice where the knife’s razor-sharp tip slashed him from his right temple, across the bridge of his nose and to his jaw line. The painkillers surging through his system barely relieved his agony. He gripped the sink’s porcelain basin until a fresh bout of nausea and vertigo passed.

Another wave of fury consumed him when he realized how he’d underestimated her. He’d been so convinced Laura didn’t have the nerve to rebel, that his threats of severe punishment would keep her subservient. But he’d misjudged her, and now he had a six-inch-long, gaping wound to remind him of his ignorance.

Since he couldn’t admit himself to a local emergency room without hospital staff barraging him with questions, Louie had to resort to self-treating a wound he knew required stitches. Christ, he could’ve lost an eye.

It took him an excruciatingly long time to crawl from the kitchen floor—where Laura had left him howling in pain—to the bathroom, where he used washcloths to staunch the copious blood flow and peroxide to disinfect the burning wound.

Since he had to keep his wits about him to figure out where Laura might’ve fled, he resisted the urge to swallow more painkillers. Think Pendleton. Think. He doubted Laura would’ve sought out the police. During her captivity, she’d witnessed too many illegal deals transpire, while cops turned their attention in another direction, to trust the law.

Louie figured her initial instinct would be to distance herself from the apartment. After a while, her sense of self-preservation would overcome hysteria, and she’d have to think of a more practical means of escape other than running pell-mell through New York’s streets.

A bus would be too slow, and hitchhiking presented its own myriad of dangers. Louie decided she’d opt to escape by train at nearby Pennsylvania Station.

Money, at least for the time being, wouldn't be an issue. Louie gauged Laura had stolen close to a grand, enough to hold her over for a week or so. By then, she'd most likely have reached that pathetic orphanage he'd kidnapped her from all those years ago.

Oh, yes, those Sisters of Mercy would be ecstatic in reclaiming their long-lost lamb and sounding the alarm for his arrest. He couldn't have that. Louie Pendleton refused to spend another stint rotting in a six-by-eight-foot prison cell over the likes of Laura Richardson.

He stumbled to his laptop and did a search of New York's Regional Rail Schedule. Within seconds, a series of arrival and departure times and station transfers flickered across the monitor's screen. He limited his search to trains headed to the Midwest within the past three hours. Only one, Train #674, coincided with this timeframe.

His eyes widened in excitement when he read the flashing red text at the bottom of the screen: System Failure. Train #674. Location: Verhoven, New York. ETD: A.M. Trains en route to Region: Diverted/ Cancelled. Updates: Forthcoming.

"Bingo! I've got your ass, you filthy whore. Your escape's short-lived after all."

At this late hour, driving ninety plus on the expressway and with the radar detector screening for speed traps, Louie figured he'd reach Verhoven in record-breaking time.

Well aware of Verhoven's ghost town status in the winter months, Louie didn't worry that the sight of a lone, distraught, and disheveled young woman, in need of a place to stay, would arouse a local's suspicion.

His appetite whetted by revenge, Louie raced into the bedroom and changed his blood-spattered clothes. He punched in a security code on a wall safe and grabbed a thick, paper-banded stack of fifty-dollar bills.

He didn't intend to return Laura to the city. Louie's staunch belief that once a runaway, always a runaway, sealed her fate. He'd snuff out her life in a town where it would take the spring thaw to unearth her body.

What a waste. Laura Richardson had been one hell of a good lay. Paybacks were a bitch, though. On his way out of the apartment, Louie snatched the bloodied blade Laura had cut him with and wrapped it in a soiled dishtowel for later use.

AS SOON AS Louie reached the rail station, he cut the Lexus's headlights and interior lights and coasted to a stop. To his left was a darkened food establishment. To his right sat the disabled commuter train. He counted four passenger cars. With the exception of an occasional dim light emanating from a hand-held electronic device, most of the cars lay in blackness.

Louie's annoyance surged. "How the hell can I ambush that bitch, when I can't see shit?"

A soft tap on the driver's side window startled him into reaching for the concealed knife on the passenger seat. His fingers relaxed on its cool steel handle when he saw the striking woman appraising him. If her haughty expression didn't give her away as a prostitute, her body language did.

Mindful to keep the mangled side of his face shadowed, Pendleton lowered the driver's side window halfway.

"Looking for someone?" she asked.

"A blonde."

The woman flashed a seductive smile. "I have wigs."

Louie smirked. “Honey, you’re one fine piece of ass, but tonight the true blondes have it. One blonde in particular.”

“I might be able to help you in that area if you’re scouting for the true blonde who had a seat on that train.”

Her sly hint set Louie’s heart racing. “Had? Meaning she’s not on the train anymore?”

“You catch on quick. I like that in a man.”

Louie hoped his voice sounded nonchalant when he asked, “So, where’d she go?”

“Time is money, lover.”

At the end of his patience, Louie fought the urge to punch her. Instead, he pulled a crumpled fifty from his front trouser pocket and pressed it against the bottom half of the window.

The hooker’s smile grew, and her arm shot forward. “Now you’re talking.”

Louie snaked out his free hand and wrenched her wrist. “Not so fast. Get in. Along the way, we’ll talk price.”

“You’re a fool to think you can drive into town with those fancy wheels and Halloween mask of a face and not attract attention. That blonde you’re stalking and every insomniac local will see you coming a mile away.”

Frustrated and enraged the prostitute had noticed, Louie ripped the blood-soaked, gauze dressing from his cheek and flung it on the passenger seat.

He tried to keep his voice level. “What do you suggest?”

“I know a shortcut through the woods.”

He gawked at her. “On foot? You must be crazy. It’s as cold as a witch’s tit out there!”

She again took a long, measured look at his face.

Louie jerked open the sedan door and spat. “Let’s go.”

MAYA IGNORED THE man’s curse-laden complaints as he struggled to keep pace with her over jagged, icy terrain. What was his name? Ah, yes, Louie. The mind probe had provided her with the name.

Before long, they’d ventured so deep into the woods Maya knew Louie couldn’t see the outline of his outstretched arms and splayed fingers. Any sense of direction he possessed at the onset of their trek no longer existed.

Ten paces from a massive oak tree, Maya acted on her murderous intentions. She slid a glass vial from a side pocket and popped its cork. She spun and hurled its contents—a fine white powder—into Louie’s face.

He let out a single, strangled gasp, before he collapsed in a tangled heap at her feet.

The powder, a high-potency drug, instantaneously paralyzed his central nervous system and rendered him devoid of movement. But the drug had no effect on the sections of the brain that controlled thought comprehension and sensation—those would continue to function. Maya took great satisfaction in knowing Louie would be cognizant and feel pain, but he’d be powerless to defend himself.

Louie’s eyes stared blankly ahead. His mouth hung open in a grotesque O. Drool ran in rivulets from his distended tongue. Maya avoided eye contact with her immobilized captive for fear she’d be tempted to brutalize him prematurely. She wanted him to suffer.

She rolled his inert body the remaining distance to the tree base and wrestled him into a sitting position. She retrieved a coiled length of rope she'd earlier stashed in a bush. Deftly, she bound his wrists and ankles and secured his torso to the oak's thick trunk.

Maya stepped back. In a tone seething with malevolence, she confronted Laura's abuser. "Be aware vengeance lies in wait in the shadows, impatient to unleash its merciless wrath. You'll endure horrific suffering. Your sadistic actions have determined your fate. You'll never hurt another innocent soul."

Brandishing a switchblade, Maya wielded it before Louie's glazed eyes. "I will cut you with this knife and draw your blood so that the creatures of the night will feast upon you." Lightning fast, Maya crouched and sliced through the front of Louie's jacket and shirt. Once she exposed bare skin, she made the first incision.

AFTERWARD, BY A half-moon's glow through a windowpane, Maya watched Laura sleep. Her physical transformation astounded Maya. Laura's face showed no trace of the harried, frightened woman who had alit from the downed train hours before. Laura's cleansed, blemish-free countenance radiated with vitality. Her dark eyelashes, unusual for one so fair, fluttered as her eyes moved beneath the lids.

Maya imagined Laura was dreaming of her future. She took a moment to reflect on her actions. She'd learned that her predecessors throughout many generations believed their role of avenger, of guardian over the tormented, was a sacred calling, one of great distinction and honor. Their long-enforced code of an "eye for an eye" rendered justice in a way no legal system could ever achieve.

The memory of Laura's serene expression reaffirmed Maya's decision that the path she'd chosen when she'd agreed to return to the Psys for years of training remained a true one. She had worked hard to hone her abilities, and at last she had grown strong enough to stream on her own.

Chapter Four

KYLIE VINSON WAS in the throes of a nightmare. A slick, viscous substance oozed from her pores. She smelled its coppery scent and, with a sickening feeling, realized she was awash in her own blood.

To her astonishment, she felt no pain, just the pressure of a rigid object scraping across her skin and abrading soft, tender tissue. That is, until shock wore off and sensation returned. Then, the excruciating pain overcame her. She tried to scream, but her vocal cords constricted. She tried to move, but her body wouldn't respond. With dawning horror, she realized the pressure she'd experienced was a knife making repeated cuts in her skin.

When the nightmare ran its terrifying course, she awoke a sobbing, quivering mess of strung-out nerves.

To dispel the horrific images from memory, she relied on past coping techniques gleaned from her therapy sessions with Dr. Felix Schneider, a longtime friend and colleague. Gradually, the dull pounding in her head eased and her breathing slowed to a normal rhythm.

She remembered their recent conversation.

"You're bound to experience relapses," he'd told her. "The effects of post-traumatic stress can be long ranging, affecting conscious and subconscious functioning. Try to remember that nightmares are your mind's way of confronting yet-to-be-resolved issues."

"Felix, do you have any reservations about my decision to take a leave of absence? Is it in my best interest?"

"What do you mean?"

"You don't think I'm running away from the memories?"

Felix's soothing tone alleviated her uncertainty. "Kylie, you can't escape memories. You've earned this reprieve. Use it as an opportunity to reassess what you want to do with the rest of your life."

"Which means weighing the pros and cons of continuing as a criminal behaviorist versus returning to general psychiatry?"

"After your recent ordeal, I'm thinking maybe you've had enough of the dark side, at least for this lifetime."

She met his eyes. "If I give up, then the bad guys win. I don't let the bad guys win."

Kylie shook off the memory of the past session and returned to the present. "Damn right I don't let the bad guys win."

Deciding an early morning commune with nature might help clear her mind, she kicked her legs free from a down comforter and rose. The cabin's early morning chill caused goose bumps to spread across her naked body. Shivering, she quickly donned a fleece bodysuit and insulated hiking boots. She finger-combed her matted hair, rinsed her mouth, and padded into the cabin's cramped, teak-paneled kitchen. She activated the automatic coffeemaker and listened to the gurgle and drip of the brewing process while she performed her warm-up routine.

Once outside, she filled her lungs with winter-crisp air. Despite the continuous snowfall—four inches had accumulated overnight, with more expected to add to it by dusk—Kylie noticed the foliage adopting the lighter tones of an early spring. The promise of warm weather invigorated her. Not for the first time, she paused to appreciate her surroundings.

She'd chosen Verhoven because of the many childhood summers she'd spent in the lakeside community. She could think of no better place to seek emotional and physical revitalization at such a critical turning point in her life.

Impatient to increase her heart rate and stimulate her metabolism, she started out briskly. Within minutes, her stride lengthened to full jogging mode. She came upon a fork in the road—one led to the scenic, more traveled footpath alongside the lake and the other to a steep, uphill trail meandering through dense woods that intersected the state highway. Her challenging, competitive nature opted for the woods.

She hadn't ventured far when she heard the frantic avian squawking. That was strange. Didn't most species migrate to warmer climates over the winter months? Undeterred, she continued on her route.

As she neared the area, Kylie saw black, glossy-coated crows with razor-sharp talons and snapping beaks ensnarled in a feeding frenzy. Her sudden approach scared them away long enough for her to get a gruesome glimpse of their prey.

At first, shock and disbelief clouded her senses. Her legs buckled, and her stomach lurched. Hot bile rose in her throat as realization of what she'd stumbled upon registered. She let out a blood-curdling scream that echoed in the wood's eerie stillness.

In a full-blown panic to flee the ghastly scene, Kylie bolted through the woods, oblivious to the clawing tree branches and snow-covered roots. The uneven terrain seemed intent on thwarting her escape. Just when she feared she might be running deeper into the woods instead of clearing them, she broke free and staggered onto a paved roadway directly into the path of an oncoming Jeep.

VERHOVEN SHERIFF LEA Carlson scowled at the charcoal-gray storm clouds skittering across the sky's bleak expanse and braced herself for the Nor'easter predicted to assault the town by nightfall. A severe temperature drop made the wind chill factor hover at twenty degrees below zero. The moderate snowfall from the previous night had already changed to ice beneath her boots.

Hours before, the National Weather Service had issued a blizzard warning for Verhoven County and the surrounding area. Lea secured the station house and prepared to ride out the worst of the storm with a pot of strong coffee and a pack of smokes. Until Harvey's emergency phone call had her scrambling into her parka and racing to a remote location.

She shuddered as gusts of frigid air whipped at her shoulder-length, sandy-blond hair and abraded her cheeks. Her teary, pale-gray eyes stared, transfixed, at the carnage lying three feet away from where she stood braced against the biting wind.

The thought that law enforcement training hadn't, hell, couldn't have prepared her for this degree of violence depressed her. Her position as a small-town sheriff didn't lend much assistance, either. Lea supposed this crime scene made her "seasoned" in urban-cop lingo, a distinction she didn't relish.

Her commitment to her job, coupled with her responsible nature, enabled her to remain focused and perform her duties. After completing a visual appraisal, she taped off the scene and radioed in a request to the state medical examiner's office for their immediate assistance.

The corpse's exposed chest and genitalia made it easy for Lea to determine gender, which was a break. Its face and upper extremities were a chewed, gnarled mess. Shredded pieces of clothing littered the blood-saturated area. The clothing clung to tattered skin and congealed blood.

Unless they found a form of identification on or near the body, the victim's identity might only be determined through forensic analysis of fingerprints, definable scars or tattoos, dental records, or other means.

Lea worked methodically, concentrating on specific areas of the body instead of the body as a whole, to isolate inconsistencies. It didn't take her long to hone in on the frayed length of gore-saturated rope attached to the corpse's torso, wrists, and ankles. She cursed and squatted to get a better look.

"What's your take on this, Sheriff? Suicide? Hunting accident?"

Lea turned to her assistant, Deputy Harvey Wilkes, whose complexion remained a sickly shade of green even though more than an hour had elapsed since the hysterical woman—the witness—had stumbled into the road and Harvey had almost flipped his Jeep to avoid hitting her. The witness had retraced her steps through the woods and shown him the body.

Lea motioned for him to come closer. "Let me show you something, Harvey."

Harvey shuffled up and peered over Lea's shoulder.

"You see that length of rope there?"

"Yeah."

"See what it's tied to?"

She heard him swallow hard.

"Jesus."

"That shoots to hell any suicide or accident theory. The bitch is we've already got a strike against us."

"How's that?"

"The fresh snow's destroyed any trace of footprints."

A thought suddenly occurred to her. She looked around and said, "Harvey, where's the witness?"

"After I recorded her statement, I let her leave."

Lea spun on her heels and glared at him. "You let her leave before I had a chance to interview her?"

Harvey stammered out an apology. "You would've done the same, Sheriff, if you'd seen how upset she was. I felt guilty making her suffer out in the cold. It's not like she's on a most-wanted-criminal list or anything. She's renting one of the cabins on Dade Road. I figured a warm, peaceful atmosphere away from the violence might help her to regain control. I told her not to discuss the incident and that you'd follow up with an interview once you cleared the scene."

Her annoyance short-lived, Lea said, "That makes sense, Harvey. Why should all of us have to freeze our asses off waiting for the M.E. to arrive?"

As if on cue, they spotted approaching headlights.

"Speak of the devil," Harvey said.

Lawrence Dawson, chief medical examiner for New York's northeast region, advanced on the gory crime scene carrying a black duffel bag.

He appraised the victim. "Talk about overkill," he muttered. "In times like this, I'm grateful for the cold. It cuts down on the smell of bodily excretions."

Long desensitized to Dawson's morbid sense of humor, Lea figured he had no choice but to make light of death when his days consisted of dissecting corpses who often met violent ends.

Dawson, in his mid-sixties and thirty years Lea's senior, had warm brown eyes and an engaging smile. He'd mentored her father, a detective, in numerous murder investigations. Over the years of their collaborative efforts to combat crime, Dawson became a frequent presence in the Carlson household and earned the distinction of trusted family friend.

As she watched Dawson slip on a pair of nitrile gloves, all the while making wisecracks, Lea realized a year had passed since she'd last seen him. She wanted to embrace him and tell him how much she'd missed him but felt awkward displaying such sentiment in front of Harvey. Instead, she stepped aside to give him room to inspect the body.

When Dawson searched the victim's pockets, he came up empty of an actual wallet, but did find a wad of fifty-dollar bills. He held them up for Lea to see. "Big spender. I know facial identification's a long shot, Lea, but do you recognize him by any other means? Style of dress? Physical build?"

"No. He may be an out-of-towner."

Dawson snorted. "Yeah, as if the city doesn't have enough places to dump a corpse. Makes sense, though. A dead body left out here has a slim chance of discovery until spring."

He reached into his duffel bag and retrieved a digital camera. He proceeded to take a steady series of post-mortem shots from varied angles.

"I'm infatuated with this newfangled, digitized gadget. It far surpasses snapping those Polaroids and waiting for the stills to air dry for the picture to emerge."

"Always up with the times, Larry," Lea teased.

"I've always considered you a smart-ass, Carlson. No doubt a trait inherited from your father. God rest his soul."

While Lea and Dawson collected potential trace evidence and body samples, Harvey tagged and bagged each specimen.

An hour later, as Dawson removed soiled gloves from his age-spotted hands and shoved them into an overcoat pocket, Lea asked, "What's your opinion?"

"It's difficult to pinpoint the extent of physical damage rendered to the body before the wildlife had their turn. You noticed the bindings?"

Lea nodded with a grim expression.

"The determination's obvious. You don't tie a dead person to a tree. You tie a living one there to keep him from getting away. Poor bastard. I'll have more for you once I get him on the examining table and clean him up. It's to your advantage Verhoven's primarily a summer resort. If news of this leaked out at the height of vacation season, you'd have yourself one hell of a panic. How's your damage control?"

"Contained to one witness."

"And the bureaucrats?"

"On my list to notify. Strokowski will hear the morbid details via conference call."

"Strokowski? What Bohemian locale has the mayor decided to tan his worthless butt in this off season?"

"I don't know, and I don't care," Lea said.

"I wish that schmuck would retire and save the town a hell of a lot of money."

“If he did, would you consider relocating and becoming my partner in fighting crime? From the autopsy table, that is.”

“Verhoven’s too slow a pace for me, Carlson. Make yourself useful and help this old-timer get this one into a body bag before full rigor mortis sets in. You know how I hate struggling with a cadaver.”

IT BEGAN TO flurry when Lea left Harvey to do a last sweep of the crime scene while she undertook the task of interviewing the lone witness. Harvey instructed her to drive a mile south on the main road. The rental cabin would be on the left, with a maroon SUV parked in the driveway.

Lea arrived at the property before realizing she hadn’t taken the time to ask Harvey the witness’s name. Backtracking, she scanned through Harvey’s chicken-scratch of a report until the words “Kylie Vinson” jumped out at her in bold, black print.

As soon as the name registered in her mind, a sharp panging began in her chest. “No way,” she whispered. “No goddamn way.”

She had a sudden, irrational urge to shift the Jeep into reverse and, with tires spinning on ice-slickened gravel, hightail it out of there before she had to face Kylie... and her memories.

Too late. Kylie stared at Lea from the window adjacent to the front door, her arms protectively tucked beneath her armpits.

Shit.

Kylie opened the door before Lea reached the landing. “The sheriff remains a permanent Verhovian figure,” she said.

Lea forced an amiable grin. “And the ex-lover returns out of the blue. What’s it been? Five years?”

“Give or take.”

Kylie was as attractive as Lea remembered, with exquisite green eyes and pale skin spattered with its fair share of freckles. She wore her auburn-colored hair at shoulder-length. Her petite, waifish body had kept its muscle tone. Unconsciously, Lea tensed her gut muscles and felt the strain of a couple extra pounds.

Although physically fit, Kylie looked tired and worn out. Dark circles shadowed her eyes, and her shoulders slouched. Lea silently questioned if Kylie’s appearance resulted from the trauma of what she’d found in the woods or if life’s misfortunes had dealt her a serious blow.

“I knew you’d be the one to interview me,” Kylie said.

“Small town, even smaller task force.”

Uncomfortable silence hung heavy in the air.

“This is hard, Lea.”

“Yes, I knew it would be.”

“Knew? What made you so sure we’d meet again?”

“Let’s say I hoped we’d meet again. Can I come in?”

Kylie opened the door and stepped aside.

Lea moved toward the blazing fireplace while Kylie poured coffee into chipped porcelain mugs.

“If I remember correctly, you drank yours black,” Kylie said.

For some reason, the fact that Kylie remembered how she took her coffee hit Lea hard. Maybe she truly did feel more than lust for me at one time, Lea thought. Doesn't matter. She quickly forced herself to forget about the past and focus on the present.

Once seated on a paisley-patterned couch, Lea pulled out a spiral-bound notepad.

"Q and A time, huh?" Kylie asked.

"Duty calls. I'm sorry you discovered the body."

Kylie looked at her in a way that made Lea feel uncomfortable. "That's so in character. The years haven't changed you. You still feel more than you should."

Lea shrugged. "It's part of my job. To care."

Kylie kept silent.

"You've already provided Deputy Wilkes with a rundown of the morning's events, but would you mind repeating them? At the onset of an investigation, I want to rule out any discrepancies from one version to the next. It's amazing what witnesses recall when given a chance to distance themselves from a crime scene. I've had some remember important details hours, sometimes days or weeks, after an incident occurred."

Kylie's eyes remained steady, unwavering.

Those eyes, Lea thought. How I've missed peering into their depths. The job. I'm here to do my job.

"You stated you were out for a morning walk. I can't help wondering why you chose the woods instead of the jogging path around the lake."

"I wanted a workout, not a lazy stroll."

"Hmm. In winter, especially with the recent snowfall, woods can be difficult to navigate. What if you'd gotten lost?"

Kylie laughed. "Have you forgotten the many summers I spent exploring those woods?"

Since Lea didn't want to embarrass her, she resisted the urge to remind Kylie of the many occasions where Lea had chased her and some high school goon from the woods for indecent exposure, lewd and lascivious behavior, or public intoxication.

"You weren't afraid?"

"I live in the big bad city, remember?" Kylie said. "Verhoven's a walk in the park. Speaking of parks, isn't hunting restricted in this area?"

"It is. At least the wildlife's safe." Lea didn't realize her mistake until she saw Kylie's startled expression.

"Are you telling me the victim was murdered?"

Lea attempted damage control. "I can't expand on that at this time."

"Which means you won't."

"Which means I can't. Like I said, it's confidential."

When Kylie opened her mouth to object, Lea cut her off. "Did anything strike you as out of the ordinary?"

"I'd consider a human body devoured by crows out of the ordinary, wouldn't you?"

Same old Kylie, Lea thought. Same old pain-in-the-ass, but incredibly sexy Kylie.

"How about the surrounding area?"

"No. Like I told Deputy Wilkes, I didn't stick around to gawk."

"Did you disturb the crime scene in any way?"

"Why the hell would I do a stupid thing like that?"

Lea tried to assuage her irritation. "I'm not insinuating you used bad judgment. I'm only ensuring the crime scene remained undisturbed."

“You screwed up again, Carlson.”

“What do you mean?”

“You said crime scene, not accident scene. This is a murder.”

Exasperated, Lea placed her mug on the scratched wooden coffee table and clasped her hands between her legs. “You win, Kylie. The victim expired under questionable circumstances. However, an official determination as to cause of death is contingent on a medical examiner’s certified autopsy findings.”

“Obviously.”

Lea sighed. “You also understand all aspects of this case are confidential?”

“I know how to keep my mouth shut.”

Lea scribbled numbers on a blank page in her notebook. She ripped the sheet from its spiral binding and handed it to her. “If you remember anything else, please contact me either on my cell phone or at the station house.”

Kylie stared at the piece of paper. “Same personal number.”

“Same apartment, too.”

“Some things never change.”

Detecting a note of sarcasm in Kylie’s voice, Lea said, “I haven’t made great strides in that area.”

“Yes, I remember.”

Lea stood. “Thank you for your time. Again, I apologize for your trouble.”

Kylie nodded and walked her to the door. As she crossed the threshold, Lea turned. “Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?”

“Not at all. I haven’t forgotten that, at one time, we knew each other on a quite personal basis.”

Lea ignored her veiled reference to their sexual past. “Why’d you come back?”

Kylie’s face clouded over. “Verhoven’s the only place I’ve ever felt truly safe. Well... until today.”

Lea stepped out into the cold. Even in the short distance to her cruiser, she felt Kylie’s intense gaze boring into her back. Lea had never felt lonelier.

LEA REGARDED MAYOR Edward Strokowski as a blowhard and a lazy-ass. He was in his late fifties. His beady black eyes and pudgy face reminded her of two raisins stuck in a mound of cooking dough. Not tall in stature, he appeared squat, with an exceptionally thick paunch. He struck her as a man content to sit idle and wait out his retirement and subsequent hefty pension, while his staff assistants oversaw town business.

His five-year stint as Verhoven’s mayor, except for the occasional, obligatory public appearance, had proven a stress-free experience. However, a lifetime of physical neglect had resulted in Strokowski suffering from gastrointestinal and cardiac problems.

Lea detested him and intentionally kept contact to a minimum. She also didn’t hold much regard for his aide, a mealy submissive named Wendell. While Wendell handled the daily, innocuous complaints commonplace in a small, tightly-knit community, Lea resolved the occasional drunken brawl at Percy’s Bar & Grill, domestic squabble, or neighbor dispute, and investigated petty crimes. Verhoven County hadn’t experienced a major crime in over twenty-

five years, and the court had ruled that incident—a drunken fall down a flight of stairs—an accident rather than a wife’s successful attempt to murder a rumored abusive husband.

They conducted the meeting behind closed doors in Strokowski’s office, with Wendell serving as liaison.

“What’s all the commotion about, Carlson?” Strokowski’s voice boomed from the speakerphone loud enough to rattle windowpanes and startle Bessie Mavis, his secretary, who had a notorious habit of eavesdropping in the hall.

“There’s been a murder,” Lea said.

Wendell blanched, Betty squealed, and Strokowski gasped. Threefor-three, Lea thought.

“Murders don’t happen in Verhoven, Sheriff Carlson.”

“They do today, Mayor.”

After a long silence, Stokowski responded. “You’re positive this isn’t the result of an unfortunate accident?”

“I’m positive. An official investigation’s underway, and the body’s scheduled for autopsy.”

In an alarmed tone, Strokowski said, “Don’t tell me Doc Wilson’s working on the body.”

“No. I requested the state medical examiner’s assistance to avoid a town panic.”

Lea didn’t add that even if panic control hadn’t been an issue, she wouldn’t have relinquished the body to Wilson. She distrusted Verhoven’s inept medical physician with finding a deer tick on a fat white ass let alone determining a murder victim’s cause of death.

“Thank God,” Strokowski said. “The less people know about this, the better. Our vacation season begins in a few months. Our promotional campaign’s already gained a favorable response. This could be the most profitable season Verhoven’s had in fifteen years.”

“So I’m told.”

“I trust you’ll notify me when the autopsy results come in or if any new developments arise?”

“Of course.”

“No offense intended, Carlson, but it’s of the utmost importance you follow procedure.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is it’ll be your ass in a sling if word of this leaks out.” He disconnected before Lea could offer a retort to his warning.

Chapter Five

VIOLENT FLASHBACKS OF the murder scene accosted Kylie's thoughts. Her heartbeat, loud and forceful, pounded in her temples. The blotches of bright light that exploded every time she blinked convinced her to pop three aspirins to ward off a migraine.

This unexpected setback in her psyche healing process left her with a profound sense of helplessness and insecurity. Never one to harbor fear or vulnerability because of her environment, it disconcerted Kylie to experience it now. It rattled her that while trying to recuperate from a traumatic event, she'd witnessed yet another in a place where she'd never expected it to happen. Verhoven.

That Lea headed the investigation didn't help matters. Kylie hadn't been surprised Lea had stayed in Verhoven, only that their paths had crossed so soon upon her arrival and under such macabre circumstances. Even with time to emotionally prepare for their meeting, Lea's physical presence on the cabin's doorstep affected her.

As usual, Kylie had difficulty gauging Lea's reactions. Kylie remembered Lea as the serious one, the one who held her emotions in check. But the lack of steady eye contact and the subtle nervous twitch at the corner of Lea's mouth gave away her nervousness.

Too jittery to relax, Kylie escaped to the kitchen and poured a double shot of whiskey to calm herself. Her hands shook as she drank.

Frightened by dusk's lengthening shadows and the eerie stillness that often preceded an impending storm, Kylie checked she'd latched and bolted all windows and doors. She stole a nervous glance out the bay window and did a double-take when she saw a bright pinpoint of light floating surreally in the dense, gray fog. The fine hairs on the nape of her neck and arms rose to attention. What the hell was that?

Kylie rushed to the window and yanked the drapes closed. She peered through a slight gap where the panels didn't meet. When the light drew closer, and a low, rumbling, sputtering sound echoed in its wake, Kylie's tension evaporated. She'd overreacted to what sounded like a snowmobile burdened with engine trouble.

A dark-clad, helmeted rider struggled to stay on as the snowmobile lurched and hitched. Its strained engine emitted a loud, oily burp and shut down within twenty yards of the cabin. When its rider collapsed against the handlebars and lay motionless for so long, Kylie became concerned and reached for the door latch. But another wave of trepidation kept her hand hovering over the latch. What if the stranded cyclist is a mass murderer, intent on luring me outside?

Don't be an idiot, Vinson. That person's in trouble and may need your help. Still leery, Kylie watched the rider push away from the handlebars and dismount. She moved in front of the dimmed headlight. Even with the protective helmet and tinted shield concealing facial features, the rider's slight body frame and effeminate posture indicated she was female.

Kylie's tension eased up enough that she opened the door. She flipped on the outside light and called out, "Are you okay?"

As the woman turned toward her, she released a chinstrap and removed her helmet.

Kylie couldn't help but stare at the stunning, statuesque beauty standing before her. The woman's dark-black hair, intense blue eyes, and burgundy-tinted lips starkly contrasted with the snow-whitened landscape.

"Yes, but my sole means of travel isn't faring as well," the woman said. "I think I overheated its engine. I shouldn't have pushed it so hard, but with the storm approaching, I was afraid I'd get stuck in the middle of nowhere."

Her throaty, sensual voice belied any trace of irritation at her predicament.

The woman's self-control impressed Kylie. If faced with a similar situation, she'd be throwing a temper tantrum and cursing up a blue streak that would've curled the ears of the most hardened sailor.

Kylie decided she could stave off loneliness while helping a soul in need. "Why don't you come inside and warm up. I'll pour you a strong drink."

"You must be reading my mind."

Kylie admired the woman's fluid movements as she covered the distance between them. When she reached the top of the landing, she pulled off a glove and extended her hand. Kylie took it.

"Maya Holworth."

"Kylie Vinson."

"Thank you for rescuing my wayward soul, Kylie."

"The pleasure's mine. I'd have felt terribly guilty drinking whiskey by the fire while watching you freeze to death."

Maya flashed a grin that warmed Kylie far more than a strong drink.

"I hope you have enough to share," Maya said.

"There's plenty."

When Kylie returned to the living room with two half-filled glasses of honey-gold liquid, she found Maya stripped down to a form-fitting bodysuit and squatted by the fire.

The sight of her firm ass and muscled thighs sent tingling sensations coursing through Kylie's pelvic region. Her body's sexual reaction to a total stranger flustered her so much, she worried Maya might notice.

Perhaps sensing her presence, Maya swiveled and rose. With a demure smile, she accepted the glass and touched it to Kylie's.

"To good deeds."

"Yes," Kylie said.

As she watched Maya tilt her head back and take a long, deep swallow, Kylie had the insane urge to reach out and trail an index finger from Maya's throat on down, tracking the whiskey's passage.

A delighted moan escaped Maya's lips. "This is delicious...and so smooth."

"I'm glad you like it."

Kylie moved toward the couch and Maya followed.

"Are you a Verhovian?" Kylie asked.

"A Verhovian?"

"A year-round resident."

Maya savored another sip. "I'm hesitant to label myself until my roots become more established. I recently purchased an abandoned estate on the town's southern perimeter."

As if this intriguing woman hadn't already stoked Kylie's interest to learn more about her, this bit of information sent Kylie's curiosity over the edge.

“You purchased the Stanwood House?”

“Yes, I believe that’s the house’s original name.”

“It’s haunted.”

“Haunted?”

Kylie realized how ridiculous she sounded. “I didn’t just say that out loud, did I?”

Maya smiled.

“You must think me quite foolish.”

“Not at all.”

“It’s amazing how difficult it is to overcome childhood fears,” Kylie said. “Many summer afternoons my friends and I staked out the place, daring each other to slip through a broken window and hunt for ghosts.”

“Did anyone do it?”

Kylie shook her head. “We chickened out before we made it to the front porch step, let alone inside. Besides, the county condemned Stanwood House after the fire.”

“So you’re a Verhovian?”

“No. I summer vacationed here for most of my youth.”

“But you’re familiar with the history of the house?”

“I heard that devil worshippers set the place ablaze during one of their crazy sacrificial rituals.”

“I see.”

Kylie felt heat rise to her cheeks. “Yet more proof of my pathetic gullibility as a youth.”

“On the contrary. I envision you as an engaging adolescent. It’s a trait that’s followed you into adulthood.”

Kylie’s blush deepened at the compliment. “Thank you.”

“Are you interested in hearing the true account of Stanwood House’s downfall?”

Kylie leaned forward on the couch with her elbows propped on her knees. She cradled her chin. “Consider me your captive audience.”

Maya motioned at the whiskey bottle. “Maybe we should refill our glasses.”

Kylie obliged as Maya began her tale.

“Stanwood House was built in the early part of the twentieth century as a court-appointed refuge for the mentally ill...what most people referred to in those days as an insane asylum.”

Appalled, Kylie said, “I had no idea. Why Verhoven? It’s so far removed from a major city. Wouldn’t its patients need medical assistance and family support nearby?”

“I blame society’s ignorance and lack of empathy. The state judicial system decided the more removed these ‘unfortunates’ were from so-called ‘civilized folk,’ the better. Out of sight, out of mind, you could say. We’re also talking over a hundred years ago. At the time, Verhoven hadn’t reached the social status of a highly-populated summer vacation resort. When rumors spread of crazies living so close to their homes, the four hundred or so residents panicked. Their lack of knowledge in terms of understanding mental illness fueled their superstitions that the patients were uncontrollable and dangerous.”

“I find it inconceivable such narrow-mindedness existed and for so many decades,” Kylie said.

“Society fears what it doesn’t understand. History is rife with such atrocities.”

“And Stanwood House?”

“One cold November evening, shortly after midnight, a fire broke out. All medical staff and patients perished in the blaze.”

“Did they suspect arson?”

“Contrary to an official investigation that determined negligence as the cause, I’m convinced a grievous injustice occurred. No one survived. Since there were no witnesses, the court’s sole form of evidence to support their ruling hinged on an overturned kerosene lamp in a patient’s room. My research of town records revealed that Stanwood House’s west wing sustained extensive fire damage. The patients’ wing was located on the east side, the opposite end from where the fire originated. What further confirms my suspicion of foul play is despite reports of flames seen from towns miles away, hours passed before Verhoven’s residents attempted rescue efforts. By then, all of Stanwood House’s inhabitants had succumbed to smoke inhalation. Even stranger, all of the bodies were recovered from the west wing. I suspect the victims were roused from their beds in the east wing, herded into the west wing and, once the flames erupted, physically prevented from escaping.”

“Do you think the townsfolk had something to do with it?” Kylie asked.

“Mass hysteria is a dangerous condition. Remember the Salem witch hunts? All those innocent people burned at the stake because the townsfolk thought them possessed by evil spirits? Unfortunately, we’ll never know for certain what happened that night at the Stanwood House.”

Kylie shook her head in disgust. “Instead of leaving it abandoned and ravaged by the elements for over a century, why didn’t the state tear it down?”

“That will forever remain a mystery.”

“In any event, you’ve taken on quite a project, Maya.”

“What can I say? I’m an avid supporter of lost causes.”

“It must be costing thousands to restore.”

“Some years ago, I inherited a sizeable family trust to do with as I please. After traveling the world in search of a place that would offer me solitude and anonymity, I’ve chosen Verhoven.”

“Verhoven’s an ideal place to settle. You’ll find its beauty and charm irresistible.”

“As I’ve discovered in the woman who rescued me from the cold.”

When Kylie averted her eyes, Maya surprised her by leaning over and touching her cheek.

“You shouldn’t shy away from a compliment, Kylie. You’re an attractive, exceptional woman. I’m very much drawn to you. I sense a sadness in you, though, as if you’re not immune to tragedy.”

Maya’s perception of her emotional state flabbergasted Kylie more than Maya’s admission of physical interest. She waited until she could trust herself to speak. “What makes you think I’m troubled?”

Maya fixed her with an intense stare. “Have you ever heard the expression, ‘the eyes are the windows to the soul’?”

“Yes.”

“Your eyes betray you. There’s darkness there. Be steadfast in your search for enlightenment. You’ll attain solace.”

Maya further unnerved Kylie by leaning ever closer and kissing her parted lips. “Until we meet again.”

Too stunned to react on any level, Kylie watched Maya don her snow apparel and let herself out. Seconds later, she heard the snowmobile’s engine turn over without any hint of its earlier difficulty and continue on to its destination.

As if on cue, it began to snow.

AFTER MAYA CHECKED in on Laura, who was sleeping peacefully in a guest room, she moved down the hallway. A candle's dim, flickering glow illuminated the room where Maya often sought the comfort of shadows. Within this chosen chamber of Holworth House, she summoned her psychic ability to transcend place and time and connect on a subconscious level with those in need of her intervention.

For hours, she sat cross-legged in the center of the room with her eyes closed and mind focused on mainstreaming into Kylie's pulse points.

To her frustration, her attempts proved futile. Although certain Kylie had suffered a devastating event, her strong emotional defense barriers wouldn't allow Maya to pinpoint its source.

She remembered Donia telling her that her psychic powers might not influence everyone, that some weren't aware they needed her help. Still, the useless effort left Maya irritated and exhausted.

Maya's confusion deepened over what role Kylie played in the scheme of her life mission. Never before by happenstance had Maya encountered someone she sensed needed her help. Nor had she met one who held her so spellbound. Yet, if Kylie hadn't acted on human kindness by inviting her in from the cold, no interaction would've taken place. Maya didn't believe in coincidences. Their paths crossed for a reason. She only hoped tragedy wouldn't befall her twice in a lifetime.

Chapter Six

AS SOON AS Lea entered her studio apartment, she yanked open the refrigerator and snagged a cold beer. She twisted off its metal top, flung it in the vicinity of the trashcan, and took a hefty swig. What a fucking nightmare. It hadn't been enough to find a murder victim gnawed to pieces within Verhoven's town limits, but Kylie literally stumbled on him.

Although she'd tried to maintain a professional exterior, Lea now second-guessed her competence to conduct the interview when the whole time an emotional and physical maelstrom had her heart pounding and her stomach flip-flopping. For years, she'd fantasized about their reconciling after such a long estrangement and had entertained scenarios from falling into a warm, platonic embrace to passionately ripping each other's clothes off and making up for lost time. Never had she imagined a grisly murder would be the precursor to their encounter.

No matter how the meeting transpired, Lea likened coming face-to-face with Kylie to journeying through a time tunnel to a past that left her with many unresolved feelings. As always, when she mentally regressed, the pain resurfaced. She didn't want to remember, but the past had too strong a hold on her emotions to allow her respite.

A memory arose from five years ago.

Lea had completed her probationary period as Verhoven's acting town sheriff in time for the summer tourism season when a sexy, grown-up Kylie showed up at the station house with a laptop and steno pad cradled in her arms.

She'd come unannounced and showed genuine surprise when Lea recognized her. Lea remembered Kylie as a high school student and how, at the time, the age gap seemed enormous. Now, with Kylie in her early twenties, it didn't matter at all. Kylie's presence had kick-started Lea's libido into full gear. Kylie had cut her auburn hair short, into a "messy on purpose" style that enhanced her sea-foam green eyes. Her full cheeks had thinned out, accentuating prominent cheekbones. Her body remained lean and toned, sexy in that tomboyish way that had always been an instant turn-on for Lea.

"I'm surprised you're still here," Kylie said. "I imagined the monotony of small-town life would've motivated you to pursue higher aspirations."

"There's always town council," Lea said, teasing.

"Somehow, I don't see you embroiled in bureaucratic bullshit."

"I like Verhoven. It has the right mix of excitement."

"So, you prefer to stay in your comfort zone?"

Her candid question put Lea on the defensive. "For now." Eager to change the subject, Lea ushered her to a chair. "What have you set your sights on over the years?"

"I've earned a BA in Psychology and am now working towards a Master's in Criminal Behavior Analysis."

"I'm impressed. So your future will consist of delving into killers' psyches?"

“Exploring the mind’s idiosyncrasies fascinates me, which is why I’m here,” Kylie said. “I’m writing a thesis on how rural violence compares to urban crime. Would you be interested in lending some insight?”

Lea laughed. “I’m not sure Verhoven offers much in the area of serious criminal behavior.”

“There are common parallels. All towns have secrets.”

“Less populated towns manage to hide them better and don’t have the media hype to generate mass hysteria.”

“Violence is random and present in all walks of life. Verhoven’s not immune to its infectious spread. Its residents don’t get to pick and choose which of the Seven Deadly Sins to commit.”

“I agree,” Lea said. “The town harbors its fair share of moral and criminal offenders, but there hasn’t been a sex crime or murder on record in over twenty-five years.”

“Will you at least humor me?”

Lea smiled. “It’d be my pleasure.”

“Before we begin, I have a confession to make. I didn’t return to Verhoven solely for my thesis. I hoped you’d still be here. You see, Sheriff, I had this insane crush on you the summer I graduated high school.”

“Really?”

“Does that come as earth-shattering news?”

“The last I remembered, you weren’t into girls.”

“What can I say? I’m a little bit of a late bloomer unlike you, who must’ve known from a young age.”

Her statement surprised Lea. “What makes you so sure I’m gay?”

“Verhoven’s a small town. Word gets around.”

Lea feigned disbelief. “And I thought I kept a low profile.”

“Fat chance of that.”

For a while, both concentrated on the task at hand. But in the ensuing weeks, sexual chemistry became an undeniable distraction and ranged from enticing body language to intimate conversation.

Lea found Kylie’s sensuality intoxicating. Her no-holds-barred approach to experiencing life had captivated her as well. Kylie told Lea she considered no topic off limits and felt free to express her innermost views and feelings without reservation.

Besides their shared physical attraction, Lea began to experience a strong, unsettling emotional connection. A failed love affair had taught her that once you’ve laid your heart bare, you become vulnerable and risk losing your sense of self. The pain of a lesson hard learned prevented Lea from acting on her emotions.

In contrast to Lea’s hesitancy to nurture anything more than a friendship, Kylie made it her mission to pursue a sexual one, which she put to the test one evening when she stopped by Lea’s apartment unannounced with a large pizza and a twelve-pack of beer.

“I hope I’m not intruding, but I had this irresistible urge to see you.”

Pleased with her unexpected arrival, Lea ushered her into the living room and closed the door.

In less than two hours, they devoured three-quarters of the pizza and had each downed their fourth beer. Just when Lea began to relax, Kylie startled her by asking, “Do you fantasize, Lea?”

Lea almost choked on a piece of crust. “What kind of fantasy are we talking about?”

“Sexual fantasy, of course.”

Lea tried the nonchalant approach. “Doesn’t everyone?”

“I’m not interested in everyone’s fantasy. I want to hear yours.”

“What makes you think I’ll tell you?”

Kylie giggled. “Because I imagine even you get tired of being so serious.”

Lea took a moment before casting her inhibitions aside. “Okay, you asked for it. In my fantasy, I arrive home late one night. It’s snowing. The flakes are coming down hard and fast against my bedroom window. I go to the window and touch its cool pane. The heat from my fingers melts some of the flakes clinging to the glass. A stranger comes up behind me. I don’t turn around. I can only see a portion of her face through the window’s reflection. She never takes her eyes off mine. Her intense gaze mesmerizes me. She begins to undress me and to stroke me. My nipples throb painfully from excitement. During the entire time, my hands are against the glass and I’m watching snowflakes turn to liquid.

“She’s completely undressed me, and she’s taking me hard from behind. I feel her fingers in me, two, three, maybe four. I want more. She presses my heated body against the glass, and as I come, I watch hundreds of snowflakes melting and streaming down the glass. Then, she’s gone.”

Kylie clapped her hands in delight. “Ah, stranger sex. I love stranger sex!”

“I think you enjoy any form of sex. It’s your turn.”

Kylie began. “My favorite fantasy is where I’m lying naked on a moonlit beach. I’m at the shoreline with my legs spread. The tide is lapping at my toes and then receding. The ebb and flow fills me with anticipation. The water surges against me. It tickles my ankles and calves and crests my knees. I’m tensing for the next wave, waiting for it to go ever higher, so that it’s wafting across my thighs and teasing my already rock-hard clit. I’m beyond myself with excitement. Just when I can’t hold out any longer, I watch a large wave approach. I spread my legs ever wider and arch my hips. The water crashes down on my clit and swirls inside me. I am... lost.”

A few moments of silence passed between them. “Wow, that’s really hot,” Lea whispered.

“No. You’re really hot.”

And that’s when, for all intents and purposes, platonic bliss went to the wayside. Like sex-crazed teenagers, they yanked each other’s clothes off.

Lea kissed Kylie with an intensity that left her panting with desire. Kylie’s silky smooth breasts and prominent nipples felt wonderful in her mouth. Lea went down on Kylie. Her pink, glistening, oh-so-delicate lips reminded Lea of dew-drenched petals opening to the sun’s warmth... to the warmth of her eager tongue and fingers.

Every day of passionate lovemaking blurred together until three mind-blowing weeks passed. Lea likened the affair to a maddening roller coaster ride, a runaway railcar and inevitable train wreck. Even though Lea sensed the relationship doomed from the start, and that she’d end up emotionally devastated and left to lick her wounds, she rode it out until the end. But when the end arrived, it still hit her like a ton of bricks.

“I need to go back to New York, Lea.”

“Your classes don’t begin for another three weeks.”

“We finished the thesis weeks ago. I think it’d be best if I left now.”

“Playtime with me is over, huh?”

She remembered how Kylie’s eyes had sparked in anger. “If I wanted to play, I would’ve seduced a stranger.”

“I’m in love with you, Kylie.”

“Don’t say that. I’m having a hard enough time dealing with this without you complicating matters.”

“We’ve both complicated matters.”

“You’re not in love with me, Lea. You feel safe with me, just like you feel safe remaining in Verhoven.”

Through a cloud of tears, Lea felt her frustration surge. “And I guess I’ve only been your convenient sexual distraction.”

Again, Lea watched Kylie’s irritation flare. “You think that’s what I’ve done? Used you?”

“You were lonely, bored...”

“Oh, no. I don’t just fuck anybody, Lea.”

“You fucked me.”

“Because I wanted to fuck you.”

“And now you want to run away. Who’s playing it safe now?”

As swift as Lea’s temper surged, it dissipated, replaced with profound remorse.

“I thought we had an understanding. I never lied to you,” Kylie said.

“No, you didn’t. But you sure as hell sent enough mixed signals for me to foolishly think I could change your mind.”

“There was never a mind to change.”

Her words cut Lea to the core.

Moments later, and without a glance back, Kylie left.

And now, five years later, she’d returned.

Emotionally drained from the memories, Lea struggled to focus on the present. She’d wasted enough time dwelling on the past.

Now, she had a murderer to catch.

Chapter Seven

THE FOLLOWING MORNING at the station house, Lea and Harvey took turns keeping warm in front of a portable, battery-operated heater.

Once the blizzard arrived, it struck full-force, dumping two feet of thick, wet snow overnight and well into the dawn hours. With gale-force winds and plummeting temperatures predicted, the inevitability of freezing roads would make travel treacherous. Lea feared it'd be spring before she'd see a glimpse of asphalt.

Harvey had spent hours plowing the town's emergency access roads only to tell Lea he'd come to the disheartening realization the snow's rapid accumulation would require plowing the roads a second, possibly a third, time.

Upon hearing the latest report from the National Weather Service, Lea dispatched a severe weather advisory warning over a local radio frequency, advising residents to remain indoors and wait for further instructions.

Dawson's gravelly voice droned from the speakerphone resting on the scratched, pen-marked, wooden desktop. Lea hoped this phone call meant he'd finished his autopsy report.

"I'm grateful for random temperature drops and wind shifts," Dawson said. "The city got rain."

"Rain freezes too, old-timer. Be careful. I've heard once people your age break bones, they're one step closer to the grave."

"You have no respect for the elderly, Carlson. No respect at all."

"I love you too, Larry."

"You conveniently use terms of endearment when you want information from me, Lea. That's shameful behavior."

"I'm not above coddling and stroking egos to get what I want."

Dawson chuckled. "I'll begin with autopsy results and proceed to scientific analyses. I've determined from the victim's blood lividity levels and body temperature that approximate time of death occurred between midnight and 2:00 a.m.

"I've noted two, one-half-inch deep slices in the victim's torso extending from slightly beneath the collarbone clear down to the navel. These cuts crisscross over the sternum. These are clean, precise incisions. By that I mean the weapon, a knife, didn't have a serrated edge. There's no sawing motion involved.

"These wounds were also inflicted premortem, with none deep enough to cause death. However, over a prolonged period, risk factors such as shock from blood loss and exposure would contribute to that demise. I'm convinced whoever inflicted these wounds meant to draw enough blood to ring the dinner bell for the area wildlife. As a result of extensive creature molestation, we're left with considerable tainted evidence."

Lea bit her tongue to prevent voicing her aggravation.

Dawson continued. “In some areas flesh is gnawed and shredded, whereas entire portions are ripped away from the victim’s thighs and stomach. There’s no question the wildlife ate him alive and death came without mercy.”

Next to her, Lea heard Harvey gag and swallow hard before darting for the bathroom.

“I also didn’t detect any trauma to his skull region—blunt force or otherwise—that would indicate unconsciousness during the time preceding death. There are no defensive wounds on the victim’s hands, wrists, or forearms to indicate a struggle occurred, either.”

Lea let a few beats of silence pass before commenting. “Larry, since the victim remained conscious during the assault but didn’t defend himself, do you think he’d been drugged?”

“Intelligent minds do share the same rationalizations. Toxicology and drug screens revealed trace elements of a wide variety of stimulant drugs that would’ve kept our victim in a perpetual hyperactive state. In order to counteract their effects, he’d have to be administered a paralytic-type drug.”

“A tranquilizer?”

“Not quite. When administered a tranquilizer, a person loses consciousness. Whoever killed our victim wanted him awake. Worse yet, he wanted him to feel. These uncontrolled substances are manufactured on the black market and are potent enough to constrict physical movement without interfering with the brain’s sensory perception.”

“Jesus. The pain must’ve been unbearable.”

“About the lab tests on body samples recovered from the murder scene, you’re on the waiting list. It pains my ego to admit that, although I do have some connections, I can’t work miracles when it comes to DNA testing. Fiber analysis performed on the rope did come back but without any promising leads. It’s categorized as standard variety and composition and mass-produced nationwide.”

“So tracking it would be impossible?”

“Unless you enjoy searching for a needle in a haystack.”

“Or the killer’s considerate enough to leave behind a sales receipt with fingerprints. The investigation’s at a fucking standstill, isn’t it?”

“Oh ye of little faith,” Dawson said. “A few clouds darken your horizon, and you’re ready to pitch a hissy fit. I discovered evidence that might assist you in creating a timeline of events preceding the murder.”

“Please, do tell.”

“There’s a significant facial wound, measuring six inches in length. It runs diagonally from the corner of the victim’s left eyebrow down across his right cheek and ends at the jawbone.”

“A knife wound?”

“Yes. But this wound’s characteristics are inconsistent with the wounds inflicted to his chest area.”

“The perp might’ve used different knives?”

“Not only that, but the injuries sustained by these dual knives occurred at different time periods.”

“You lost me, Larry.”

“To clarify, the face wound isn’t as fresh as the chest wound, and the chest wound isn’t as fresh as the wounds inflicted from wildlife.”

“In layman’s terms, please.”

“These wounds were rendered in a series and at varying time intervals. The facial wound is hours older than subsequent wounds. I found traces of antiseptic and frayed pieces of gauze—clear indications the victim attempted to self treat.”

“So someone else had a stab—excuse the pun—at him before our murderer?”

“Or the same murderer had a second chance to finish up on a previously botched attempt.”

“Which makes this not a spontaneous act of violence, but a premeditated one?”

“Indeed.”

Lea’s thoughts still reeled from Dawson’s autopsy findings when the phone rang twenty minutes later. The caller was Duke Freeman, Verhoven’s regional rail station manager. His gruff voice echoed loudly in her ear.

“I hate to bother you, Sheriff, but there’s an abandoned vehicle down by the tracks. I don’t know how long it’s been there. With the rails shut down due to the malfunction and then the storm, I got a late start.”

“I’ll send Harvey over to check it out.”

“Maybe you should come as well.”

The tone of his voice, and what he proceeded to tell her, made Lea shout at the closed bathroom door. “Grab your coat, Harvey!”

LEA GRIMACED AS she pulled on a pair of nitrile gloves and advanced on the abandoned car.

Unaware the car and surrounding area might be a possible crime scene, Duke had cleared it of snow. Shovel indentations and boot prints tainted the area and any potential evidence.

Too late to worry about that now. Lea identified the sedan as a late model, black Lexus, with New York license plates. True to Freeman’s report, she found the driver’s side door unlocked, and its passenger seat littered with wads of bloodied first-aid dressings.

She carefully lifted a gore-saturated piece of gauze with the tip of a pen so Harvey, peering over her shoulder, could see it.

“Jesus,” he said.

“I’d lay odds this belongs to our John Doe. Now we have to figure out how he got from here to the woods. While I’m collecting evidence, Harvey, radio in the plate number to the state police and have them run a background check.”

Within fifteen minutes, Harvey returned.

“Owner’s name is Louis Pendleton, age thirty-nine, residing in South Bronx. A search of criminal records revealed petty misdemeanors as a juvenile, progressing to a slew of adult felony charges. A police cruiser is en route to the address on record to investigate the premises. Dispatch will relay their findings. A crime scene team’s on alert and awaiting further orders.”

“Good work, Harvey.”

Lea motioned toward the bar and grill. “I’ll stand by for the update while you check out Percy’s. Maybe someone will remember seeing a man matching Pendleton’s description in the area a few days ago. With his face cut up like hamburger, he’d be hard to miss.”

Lea received feedback from police dispatch as she concluded her inspection of the Lexus. Over band-radio static, she managed to get the gist of the officer’s report.

“No suspect located on premises, Sheriff Carlson. Landlady escorted patrolmen into apartment sans search warrant because she’s pissed off Pendleton owed her three-months’ rent.

“Upon entering, officers found obvious signs of a physical altercation: bloodstained countertop and floor, and a cache of undetermined substances in both crystallized and powdered form. Soiled first-aid supplies were strewn about the bathroom. They recovered a wallet, empty of cash. A laptop screen displayed regional rail schedules from NYC to areas in Verhoven’s vicinity.

“Officers had to revive landlady with smelling salts after she’d taken in the scene and passed out. Information obtained from her is sketchy. She states Pendleton has a live-in woman: Laura something. Age she guessed around twenty. She described her as having blonde hair, blue eyes, tall and thin in build. She’s gone missing as well. Dispatch has issued an APB for both persons of interest.”

“You can scratch the one for Pendleton,” Lea said. “His body’s cooling in the state morgue. It’s the woman I’d be concerned about.”

Lea’s next task required getting a formal statement from Duke Freeman. Well into his twilight years, with a tendency to reminisce about the past, Duke made the statement process take longer than Lea had the time or patience to endure.

As he geared up for his second “back in the day” story, Lea said, “Not today, Duke.”

His startled expression made her feel guilty over her tone and rude dismissal. “Sorry. The past couple of days have taken their toll. I didn’t mean to sound so harsh.”

Duke’s rheumy hazel eyes softened. “I sympathize with your pain. Bad weather can sure stoke tempers. Add to that cabin fever, and you’ve got your hands full.”

“Were you at the station the evening the train malfunctioned?”

“Yup. A hell of a lot of angry, stranded passengers gave me a hassle before I could even get out of my car. Either the world’s gotten more impatient, or I’ve gotten more sensitive.”

“I think it’s the former, Duke. Did you happen to notice a woman matching this description?”

To Lea’s mounting frustration, Freeman didn’t remember seeing anyone resembling the missing woman. He confided that after having spent thirty-some years “riding the rails,” he’d adopted a habit of making sure trains arrived and departed on schedule and paid little attention to their passengers.

Discouraged, Lea jammed her hands in her pockets and watched a state patrol car and crime-scene-investigation van sidle up to the Lexus. While she briefed the officer in charge on specifics, technicians set to work dusting the car for fingerprints and cataloging evidence.

Once finished, she walked the short distance to Percy’s. She located Harvey seated at the bar and slid onto a vacant stool to his right.

In a voice low enough for only Lea to hear, Harvey said, “Please reassure me my misery will be short-lived.”

With a tilt of his head and a roll of his eyes, he directed Lea’s attention to a thick-necked, bear of a man sitting on his left flailing his arms and complaining about illegal immigrants. Despite the early afternoon hour, his bloodshot and heavy-lidded eyes and slurred speech clearly indicated intoxication. His breath, a horrid mix of cigarette smoke and beer, hung so cloyingly in the air Lea resorted to inhaling through her mouth to cut down on the stench.

She thought she knew all of Verhoven’s drunks, but this guy’s face didn’t ring any bells.

Harvey introduced him. “Mr. Reginald Bowser, meet Sheriff Lea Carlson.”

“How do, there. As I told your deputy here, I ain’t seen no guy with no chopped up face.”

“How about a woman?”

Lea gave Bowser a description and watched his eyes blink in recognition. He let out a loud, noxious belch. “A dame? Your deputy didn’t tell me you’re scoping out a dame.”

“I’m telling you now. Have you seen her?”

“Hell, yes! I seen some chick like that a few nights ago, sitting right over there.” Bowser pointed a pudgy finger at a booth occupied by an elderly couple who appeared to be bickering over the lunch tab. Bowser shouted to a man behind the bar stacking glasses. “Ain’t that right, Percy?”

Percy Dwightman, the grill’s proprietor, ambled toward the trio.

He acknowledged Lea and Harvey with a polite nod.

“Yes, that’s right,” Percy said. “As soon as she got off the train, I pegged her as a runaway. She ate as if she hadn’t had a decent meal in months. You should’ve seen her panicked expression when the conductor relayed news of the downed train. She looked about ready to jump out of her skin.”

Lea turned to Bowser. “How about your contact with this woman, Mr. Bowser?”

“She was nothing but a ball-breaker.”

“Why do you say that, Mr. Bowser?”

“Because that bitch didn’t want to take a ride on my big machine.” Bowser cupped the front of his jeans and crudely rubbed its bulge for emphasis.

Lea ignored Harvey’s snickering.

“Big machine, huh?”

“Yup. She had her eyes set on something else.”

“Could you be more specific, Mr. Bowser?”

“She wanted pussy. Can you believe that? She was a goddamn dyke.”

Lea’s face flushed with rage. Unaware of Lea’s sexual preference, Bowser continued to rant. “Her butch girlfriend pulled a knife on me and threatened to cut off my dick. There oughta be a law.”

Lea’s words came out in a low, biting tone. “Yeah, a law legalizing a woman’s right to castrate.”

Bowser’s brow creased in confusion. “What?”

Harvey quickly redirected the conversation. “So, Mr. Bowser, what you’re claiming is you propositioned a woman who is a lesbian, and she, along with her partner, turned down your advances?”

“You got that right, Deputy.”

“And you haven’t seen either of these women since that night?”

“I sure as hell ain’t.”

“Could you describe the one with the knife?”

“Naw. Too damn dark outside.”

Unable to contain her irritation, Lea said, “More like you were too damned drunk.”

Bowser gawked at her. “Hey, that’s uncalled for.”

“The only behavior uncalled for is your prejudice and public display of drunkenness. Cut him off, Percy.”

“Already did, Sheriff, and took his car keys.”

Lea tried to remain calm. “Mr. Bowser, I suggest you get your ass off that stool and start moving it toward the exit, or I’ll have it cooling in a jail cell.”

Bowser’s bewildered expression changed to fear. With a grunt and a burp, he weaved an unsteady path to the exit.

Harvey burst into a fit of laughter. “Damn! Even in the off months the drunks are alive and well.”

“At least this one’s given us a viable lead.”

“What’s this about a female?” Harvey asked.

Lea shared the state police report with him.

“The scenario I’m playing out,” she said, “is Pendleton got heavy with the hand and the girl slashed him, which, by the way, coincides with Larry’s determination of two separate knife injuries at two different time intervals. She then took off and hopped a train. Pendleton must’ve followed her, and she finished him off here.”

“Are there any jurisdictional restrictions since the victim and suspect aren’t local?” Harvey asked.

“Good question. We’ll have to wait and see.”

“What do you make of the other woman that lard ass mentioned? The one wielding a knife?”

“My first guess is she’s an accomplice.”

AN INTENSE, THROBBING sensation woke Kylie from a dream where she and Maya had been making passionate love. She quivered with excitement when she remembered how Maya’s tongue and fingers left none of her erogenous zones unexplored.

Eager to recapture the dream awake, her fingers moved between her legs to her pulsing, moist pussy and lightly stroked her hardened clit. She moaned and flipped onto her stomach. She slid two fingers inside her warmth and moved in rhythm with her thrusts. She came fast and loud and muffled her cries of ecstasy against a pillow. Although she’d sated her desire, her mind lingered on images of Maya ravishing her. She couldn’t stop fantasizing about Maya’s cobalt-blue eyes and incredible body. Never had she experienced such a strong connection to someone after such a brief exchange.

A persistent yearning to see Maya again had Kylie bounding from bed and racing to the window. She shivered, unsure if the early morning’s chill or her excitement over another stimulating encounter with Maya had elicited the reaction. Her eager grin changed to a frown when it dawned on her that the huge white monolith in the drive was her snow-entombed SUV. Disgruntled, she wriggled into an oversized robe and padded into the cabin’s living area.

Her mood further darkened when she glimpsed the unlit digital displays on the kitchen appliances and the dim glow of embers in the fireplace. Damn. The power was out, and she’d forgotten to stock up on logs she stored in the shed.

If she hadn’t been in such an agitated state, she would’ve been amused that the idea of drinking an ice-cold cup of coffee upset her more than the possibility of freezing to death waiting for the electricity to come back on.

Grumbling, she strode to the front door and pulled it open. Her aggravation eased when she saw that at least the plows had cleared a path to the main road. If she could dig out a path from the house to her SUV, and from the SUV to the intersecting road, four-wheel drive would do the rest. With the possibility of freedom only shovelfuls of snow away, her anticipation returned.

She hastily dressed in layered clothing before donning a hooded parka. With renewed vigor, she grabbed a shovel from underneath the porch eave. She clomped down the steps and began to dig.

It took her two hours to clear the SUV, but the exertion invigorated more than exhausted her. When she finished, she tossed the shovel onto the porch and raced into the cabin. She ran through credible excuses to pay Maya an unannounced visit.

She couldn't tell Maya the truth about her obsession. No, that'd be too much information revealed much too soon and might scare Maya off. God forbid Maya think her a stalker. She could use the cabin's lack of electricity as a viable reason, though. After all, who wanted to spend a cold afternoon alone in an unheated place? She could also tell Maya she'd stopped by to make sure she'd weathered the storm without any further snowmobile troubles.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she wriggled into the SUV and turned over its ignition. She grinned triumphantly as it roared into life.

Childhood memory served her well in guiding her to Stanwood/ Holworth House. Three miles later, she spotted the Victorian-style residence, not that she could've missed it. With a blanket of snow and a few spindly trees as a backdrop, Stanwood House stood alone and, from afar, gave the impression of an eerie, foreboding place. From the outside, it loomed unchanged: a scorched brick monstrosity set into a glaring white, barren landscape.

Kylie couldn't help wondering what morbid sense prompted Maya to purchase such a depressing structure.

As she'd hoped, Maya's snowmobile sat, unattended, adjacent to the front door. Kylie came to the frustrating realization that, with her form of transportation mounted with skis, Maya had no need to shovel her driveway. A long expanse of virgin snow lay between Maya's house and the intersecting road. Since she hadn't thought to bring a shovel, Kylie had no choice but to make a path to the house with her body.

Damn. If I'd known winter had a bitch on, I'd have rented my own snowmobile for my stay.

Uncertainty made her hesitant to leave the SUV's warm confines. You've come too far to back out now, she thought. Chances are she's already seen you, anyway.

Kylie took a few deep breaths to steady her nerves. She spread her lips in what she hoped would pass as a confident smile and opened the SUV's door. Although shoveling at the cabin hadn't winded her, the trek to Holworth House proved a challenge. She was grunting and trudging through knee-deep snow.

When she made it to the landing, she leaned against an ice-caked railing to catch her breath. She glanced at the front door. Stained oak made up the lower half, while the upper half consisted of various sized and shaped beveled glass panes.

Through one of these panes, Kylie caught sight of a naked, blonde-haired woman walking with her back to her down a long, narrow hallway. Before Kylie could retreat, a fully dressed Maya emerged from a doorway with a terrycloth robe draped over a forearm. When the blonde-haired woman saw Maya, she smiled and moved into Maya's arms for a warm embrace.

Shit. They're lovers.

Humiliated, Kylie couldn't get away from the landing fast enough. She retraced her steps, stumbled, and fell face-first into a mound of snow. She quickly got up and scrambled away. Once she'd made it to the SUV, she flung herself behind the steering wheel and turned the key in the ignition. She drove away in a plume of churned-up snow.

She silently thanked whatever powers may be that neither Maya nor the unknown woman seemed aware of her presence. If they'd caught sight of her, Kylie would've suffered the ultimate embarrassment.

SEATED ON A padded stool, in a candlelit bathroom, with Laura's back to her, Maya combed Laura's damp hair. With each stroke, she admired how Laura's tresses fell in wavy, fan-like patterns across her narrow shoulders.

"You have such beautiful hair, Laura. It's so long and lustrous."

"The Sisters of Mercy often complimented me on my hair. They always took turns braiding or updoing it. Every other day I sported a different hairstyle."

"Please tell me more about the sisters. When I first met you, I was more concerned with streaming into your tortured memories, not your pleasant ones."

"There were five sisters in all. Each indulged me in their own way. One catered to my every whim, and one taught me right from wrong. Another sister kept me fed and tidy, while another taught me to read and write. The last, Sister Guinevere, taught me 'to thine own self be true.' As I grew up never knowing my mother, each became a cherished part of what I imagined a mother would be."

"You never knew your mother?" Maya asked.

"No. She abandoned me at birth. The sisters literally found me wrapped in tattered, blood-drenched sheets and lying in a clothes basket at the orphanage's front door. They said I'd always have a special place in their hearts." Laura giggled. "They probably told all the children that."

"I can see why you'd be their favorite. It won't be long now. Your reunion is only a day's train ride away."

"I'm so excited about my return, yet I feel torn," Laura said in a quiet voice.

"How so?"

Laura swiveled on the stool and embraced Maya. "I'll miss our time together."

Maya smiled and caressed her silken cheeks. "I'll never be far from your thoughts. You know if you need me to seek me out in your mind."

"The gift," Laura said.

"Yes. Just as your emotional devotion to the Sisters of Mercy has prevailed, so will our unique connection, our merged psyches."

"You've been so kind and attentive to my needs. How can I ever repay you?"

"Do you remember my telling you that first night not all acts of kindness come with a price?"

"Yes."

"Friendship is one of them."

"I love you, Maya."

"As I do you, Laura."

Maya stood and reached for her hand. "Come. It's time. The sisters await."

As a precaution against anyone possibly recognizing Laura from the night Verhoven's rail system went down, Maya drove her by snowmobile twenty-five miles north to an intersecting connection.

Tears clouded Maya's vision as Laura handed her ticket to the stationmaster for stamping before boarding the idling train. Maya watched as Laura made her way through the passenger car's narrow aisle and slid into a window seat. In a tiny satchel, Maya had packed a change of clothes and a slim manila envelope containing enough money for Laura to begin her new life.

A whistle blew. The train master hopped on board and scanned the station area for any latecomers before pressing a button. With a whishing sound, the electronic doors breezed closed.

Just as the train sluggishly inched forward, Laura turned toward her and pressed her palms flat against the glass. With tears trickling down her cheeks, she managed a smile.

Maya raised her hand and waved until the train picked up speed and disappeared from view.

OTHER THAN A few calls logged from concerned residents who observed state cops in the area—which Lea explained as routine perimeter checks—Lea felt confident Verhoven’s residents remained unaware a murder had occurred. Although relieved the investigation wouldn’t be compromised, she experienced guilt at keeping citizens in the dark. Damn Strokowski. But she had no choice. Strokowski had issued a gag order, and she and Harvey had done their damndest to abide by it. With the exception of a lone witness, and a handful of high-ranking town and city officials, Verhoven’s belief that it remained one of the few crime-free communities on the East Coast held strong. She wondered if she could’ve pulled it off if the backlash from the storm hadn’t kept many of the residents inside until the weather cleared.

In any event, it didn’t matter. They’d relinquished the body and evidence recovered into the medical examiner’s competent hands, assisted the New York City detectives in identifying the victim and suspect’s residence, and had even gone a step further in providing an accomplice theory.

From all aspects of police procedure, they’d covered their bases, and more important, their asses to the best of their professional ability. From here on out, the big-city detectives controlled the investigation.

While Harvey commandeered the night shift at the station house to monitor any emergency calls, Lea headed home. She resisted the temptation to drive by Kylie’s cabin. She rationalized that enough drama had occurred over the past two days without the possibility of encountering or stirring up more.

Chapter Eight

MAYA AWOKE TO a strong sense of foreboding, an unsettling feeling that someone, overwhelmed by fear and despair, was unconsciously reaching out to her through telepathic means. She prepared herself to visit.

Her honed supernatural abilities as a Psy enabled her to venture into parallel worlds while maintaining a physical presence in the real world. Within this altered state, she relied on pulse points to mainstream in to the person in need's troubled inner psyche.

The mental scene revealed a darkened room. A single halo of light shone upon a young, adolescent female who trembled with fear. Flushed and sweaty, she had strands of honey-blond hair hanging limply across her forehead. The sight of her tear-stained cheeks and bloody, tattered lips tore at Maya's heartstrings. The girl stood within this narrow circle of light and clutched a sheet in a futile attempt to hide her nakedness.

Maya shuddered. In these tension-filled moments, when her anger flared white-hot and her thirst for revenge consumed her, she often forgot the scene in her mind signified a past memory of a child's nightmare. Maya tensed in dreaded anticipation of events to come.

Somewhere in the outer expanse of blackness, a deep-throated voice said, "You know what must be done in order for you to keep your secret."

"But I don't want to," the girl pleaded. "It hurts too much."

"But you must. Physical persecution is the only way one can atone for past sins. Or would you rather I tell your father what you did to your mother. How you left her alone to die."

"No, please don't tell Daddy. He can't take much more."

"Then do as I say. Turn away from me and prepare to repent for your soul's redemption."

Choking back an anguished sob, the girl obeyed her persecutor's command.

The emotional degradation had been hard enough to witness, but nothing could have prepared Maya for the grotesque marks of violence that riddled the girl's frail body from her shoulders to her buttocks and upper thighs. The welts, some fresh, others thick from scarring, varied in severity.

Overcome with repulsion, Maya's psychic connection to the girl faltered. Fearful she'd lose the child's stream of thought, Maya forced herself to watch and absorb every minute detail of unfolding events, no matter how disturbing they may be.

To her frustration, a long, hooded cloak obscured the sadist's identity and when he entered the perimeter of light, he turned his tall, hulking frame away from her.

She strained to reestablish a clearer point of focus only to realize that, because the scene originated from the abused girl's perspective, Maya couldn't get a clear view of her victimizer's face.

In his right hand, he brandished a leather cat-o'-nine tails. Its knotted ends skittered and scraped across the wooden floor as he advanced on her.

The girl flinched. Her reflexive reaction to the threatening sound incited her attacker.

"You must not fear atonement, child. You must welcome it."

In a fit of rage and frenzied motion, the abuser jerked his arm back. Horrified, Maya watched the whip's long tendrils constrict and expand behind him before he hurled his arm forward, casting their lethal extensions at the cowering child.

Outraged, Maya screamed. As if by sheer will, the violent scene faded into oblivion. In an instant, a far different one presented itself.

The girl, now clothed in a pair of pastel-hued, flannel pajamas, sat propped against a fluffy pillow in a bed surrounded by stuffed animals. A rainbow-patterned comforter concealed her from the waist down. A table lamp bathed her delicate features in an ethereal glow.

The stark contrast to the atrocity Maya had witnessed moments before calmed her anxiety.

The girl greeted Maya with a radiant smile. "I knew you'd come. I knew if I prayed long and hard enough my guardian angel would come and save me from the bad man."

Maya came to the astonishing realization that no psychic barriers existed between her and the girl. Never had Maya witnessed such exceptional mental acuity displayed in one so young.

Maya's calling required her to tap into a person in need's stream of consciousness, not for a needy one to access hers. Unbelievably, as much as Maya had probed her mind, so had the girl projected into Maya's. Since the girl's psychic abilities weren't honed enough to enable her to avenge herself, she had no choice but to reach out to Maya for help.

The girl must've misinterpreted Maya's awed expression as displeasure because she suddenly cried out, "Please, guardian angel. Please don't leave me."

Quick to assuage her fear, Maya reached for her hand. Warm skin met warm skin, further confirming their presence in the here and now.

"I would never abandon you, my sweet little girl. I'm here for you. Tell me... what is your name?"

"Amy," the girl said in a voice barely above a whisper.

"Amy, I need you to show me more of the bad man. I need to see his face. Can you do that for me?"

With an eager nod, Amy's eyes deadlocked on Maya's.

The powerful psychic transference weakened Maya with its strength. Within seconds, Maya's mind became a turbulent swirl of information, telepathic streams of information that replayed how such brutality had deprived Amy of her innocence.

Maya came away drained of emotion but physically energized. Unbridled rage and desire for vengeance consumed her. She gave them full rein.

As preordained in the past, so it would be enacted in the present.

A victimizer deserved no mercy.

INSISTENT KNOCKING STARTLED Lea from an exhausted stupor. She staggered through the dark apartment and fumbled with the door latch.

Harvey's stony expression chilled her far more than the icy cold that flowed in from the open doorway.

"What?" she asked.

"There's been another murder."

THE MOON SHONE on the snowy, desolate landscape, making it appear slick and silvery, like liquid mercury.

On the drive to the crime scene, Harvey briefed Lea on recent happenings. “The victim’s name is Dr. Michael Alfred Sanders. He’s some type of head prober.”

“Head prober?”

“You know... a shrink. I can’t remember if she called him a psychologist or psychiatrist.”

“Who?”

“Alice Clarke. Her property fronts the victim’s.”

Lea’s aggravation turned to concern. “Is Alice okay?”

“Alice is fine. That woman has enough stamina to shame the entire town.”

Lea sighed in relief.

Alice Mae Clarke, Verhoven’s endearing town librarian for well over sixty years, had recently retired at the astonishing age of eighty, not due to a failing mind but because she suffered from rheumatoid arthritis.

“Still, finding a dead body...” Lea said.

“Alice didn’t discover it, but she later confirmed the identity.”

“Who discovered the body, then?”

“The paperboy. Joe Seacrest’s kid, Corey. Apparently, the little guy went haywire with the morning hurl and ended up smashing a side window with the Sunday edition of the Verhoven Gazette. When he knocked on the victim’s front door to apologize for his bad aim and didn’t get an answer, he went to the back entrance and found the door ajar.”

“Did he enter the house?”

Harvey shook his head. “He got enough of an eyeful from the porch.”

“Thank God,” Lea said. “That’s all we need is another tainted crime scene.”

“The crime scene may be undisturbed, but that kid’s dreams won’t be.”

“What do you mean?”

“He found the victim hanging from the ceiling.”

Unable to hide her annoyance, Lea said, “I thought you told me this was a murder, Harvey. You’ve stressed me out over a suspected suicide?”

“Not from the description Alice gave me, Sheriff.”

AS THEY PULLED into Sanders’ drive, Lea saw Alice Clarke and Corey staring at them from her bay window. Lea frowned.

“I instructed Alice and Corey to remain inside with doors locked until we arrived on the scene,” Harvey said. “Once we’ve cordoned off the area and made sure the perp isn’t still on the premises, I’ll take them to the station house for a formal statement. Since Corey’s a minor, I’ll need permission from his parents before any questions are asked.”

“Good job, Harvey. Stress confidentiality as best you can. If the residents catch wind of this, we’ll have mass hysteria over a serial killer running rampant.”

The color drained from Harvey’s face. “Do you think that’s what we’re dealing with? A serial killer?”

“I sure as hell hope not,” Lea said.

They cautiously approached the house and surveyed the property before entering. The rear door opened onto a cramped laundry area which gave way to an expansive room.

As Alice stated, Dr. Michael Alfred Sanders hung in plain view. Lea reacted to the scene with a mix of shock and revulsion. She glanced at Harvey. He wasn't faring much better.

A low-wattage lightbulb spotlighted Sanders's naked, grotesquely battered body. The nauseating odor of bodily secretions permeated the air.

Harvey gagged.

Lea swallowed hard. "Remember to breathe through your mouth, Harvey."

With service revolvers drawn and high-powered flashlights beaming, they sidled past the body and spread out to investigate adjoining rooms and floors. After they completed a thorough sweep of the house and deemed it safe, Lea put an emergency call in to Larry Dawson while Harvey shuttled Alice and Corey to the station house.

Lea took a few moments to regain her composure before holstering her weapon and slipping on a pair of nitrile gloves. With extreme attention to detail, she began her inspection.

She guessed the room's dimensions as twenty feet squared. A massive oak armoire, pushed flush against a far wall, dominated its interior. Thick cloth obscured a set of double-paned windows. Streaks and spatters of blood and gore stained the room from floor to ceiling.

Mindful to preserve the crime scene, Lea didn't advance farther than ten feet from the body. Any closer would disturb blood spatter.

Sanders's mottled skin, bulging eyes, and bloated tongue unsettled her. His body was a blood-seeping, tissue-tattered mass of slashes and welts. Based on the type and severity of the wounds, Lea surmised the killer used some sort of whipping strap on him.

The body hung suspended from a ceiling rafter by an orange extension cord. Its loose end encircled Sanders's neck. The remainder of the cord bound his arms to his body but left his legs free. His distended toes dangled less than one-half an inch from making contact with the floor.

When she shifted her attention to the armoire, she glimpsed the edge of an object protruding from its base. She crouched and, with her index finger, nudged a foot-squared, half-inch section of plywood into view.

Lea gasped when she recognized the rust-colored stains smearing its splintered surface as overlaid footprints—bloodied overlaid footprints. She glanced at Sanders's feet and did a rough visual comparison.

A sickening realization overcame her as her mind worked out a few scenarios based on the killer's perspective. The killer slid the plywood beneath Sanders's feet to prevent him from strangling prematurely. But once the beating began, if Sanders so much as jerked too far in either direction, his feet would slip over the edge of the plywood and the cord would tighten around his neck, leading to strangulation.

Or, once the murderer finished flagellating him, he kicked the plywood out from under Sanders's feet and watched him strangle. The latter theory would explain how the plywood had flown across the room and wedged beneath the armoire.

The magnitude of violence committed, and the excruciating pain the victim endured, confirmed Lea's fear she was dealing with a psychopath.

She opened the armoire's double doors. A selection of seasonal coats hung from a tension rod in the upper section. The bottom section consisted of three drawers. The first held sexually explicit, sadomasochistic-themed magazines and DVDs. The second contained a perverse assortment of instruments Lea presumed were used for sexual bondage and torture.

She found the possible murder weapon in the bottom drawer—a neatly coiled, blood-soaked, leather cat o' nine tails. "Jesus. The killer intentionally left the murder weapon for us to find. What kind of sick fuck are we up against?"

The fact that Lea didn't have a clue, terrified her.

AN HOUR AFTER Lea completed her inspection and Harvey returned from the station house to the crime scene, they watched Larry Dawson perform a preliminary examination of Sanders's body.

"Is it me, or are you experiencing déjà vu, too?" Harvey asked.

"You're not alone," Lea said. "We're living a nightmare."

Dawson interrupted them. "It never ceases to shock me what new methods of torture and murder the dregs of society inflict on their fellow man."

Sobered by the reality of a potential serial killer in their midst, neither Lea nor Harvey seemed eager to engage in idle chitchat.

"Keeping this one under wraps will be difficult," Dawson said. "It's hard enough for an adult to maintain confidentiality, let alone a ten-year-old."

"I know. It wouldn't surprise me if Corey's parents sue the town for emotional duress of a minor," Lea said.

"Can they do that?" Harvey asked.

Lea shrugged.

Dawson stood and removed his gloves. "As always, Lea, no formal COD will be confirmed until a full autopsy's performed. My initial inspection indicates death by asphyxiation."

"Asphyxiation?" Harvey asked.

"He suffocated from airway constriction," Lea said.

"Oh."

Lea turned back to Dawson. "What about the flesh wounds?"

"Distinguishable patterns from the leather straps are evident. Various points of impact resulted in external and underlying tissue damage. Ruptured capillaries and bruising are also consistent with severe beating. The victim suffered acute physical distress. For this reason, I haven't ruled out the possibility death might've resulted from aortic malfunction."

Lea stared at him. "Heart attack?"

Dawson nodded. "Such severe and prolonged emotional and physical trauma could induce cardiac arrest. If this occurred, he would've lost control of his body and ended up choking to death at the same time. Again, until I open him up..."

"I understand, Larry."

"What's your next move?"

"To help you load the body into the van. I'll have Harvey patrol the scene to keep any curiosity seekers at bay while I head over to Town Hall to meet up with Strokowski."

"Strokowski?" Dawson said. "Isn't he tanning his fat white ass on some remote, tropical beach?"

"Yes, until he got my call and had to cut his vacation short."

"I don't envy your having to deal with that pompous imbecile."

Lea grunted. "Most people don't."

IF CIRCUMSTANCES HADN'T been so dismal, Lea would've broken into laughter when she entered Strokowski's office and got a look at his appearance.

Since he'd aborted his Bermuda vacation with scarce time to board a return flight to the states, he hadn't changed his casual attire. He wore a tropical-patterned shirt featuring flamboyantly printed toucans and a pair of knee-length, garishly colored green shorts. Lea thought he resembled an overripe watermelon.

Wendell, his ever-doting, kiss-ass subservient, busied himself preparing Strokowski a cup of herbal tea.

Strokowski spoke before Lea had a chance to utter a word. "I appreciate your eagerness to brief me on the investigation, Carlson, but it'd be senseless to repeat yourself. We'll wait for Denkins to arrive."

Perplexed, Lea asked, "Denkins?"

"Field Agent Walter Denkins."

"Field agent as in FBI?"

"That's correct."

Lea tensed. Her dread deepened when she glanced at Wendell who sported a smug smile.

Strokowski continued. "After conferring with state government officials, it's been decided Verhoven's lack of manpower—no political incorrectness intended—and inexperience in overseeing such sensitive matters, mandates us to relinquish all investigative authority to New York State's Federal Bureau of Investigation. I'm confident under Walter Denkins's command he'll apprehend the murderer and punish him to the fullest extent of the law."

Strokowski flashed a self-satisfied grin. He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his potbellied stomach.

Lea felt her blood boil and envisioned launching herself across the desktop and strangling him. Instead, she silently counted to ten before speaking.

"Mayor, are you implying you don't believe I have the experience to command this investigation?"

"Now, Carlson, please try to understand my position." His placating tone fueled her smoldering rage. "This murder business is routine for the Feds. The worst Verhoven's had to contend with is an occasional domestic squabble or misdemeanor."

Lea bristled. "I'm trained to handle all crimes, including murder."

"That may be true, but my decision stands. Time is of the essence. Our summer promotional campaign is ready to officially launch, and I refuse to have it share front-page news with a bunch of dead bodies. Besides, the first victim's a nonresident and Sanders is a seasonal one. Why should Verhoven bear the burden of unfavorable publicity just because we're the nearest dumping ground for the violence overflowing from the city's depraved streets?"

"It doesn't matter whether the victims are local or out-of-state," Lea said. "It's my responsibility"—she poked her chest hard—as sheriff to protect and serve the community, *our* community."

Lea came to the frustrating realization she'd have had better luck convincing a petulant child to eat vegetables instead of sweets than changing Strokowski's mind. Strokowski tsked, tsked and Wendell pshawed, pshawed until, frustrated and pissed off, Lea unclipped her badge and unholstered her revolver. She slammed both so hard on the desktop Strokowski and Wendell recoiled as if in fear for their lives.

"Fuck you both." As she stormed out, Lea got mild satisfaction from seeing their shocked faces.

Lea's anger clouded her senses to the point where she couldn't see straight. With head down and a stream of curses echoing in the morning's stillness, she strode around the corner of Verhoven's Town Hall and collided with another early morning riser.

The force sent the startled passerby rolling across snow-blanketed cement, scattering brown-bagged groceries behind her.

When Lea rushed to help, she stopped short, surprised to find Kylie the hapless victim.

In Kylie's vulnerable state, Lea couldn't help thinking she resembled a snow-dipped pixie, albeit an adorable, snow-dipped pixie.

"Jesus, Kylie, I'm sorry. My mind's elsewhere. Did I hurt you?"

Kylie accepted Lea's outstretched hand. Once on her feet, she shook off clumps of snow from her hair and snowsuit.

"You sure have a way of sweeping a woman off her feet. Do you get many dates that way?"

Lea blubbered through another flurry of apologies.

"I'm joking, Lea. I'll take partial blame. If I'd looked farther than my nose, I would've seen you coming."

Kylie's good-natured smile turned into a frown. Lea followed her gaze. Mangled groceries littered the walkway. Egg yolk oozed and milk dribbled over a fashion magazine and a crossword book.

"Damn it." Lea said. "I'm sor—"

Kylie touched her arm. "Don't apologize again. No point in crying over spilt milk or, in this case, cracked eggs."

Lea paid no mind to Kylie's attempt at comic relief. Her hands were shaking when she bent to salvage the mess.

Kylie squatted beside her and covered them with her gloved ones. "Lea, what's wrong?"

Lea couldn't meet her eyes. "I hate making a mess."

"That's a poor excuse."

Lea glanced at Kylie. "What?"

"I said, that's a poor excuse. I remember that intense, mad-at-the-world expression. Your mood has nothing to do with ruined groceries." When Lea tried to avert her gaze, Kylie gripped her hands tighter. "Tell me what's wrong."

"I can't. It's..."

"If you say the word 'confidential' one more time, I won't be held responsible for my actions."

They locked gazes.

"You can trust me, Lea."

"There's been another murder. I walked into town from the murder scene to brief that nimrod, Strokowski."

"Oh, my God! Forget this mess. Let me drive you to the station house."

"Kylie, you don't need—"

Kylie cut her off. "I insist."

While Kylie maneuvered her SUV through Verhoven's snow-swept streets and onto the main road, Lea filled her in on the morning's gruesome discovery.

"Have you uncovered a connection between the two murders?"

Lea hesitated.

Kylie made a face. "Doesn't an off-the-record question permit an off-the-record response? I wish you'd give me a little credit that I won't go blabbing off to the local paper."

Lea relented. "In all honesty, I'm not sure. There are no similarities to link them."

"I can chalk off a single act of violence in Verhoven to bad luck, but not two," Kylie said, "and certainly not in as many days. It's uncharacteristic of the town. It's an aberration."

"I agree."

Kylie took her eyes off the road briefly to meet Lea's gaze. "So, you have to consider the possibility that just because there's no obvious connection between the murders, doesn't mean one doesn't exist. You need to dig deeper."

"Our no good, ball-less mayor has other intentions."

"What do you mean?"

"Strokowski shafted me from working the case. It's now the FBI's concern."

"You're bullshitting me."

"Nope. I'm nothing but a hick wannabe cop with a dime-store badge."

Kylie glanced at her. "Strokowski said that?"

"Not in those words, but I got the message loud and clear. It gets worse. I quit."

"You what?"

"Ironic isn't it? That I'm moving on to greener pastures five years too late?"

Kylie didn't comment on Lea's sarcastic dig directed at their past relationship. "Your quitting may be to your advantage."

"How do you figure that?"

"Strokowski isn't concerned with finding the killer, just making the whole ugly mess go away before the summer vacation surge. He would've sabotaged your investigation every step of the way if it meant keeping Verhoven's residents uninformed. And don't think for a minute the FBI would've included you. Whether you realize it or not, quitting's provided you with a means for bypassing normal channels."

Lea's disillusioned mood lightened as Kylie's words finally got through to her. Here was Kylie, her Kylie, acting so in character with her youth. She'd always bucked authority at every turn and played by her own set of rules. It pleased Lea to see that time hadn't weakened her determination.

"You're suggesting I go rogue with my own investigation?" Lea asked.

"Why not? You've been involved from the start: from examining the victims, to collecting evidence, and questioning witnesses. You've developed a feel for this case no outsider has a chance in hell of matching second-hand."

It's hard to argue a point with someone when you know they're right, Lea thought, as they continued on to the station house in silence.

Lea reached for the door handle as Kylie cruised to a stop. "Thanks, Kylie. You've given me a lot to think about."

"Don't waste too much time making a decision. Murder isn't patient."

Chapter Nine

WHILE KYLIE BACKTRACKED into town to pick up fresh groceries, her mind ran through the chaotic happenings of recent days.

Her mood fluctuated from browbeating herself over her bruised ego and poor judgment in her calamitous attempt to visit Maya, to anxiety and outrage at the discovery of another murder victim. A killer lurked in their midst, and Kylie admired Lea for rebelling against county-driven political and prejudicial bullshit. She hoped Lea would choose to pursue her own undercover investigation.

She grimaced when she approached FoodMart and saw its large parking lot transformed into bottleneck packed cars. The idea of maneuvering a shopping cart through cramped aisles and waiting in a mobbed checkout line didn't interest her, so she decided to drive to the Town Square and search for a worthwhile distraction until the FoodMart crowd died down.

When she spotted Verhoven's Public Library, a wave of nostalgia flooded over her. She couldn't resist the pull of visiting her old haunt. The library, a favored hangout for her and her friends during her younger years, hadn't lost its appeal. Their town-sponsored, summer reading programs inspired Kylie's thirst for knowledge. She remembered many afternoons spent engrossed in true-crime stories, sitting beneath whirring ceiling fans and flurrying dust motes, long after her friends had left to pursue outdoor adventures.

A historical landmark, the library stood two stories high with a slate-shingled roof, red-brick façades, and cobblestone path. Kylie had read a recent news article about Verhoven Horticultural Society's endeavors to enhance the building's exterior landscape with lush foliage and a few teak benches.

As soon as she entered the library, she filled her lungs and stoked her memory with the familiar scent of age-worn books. Its essence permeated the library's interior, becoming as much a part of its structural makeup as its solid frame and foundation.

The first floor boasted a spacious gathering area. A semicircular stone fireplace occupied a significant portion of the north wall. Round tables and comfortable, wicker-backed chairs added to its welcoming ambience. Oak floors, polished to a glossy sheen, reflected the fire's glow.

Along the walls flanking the fireplace stood rows of neatly aligned bookshelves that contained a diverse selection of fiction genres and nonfiction works. A spiral staircase provided access to the second floor, which stored reference books and various research materials.

When Kylie attempted to count back the years, she came to the disheartening realization she couldn't remember the last time she'd visited a library.

Whispered words wafted by her ear. "Is it coincidence or fate that draws us together?"

Startled, Kylie whirled to find Maya standing close enough to touch.

"Would I disappoint you if I told you I don't believe in either?" Kylie asked.

"Not in the slightest. From the moment I saw you, you impressed me as a mental."

"A mental? As in I should be institutionalized?" Kylie joked.

"Of course not. I'm referring to your aura."

“My aura?”

Maya motioned to a nearby tabletop strewn with leather-bound reference books. One title in particular caught Kylie’s attention: *The Core Spectrum of Auras*.

“Would you care to join me in exploring yours?” Maya asked.

“Do I dare?”

Maya smiled. “I detect a note of sarcasm in your tone.”

“I apologize.”

“But you will indulge me?”

“What do I have to lose?”

Once seated, Maya said, “In aura reading, each individual possesses a core color. It’s the closest energy field to the body and the most influential. It never changes and exists within the body until death. Your core color is green.”

“What’s the core color’s purpose?” Kylie asked.

“Each color is linked to a distinct personality trait. Depending on what dominant color manifests in your aura, your inner self is defined as either physically, mentally, or emotionally motivated. If you’re physical, you process information through the senses, mental through analytical means, and emotional through intuition. Your mental status would explain your lack of belief in fate or, for that matter, any powers that be.”

“And the other colors? The spectrum?”

“They’re energy fields, bands of light that alternate colors depending on what emotional mood a person’s experiencing at any given time. For instance, at this moment, I see muted grays and browns surrounding your core color. These colors represent turmoil and strife. If you remember, I sensed your distress the night of the storm.”

“Yes, I remember. The eyes are the windows to the soul.”

“Do not despair, Kylie. Your core color outshines these negative fields, which reassures me that, although you’ve suffered, you’re in the process of emotional and physical renewal. Would it be too personal to ask you about your occupation?”

Dumbfounded by Maya’s intuitiveness to her emotional state, Kylie stiffened. “I was...am a criminal behaviorist.”

“So, I’m right. Your chosen field of expertise is a mental profession. You see, it’s only through psychological analysis that proper diagnosis of one’s inner psyche can be determined. I consider myself emotionally motivated.”

“Which explains your insightfulness.”

Maya nodded. “Perception is an ability I’ve nurtured and refined throughout my life. All it requires is distancing yourself enough from your own emotions in order to observe and interpret others’ needs.”

“You mean a total lack of selflessness?”

“Yes. Ah, now I see your spectrum colors are again changing. Distress is not at the forefront of your emotions.”

In a guarded tone, Kylie asked, “What is?”

“You’re nervous, uncomfortable. It’s not my intention to make you feel this way. In my eagerness to get to know you better, I’m probing too much and causing you to feel ill at ease. I’m sorry.”

“You haven’t upset me. I want to get to know you better, too, Maya.”

“Then pardon my asking what made you have second thoughts?”

“I don’t understand.”

“I saw you yesterday, driving away from Holworth House.”

Kylie grasped at the first excuse to come to mind. “It didn’t occur to me, until I stood on your doorstep, that you might consider my unannounced visit improper, maybe even rude.”

“Tell me, Kylie. Is fear of being rude the only reason you changed your mind?”

Kylie squirmed. “Well, you seemed preoccupied with someone.”

She watched Maya’s expression change from confusion to comprehension.

“Ah, now I see. You saw my houseguest.”

“I tend to notice naked women.”

Maya laughed. “She’s a close personal friend, and I do stress the word friend, who stayed with me for a few days. I must admit, she’s unabashed when it comes to freely moving about au naturel. She’s gone now.”

Kylie felt foolish. “I...I guess I misinterpreted the relationship.”

“You thought she was my lover?”

“That’d be a natural assumption, don’t you think?”

“It would. Tell me, Kylie. Did it disappoint you?”

“Did what disappoint me?”

“That I might be involved with someone else and, because of that involvement, would have no interest in pursuing a relationship with you?”

Maya’s candidness unsettled her. Hold your own, Vinson, an inner voice whispered. Hold your own. “That would be an immature reaction, considering we hardly know each other.”

“You’re not denying it, though.”

Maya’s eyes, Kylie thought. How can they be so damn mesmerizing? And her lips...

“We’re practically strangers,” Kylie said.

Maya leaned across the table and rested a hand on hers.

Kylie’s heartbeat, already staccato thumps in her eardrums, increased to rib-jarring thuds.

“Kylie, you ceased being a stranger the moment you invited me into your home.”

Kylie felt weakened from Maya’s touch and lightheaded from the subtle muskiness of her perfume. The all-too-familiar tingling sensation began in her groin, pulsing at first and then throbbing with pleasure. She couldn’t recall ever feeling this much attraction, this much sexual heat for another woman.

Unable to stand the seduction game any longer, Kylie asked, “Maya Holworth, do you enjoy flirting with me?”

“Immensely.”

“And where do you see this flirtation leading?”

“That depends on you.”

“How so?”

“If you’re enough of a free spirit to act on your impulses.”

Kylie couldn’t resist a bit of teasing. “You’re the aura reader. What do you see?”

“I don’t look ahead. I enjoy the anticipation. I do have a strong sense we’ll meet again, though.”

“And what do you base that sense on?”

“Your being as intrigued by me as I am by you.” Maya stood and gathered her books.

As she turned to leave, her long, slender fingers coasted across Kylie’s shoulder and down the length of her arm, making Kylie shiver.

Foreplay had officially begun.

WHEN LEA ENTERED the station house, she found Harvey sitting ramrod straight in a desk chair, glaring at her.

“How could you, Lea?”

Lea grimaced. “News sure travels fast. So much for breaking it to you gently, Harvey. Who told you?”

“That prick, Wendell.”

“What else did he say?”

“To have investigative reports on both murders in order within the hour.”

“So you know about Denkins?”

“Yeah.”

Harvey hawked a mouthful of drool into the trash can. “Why’d you do it? Why’d you bail out on me?”

Although offended by Harvey questioning her loyalty, Lea thought it stemmed from misinformation and hurt feelings. “I’m sorry. I lost my temper. Strokowski yanked control of the investigation away from us. I didn’t think about the repercussions. I just reacted.”

“But now you’ve left me high and dry. You know damn well the Feds will treat me like I’m some backward yokel.”

“I didn’t intend for things to turn out this way.”

“What happened to our working as a team, Sheriff?”

“We still are, Harvey, but in a different capacity.”

The expression on her face, and the implication in her words, diffused Harvey’s indignation. He smiled, knowingly. “What did you have in mind?”

Twenty minutes later, Lea strode from the station house carrying a manila envelope crammed with duplicate copies of evidence reports, crime scene photos, and witness accounts for both murders, tucked under an arm.

For the first time in days, she couldn’t resist a self-satisfied grin. She had a gut feeling that maybe the “scales of justice” were starting to tilt in her favor.

LEA NO SOONER entered her apartment when her cell phone went off. She glanced at its digital display: NYC Medical Examiner’s Office. Dawson.

He didn’t bother with a greeting. “Bureaucracy sucks, Lea. You had justified authority.”

“I know.”

“Denkins is a major asshole. I’ve worked with him on murder investigations in the past. He’s an egotist, a legend in his own mind.”

“It may turn out you’ll be collaborating with him on the present one, too, Larry.”

“I’d rather eat horse manure and die. Besides, I’ve got a triple homicide, with bodies on gurneys lined up in the shape of a U, waiting for me in the next room. I didn’t call just to convey condolences, Lea. I’ve concluded Sanders’s autopsy. As far as I’m concerned, I wasn’t made aware of the change in command. I started with you as the official contact, and I’ll finish with you as such. I also have no conscience-driven qualms about giving you first-rights to the lab

results when I get those. What you choose to do with the information on your free time is your business.”

“You know me so well,” Lea said, not trying to hide her amusement.

Dawson grunted. “You’re a Carlson. Carlsons never surrender without a fight.”

Lea listened as he relayed his latest findings. “Final determination of Sanders’s cause of death is from strangulation. Preliminary DNA analyses of trace evidence is still pending.”

“It’s like the bastard’s a ghost,” Lea said. “He leaves nothing behind to incriminate himself.”

“I agree. He’s meticulous in his cleanup.”

“I appreciate your loyalty in keeping me in the loop,” Lea said.

“What are old friends for?”

“You’re right. Some older than others.”

“There you go again with the aging jokes.”

“I love you, Larry.”

He groaned. “And now you have to get all sentimental on me, too? Let’s hang up and call it a day.”

“Let’s.”

LOUD, PERSISTENT KNOCKING startled Kylie from a sound sleep and sent her bolting from the couch.

Disoriented at first, it surprised her to awaken to a dark and chilled cabin. Glowing embers were all that remained of the bundled firewood she’d lit upon her return from town. As she stumbled to the door, she glanced at the microwave’s lighted digital clock. The “little nap” she’d intended on taking midday had ended up lasting well past dusk.

She had good reason for the exhaustion, though. Kylie hadn’t had a restful night’s sleep in months. No wonder, considering her recent emotional upheaval. Still, to sleep undisturbed by recurring nightmares...the notion had her contemplating if what Maya said about her aura signifying emotional and physical renewal could be true.

Bleary-eyed and groggy, she flipped on the porch light and peered through an olive-tinted, eyelet curtain.

Lea stood on the cabin’s stoop, stomping her feet and rubbing her hands in an obvious effort to keep warm. A continuous stream of white vapor escaped from her nose and mouth.

Kylie unlocked and opened the door. “Lea? What the...”

Lea shouldered past her. “You’re right.”

“About what?”

Lea spun around. “About the investigation. I can’t let it go. I need to see it through, even if it ends up a cold case. I have a responsibility to the town.”

Kylie opened the refrigerator and snagged two beers. “I never had a doubt,” she said, as she handed her a cold one.

“What pisses me off is the bastard who’s doing this has robbed the town of its innocence.”

“And you’re hell-bent on reclaiming it?”

“You’re damn right, I am.” Lea took a long pull of beer.

“Violence is an infectious disease,” Kylie said. “It knows no boundaries.”

“Neither do I.”

“I’m assuming you’ve devised some sort of plan?”

Lea unzipped her parka and pulled out a large, thick, manila envelope. "I had Harvey run duplicates of everything pertaining to the murders."

"An excellent start. I assume he'll be your man on the inside?"

Lea shook her head. "I want Harvey's involvement limited."

"Why?"

"If this all turns to shit, I don't want him taking the fall along with me."

"I see. How do you intend to conduct an investigation without help? You'll need a posse."

"I have my sights set more along the lines of a Dynamic Duo," Lea said.

Lea's unwavering stare made it clear to Kylie who she wanted as a sidekick.

"Oh, I get it... You don't want to place Harvey's ass in jeopardy, but mine's expendable?"

Lea rushed on as if she feared Kylie would reject the idea outright. "Last I remembered, criminal behavior analysis is your area of expertise. I'm thinking you could create a behavioral profile of our killer, or killers, based on the evidence recovered. In no way would you be in any physical danger, nor would I reveal to anyone the extent of your involvement."

Kylie tried to keep her expression blank even though inside she felt anxious and unsure. If she confided to Lea the true reason why she'd returned to Verhoven, she'd have a well-deserved excuse to decline getting involved. But her pride, as usual, got in the way. She wouldn't show weakness. She wouldn't let Lea know.

"Kylie, I know we can't change the past, but we're in the middle of a crisis where innocent lives are at stake. I don't believe either of us is that stubborn we can't put aside any lingering hard feelings and focus on catching this psycho. My intuition tells me I can still trust you to do the right thing."

Lea's words put Kylie on the defensive. "Don't try to guilt me into this, Lea."

"I wouldn't dare."

Kylie eyed the envelope. "Leave it with me. I'll review the case files and see what I come up with."

Lea's worried expression turned to relief. "Thank you. Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. I'm a long way from donning a superhero cape."

ONCE ALONE, KYLIE struggled with feelings of inadequacy.

You must be crazy to climb out on a wire without a safety net. Haven't you had enough of the dark side? Why jeopardize your progress by plunging yourself into another nightmare? Why?

"Because if I don't, the bad guy wins," she said.

Kylie's inner resolve refused to allow her past trauma to weaken her self-confidence. She'd worked too damn hard over the past few months to regain control over her life.

Lea didn't realize she'd offered Kylie a chance to reclaim her long-lost self, and fear be damned, she'd take it.

Two hours later, Kylie concluded her exhaustive review of the murder victims' case files. Her eyes burned from poring over the material. Her stomach roiled from viewing graphic crime scene photographs. Her fingers ached from taking copious notes.

Still, she needed to remain emotionally detached from the violence in order to process the evidence and create a distinct behavioral profile. She focused on finding a common psychological link between what appeared on the surface as two disparate personalities and two disparate crimes. She wouldn't relent until she found it.

THE PHONE CALL came at dawn. Lea grabbed the receiver before it rang twice.

“Hello?”

“It’s Kylie. How soon can you come over?”

Chapter Ten

LEA REACHED THE cabin within an hour, toting a carton of fresh-brewed coffee from Verhoven's Homemade Beanery Company and a bag of sugar-crusted, blueberry scones.

They sat across from each other at the dinette table amid scattered investigative notes and crime scene photos. Lea scowled at the gruesome depictions of death. "As you can see, the ME's obsessed with the zoom lens feature on his brand-spanking-new digital camera."

Kylie didn't respond to her humorous comment.

"Hey, are you okay?" Lea asked. When Kylie looked at her, Lea noticed the dark circles beneath her eyes.

"Yes, just tired. I didn't get to bed until the wee hours of the morning."

"Did you come to any determinations?"

"On the surface, it appears the victims are strangers to each other. One's a pimp and the other's a therapist."

"How about a drug link?"

"Not sure," Kylie said. "Crime scene reports don't list any illegal drugs recovered at Sanders's residence."

"How about prostitution? Sanders might've been a john."

"Could be. Sadomasochism isn't usually the norm in most relationships. He might have had to pursue that kind of action outside of one. Did Sanders have a steady lover?"

"Not that I know of," Lea said. "I'll have Harvey do some snooping."

Kylie scanned her notes. "Socially, economically, and culturally, they're from opposite spectrums. The only common connection is they both reside in the city. I've ruled out a crime of opportunity as a motive in either murder. Pendleton had a wad of cash and a diamond pinky ring. He also had a gold Rolex on his person at the time of his death."

"But a police report states a ransacked apartment," Lea said.

"With nothing of worth, including cash and credit cards, reportedly taken. The same holds true for Sanders's residence."

"So these murders aren't motivated by want or money."

"No, which leads me to surmise we're dealing with a sociopathic/ psychotic-type personality," Kylie said.

"A serial killer?"

Kylie motioned to the crime scene photos. "I've noted clear indicators of such."

Lea refilled her coffee mug. "I don't get it. What exactly makes a person a serial killer?"

"Many clinicians theorize violent behavior results from abnormal brain patterns or fractures in one's personality. Others believe it's caused by severe, prolonged familial dysfunction at a young age."

"Physical and sexual abuse?" Lea asked.

"Yes. A child exposed to this type of abuse will ultimately suppress his or her feelings toward their abuser but will act out against others as a means of exerting control."

“How do you determine the motivators that incite a killer to violence?”

“I’ve often used the Seven Deadly Sins as a reference source when compiling a killer’s profile.”

“Interesting.”

“I find it quite reliable,” Kylie said.

“Then we’ve already eliminated greed and envy.”

“Add to that gluttony and sloth.”

“Which leaves us with lust, pride, and anger.”

“And of the three remaining deadly sins, anger is the most prevalent. Actually, anger may be too tame a word to describe these murders. Irrepressible rage sounds better. Take for instance the killer’s choice of weapons and how he attained them.”

“In Pendleton’s case,” Lea said, “the killer had the knife with him, and made sure to take it with him afterwards. That indicates premeditation.”

“Yes, whereas in Sanders’s case, the murderer used one of Sanders’s own possessions, a whip, to do the killing.”

“Kylie, if premeditation is the basis for one murder and the other murder is a random act, wouldn’t that suggest two isolated incidents and two different perpetrators?”

“Not quite,” Kylie said.

“I’m confused. Don’t serial killers stick to the same mode of operation?”

“That’s a fallacy. Historically, repetitive killers learn from their mistakes and go to great lengths to change their MOs with each new kill. It’s an excellent strategy for diverting suspicion, but it’s not a foolproof tactic in avoiding apprehension. Often, killers become overconfident in their ability to avoid capture and end up making mistakes after all. There’s also more than one type of serial killer.”

“You’re joking, right?” Lea asked.

“Nope. It’s important to understand that, even though there are different types, all serial killers are obsessed with the need to dominate and manipulate their victims. And to demoralize them.”

“Sick fucks,” Lea said.

“I agree. Our sick fuck goes for effect. The more brutal, the better. Also, his focus of rage is intense, with prevalent sadistic traits. Our killer relishes inflicting pain on a prolonged basis. Immediate gratification is of no interest to him. He wants his victims to suffer, and he enjoys watching it. He’s not readily intimidated. I don’t think physical size or strength are issues. Our killer uses mental manipulation first and then, when the intended victim’s guard is down, physical restraint.”

“So, he could be an average Joe?”

“Or Jane. Although most serial killers are male, there are documented instances where women are categorized as such.”

She started gathering up the papers and photos. “We’ve got our work cut out for us, Lea. My next step is to access ViCAP.”

“Please refresh my memory of the acronym.”

“It stands for Violent Criminal Apprehension Program. It’s an extensive and comprehensive database used by law enforcement to search and compare characteristics of violent crimes with other crimes committed statewide.”

“Isn’t access mandated to heightened-security personnel?”

“Since I work hand-in-hand with law enforcement officials, I have clearance. Keep your fingers crossed our guy, or gal, is in the system and we find a match.”

“You said ‘our.’”

“What?”

“You referred to the perp as ours. Does that mean you’re willing to work with me on this case?”

Kylie fixed her with a level gaze. “You’ve succeeded in recruiting a partner.”

Lea grinned. “What changed your mind? I mean, what decided it for you?”

“I realized until this bastard’s caught, I’m as prime a target as anyone else in this town. I can’t promise anything, Lea, but I can sure as hell try.”

KYLIE SLUMPED ACROSS the dinette table and groaned in frustration. Her exhaustive search of ViCAP’s database didn’t turn up any MOs comparable to Verhoven’s murders. With a resigned sigh, she logged off her laptop and massaged her throbbing temples.

So much for having far-reaching connections, she thought. Dismayed by her lack of progress and restless over being cooped up in a cabin with images of death as company, Kylie strived for a distraction. When she looked out the window, she noticed the early morning fog and gloom had evaporated. A radiant sun now glistened off snow-trimmed trees with an intensity that caused her to squint and made her eyes tear.

As had become habit over the past few days, her mind wandered to her chance encounter with Maya at the library. Maya’s parting words echoed in her mind. “Because you’re as intrigued by me, as I am you.”

Maya’s intuitiveness unnerved Kylie and made her worry if Maya sensed her sexual attraction as well. She fleetingly wondered what color signified passion in the vast spectrum of auras.

Renewed excitement coursed through her. She felt an irresistible urge to see Maya again. She pulled on her parka, laced her boots, and headed out to her SUV. She figured she’d have plenty of time on her way to the old Stanwood House to think up a plausible excuse. Not that she felt she needed one. Hadn’t Maya left it up to her to make the next move?

MAYA GREETED HER at the front door wearing a thigh-high nightshirt. Its thin, gauzy fabric failed to hide her nakedness.

Startled by Maya’s lack of attire, Kylie tried to avert her gaze from staring at Maya’s pronounced nipples and darkened pubic mound, to focus on her welcoming grin.

Maya embraced her.

“Kylie, what a pleasant surprise. I assure you there are no naked women on the premises, so there’s no need for you to make a hasty retreat.”

In an attempt at nonchalance, Kylie said, “It’s the first time I’ve seen the sun in days. I didn’t want to miss out on such a beautiful day.”

Maya smiled. “Fresh air revitalizes the soul, but I hope it wasn’t just the mild weather that motivated you to seek outdoor adventure. I hope your desire to see me matched my desire to see you.”

So much for formalities, Kylie thought. “You’re addictive, Maya.”

“And, from the way your eyes keep roaming across my body, distracting as well.”

Kylie felt heat rise to her cheeks. “I…”

Maya reached for her hand. “Come inside. Please, make yourself comfortable while I change into clothes more appropriate for company.”

As Maya glided down the hall, Kylie couldn’t resist marveling at her shapely ass and toned thighs before taking in her surroundings. Stanwood House bore no resemblance to her childhood imaginings. There were no cobwebs and creepy-crawlies scuttling about or ghostly images flitting in the shadows. It boasted a spacious living area with high-vaulted ceilings and butterscotch-hued walls. Its oak floors were varnished to a high gloss. A blazing fireplace stood as the room’s focal point. A leather couch and side table accentuated the room. Its wall décor consisted of a lone black-and-white framed photograph on display above the mantel.

It captured Maya and a silver-haired, older woman wrapped in a warm, comfortable embrace. Their smiling faces radiated vitality and an obvious sense of well-being.

Lovers, Kylie decided, with a pang of jealousy. Maya and she are lovers.

Kylie didn’t hear Maya come up behind her.

“Her name’s Donia,” Maya said.

“A beautiful name for a beautiful woman.”

“Yes. She was incredibly beautiful.”

Kylie turned questioning eyes on her. “Was?”

“Donia died. Some years ago.”

“I’m sorry.” Maya’s saddened expression prompted Kylie to quickly change the subject. “This place is enormous. Don’t you feel swallowed up in it?”

“Sometimes.”

“Do you ever get lonely?”

“I don’t fear loneliness. My memories keep me company.”

“I’d love a grand tour of the house.”

As Maya led her by the hand, Kylie noticed she’d changed into an oversized sweatshirt and a pair of worn jeans. When she glanced down at Maya’s bare feet and unpolished toes, the tingling in her crotch began again in earnest. She imagined massaging them with scented lotion.

Kylie listened as Maya guided her from room to room and explained where Stanwood House’s former inhabitants resided and what their daily activities entailed. She viewed the fire-damaged west wing, now gutted and sealed off for future restoration. As she meandered through patients’ sparsely furnished bedrooms, Kylie couldn’t help wondering how these tormented souls survived their banishment from society and estrangement from their families. They must’ve felt condemned to a life sentence of loneliness and despair.

Maya led them back to the main foyer. “There’s one room I’m particularly fond of and have saved for last. I’ve named it my ‘Meditation Room.’”

“Meditation Room? Don’t most people call that a den?” Kylie said, teasing.

“For me, it’s a place to enhance intuition and introspection and search for spiritual enlightenment.”

“You mean it’s a place you visit when you want to get in touch with your inner self?”

“Or others’ inner selves,” Maya said.

“I’m not sure I’m following you.”

“The Meditation Room is my venue for transcending normal bounds and exploring altered states of consciousness.”

“Are you referring to the afterlife?”

Maya shook her head. “I have no desire to interact with the dead. My intent is to connect with the living through such means as telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, astral projection...”

“What you’re telling me is, aside from having a fascination with auras, you enjoy reading people’s thoughts, foreseeing future events, and having out-of-body experiences?”

“Ah, ah, ah, Kylie. Your cynicism is pervasive.”

“What can I say? Psychic phenomenon holds no interest for me.”

“Because as a ‘mental’ you don’t have faith in anything that can’t be proven?”

“Is that your subtle way of implying I’m a snob when it comes to exploring new possibilities?”

“Exploration enhances open-mindedness. There are ways of convincing you such phenomena exist.”

Enjoying their playful banter, Kylie asked, “What are you proposing?”

“Come with me.”

The Meditation Room, devoid of furniture and windows, smelled of burnt incense and candle wax. An intricately carved box sat on a round, sisal rug in the room’s center. A large candle and incense-laden tray rested upon its surface.

Maya led Kylie to the rug and motioned her to sit across from her. Kylie watched in silence as Maya lit a candle and an incense cone. She reached for Kylie’s hands.

Kylie felt lightheaded from the fragrant incense. “Do you intend to hypnotize me?”

“No. Hypnosis aims at targeting a particular event in a participant’s subconscious. Often times, a trance is induced to relive a past trauma. I call my gift ‘streaming.’ It’s a natural process where a participant’s deep-felt emotions are revived. It’s progressive in that it deals with states of emotion, not memories associated with such.”

“Streaming sounds complicated.”

“Only in the beginning. All you need to do is close your eyes and surrender to your innermost feelings, whether they’re fear, elation, or passion. Your subconscious will choose which sensation is most dominant.”

Although dubious, Kylie found it surprisingly easy to clear her mind of distractions. All of those yoga and meditation sessions must’ve paid off, she thought. Or maybe the headiness of the incense, combined with the warmth of Maya’s touch, had something to do with her relaxed state. Either way, she likened the sensation to drifting on the sea, relinquishing mind, body, and soul to the tide.

Before long, she lost all conception of time and space. Only her subconscious maintained a heightened state of awareness.

“I feel your heart beating,” Maya said. “Fast...so very fast. You’re excited. Excited because you’re here, with me. You’re aflame with yearning, yet conflicted whether I share your emotions. Be assured, Kylie, whenever we’re together, I feel your essence. I feel your throbbing pulse points. You’ve become a strong sensation to me, one I long to savor and indulge. Yet I feel a strong resistance from you to act on your urges. Instead, you choose to fantasize.”

Kylie started to speak, but Maya held fast to her hands.

“I see it now. Fear overpowers your desire. Its darkness consumes you, makes you doubt yourself. This fear stems from...”

Panicked by Maya’s intuitiveness to her feelings, Kylie opened her eyes. She yanked her hands away and inched backwards on the rug.

“I’m sorry, Maya. I didn’t mean to... I just didn’t expect...”

“Kylie, what do you fear that makes you content to live in fantasy?”

Kylie remained quiet.

Maya’s long, slender fingers coasted across Kylie’s cheek. “Please talk to me. We’re no longer strangers, remember?”

“In fantasy, there’s a level of control not found in reality.” Kylie failed to stop the quivering in her voice.

“Is that what this is all about? Control?”

“No. You don’t understand.”

Maya continued to caress her cheeks. “Then help me to understand.”

Here goes nothing, Kylie decided. “The darkness you’ve seen in my aura and felt through streaming is real. I’ve survived a traumatic event, but it’s left me with emotional and physical scars. If I show you...” She bit her lower lip and looked away.

Maya gripped her hands until she turned back. “Never would I think of you as anything less than extraordinary.”

Empowered by Maya’s encouraging words and intense gaze, Kylie kneeled before her. With trembling fingers, she unbuttoned her shirt and unhooked the front clasp on her bra. With a shrug, they slid from her shoulders. She then unzipped her jeans and pushed them down to her knees.

When she reached for her panties, Maya said, “You need not go any further.”

For long, measured moments, Maya studied the healing slash marks marring Kylie’s delicate skin from right breast to her upper thighs.

In silence, Maya leaned forward. Ever so gently, she used her fingertips then lips to trace the savage marks of violence.

Maya’s tender touch and soothing breath flowing across her skin overwhelmed Kylie to the point where her pent up tension and anxiety dissipated in a flood of tears.

Rising to her knees, Maya cradled Kylie’s face with her hands and kissed her tear-stained lips.

“You’re so exceptional, Kylie, so undeserving of such violence. I want you to let go of your fears. They don’t exist when you’re with me. I want to make love to you, for our bodies and minds to merge.”

Kylie didn’t resist. She leaned back and pulled Maya astride her. Maya showered her with butterfly kisses about her eyes and mouth. When her tongue flicked across her upper lip, Kylie opened her mouth and sought her out with her own tongue, drawing her deep inside.

Maya’s fingers stroked the sides of Kylie’s neck before moving across her shoulders and down to her breasts.

Maya is right about pulse points, Kylie thought. Her body tingled with pleasure wherever Maya touched. She spread herself wide for her and gave in to pure sensation.

Maya’s lips encircled her hardened nipples. Her teeth alternated between light nips to long tugs on their oh-so-sensitive peaks.

“Does that hurt?” Maya asked.

“God, no. If that’s what hurt feels like, don’t stop.”

Encouraged, Maya’s nose and lips roamed downward across Kylie’s flat stomach to her panties. Kylie arched her hips so Maya could slide them off. She nuzzled her damp curls and whispered, “You’re intoxicating.”

Kylie moaned and gripped Maya’s hair to pull her tighter. Maya lapped at her throbbing clit before spreading her swollen lips and plunging her tongue and fingers inside her pulsating

warmth. Maya's lovemaking drove Kylie into a frenzy that had her bucking hard against Maya's expert mouth.

When Maya must have sensed Kylie couldn't hold out any longer, she moved up her writhing body and watched her peak.

Kylie's eyes locked on hers. Her parted lips trembled with desire. Low, guttural moans tumbled from the base of her throat as Kylie rocked along with the motion of Maya's hand.

Maya cooed to her. "That's right, my sweet. Don't hold back. Let yourself go."

Seconds later, Kylie's climax surged through her, leaving her straining against Maya, grappling to hold fast until, exhausted, she fell back and Maya collapsed into her arms.

Chapter Eleven

MAYA OBSERVED KYLIE standing at a bay window that looked out onto a snow-swept countryside. As Kylie admired the view, Maya walked to her and pressed her naked body against her back. Kylie leaned into her and smiled.

“You were incredible,” Maya murmured, kissing the nape of her neck. “I can still taste you on my lips.”

She felt Kylie shudder when she flicked out her tongue to tease Kylie’s earlobe.

“How could you be so sure I’d respond to you as I have?” Kylie asked.

“Because you’re my reflection. We’re opposite sides of the same mirror, shared souls.”

Maya’s fingers skittered across Kylie’s nipples, bringing them to taut attention, before gliding across her stomach and cupping her soft bush. She lightly circled Kylie’s clit with the tip of her index finger until it hardened into a pulsing nub of sensation.

Kylie moaned. “More.”

When Maya’s free hand massaged the molded curves of her ass, Kylie bent forward and gripped the window ledge for support. She swiveled her hips so that her cheeks rubbed hard against Maya’s heat.

“You’re insatiable, my love,” Maya said.

“Not with any other lover. Not until I met you.”

To Maya’s surprise, Kylie turned and pushed her flush against a wall. She kissed her hungrily. Kylie’s sudden and intense display of passion, when all along she’d tried to keep her emotions in check, sent Maya’s pulse points raging.

Not since Donia had Maya trusted a lover to consume her world. She’d held fast to her resolve to assume the role of seductress rather than the object of desire over so many years, so many relationships... until now.

When Kylie dropped to her knees before her darkened mound and ran the tip of her nose teasingly over its soft bush, Maya spread her legs and braced her hands against the wall. She surrendered willingly to the overwhelming pleasure. Her body convulsed with sensation as Kylie’s tongue bathed her slit and swollen lips before plunging inside to lap her. She’d never gotten this wet, this fast.

“Is this what you want?” Kylie asked, gazing up.

Maya entwined her fingers in Kylie’s hair and tugged hard. “Yes,” she moaned.

Kylie slid two fingers into her wetness. “And this?”

In answer, Maya clamped her hand on Kylie’s and forced her fingers deeper inside. Seconds later, she came.

When tremors of her orgasm ceased coursing through her body and she trusted her voice, Maya looked deeply into Kylie’s eyes and said, “I think I’m falling in love with you, Kylie.”

MAYA TRAILED A finger across a large, grotesque scar on Kylie's hip, feeling each raised ridge beneath her fingertip.

"That one's taken the longest to heal," Kylie said.

"I can't imagine how you've suffered."

"I don't remember much. I think I passed out through the worst of it, or maybe I zoned out from shock."

"If it causes you too much pain, you don't have to relive your dark time."

"No," Kylie said. "I want to. I need to. I guess it's best to start at the beginning. My responsibilities as a criminal behaviorist are to assess a crime scene, examine all evidence recovered, and present a suspect's behavioral profile to proper law enforcement officials."

"In August of last year, New York State Police requested my services at a murder scene at an abandoned warehouse in a depraved section of Albany. John Haskins, a detective I'd worked homicides with in the past, briefed me on the specifics. A vagrant found the victim, an alleged prostitute, on the fourth floor. It took the frantic, homeless man close to an hour to convince someone on the street he wasn't stark raving mad and to contact the police."

"She was the third victim in as many weeks. The two prior victims, also prostitutes, had been raped and suffered intense, prolonged torture by a sharp instrument prior to strangulation. The media exploded with allegations of an inept police force. People feared for their safety and demanded justice. The police were at a loss for leads and felt tremendous pressure from high-ranking city officials to catch the perpetrator. If this third murder victim's cause of death matched the MO of the two previous ones, the police would call the FBI in to determine if a serial killer was involved. I became the police department's last-ditch hope to retain control over the investigation."

"From my prior work with Haskins, he knew my aversion to distraction while I conducted on-scene analyses and assured me he'd keep his distance so as not to intrude. It's funny how I remember flinching when I heard the warehouse's heavy metal door slam when he left."

"Being alone didn't frighten you?"

"I didn't have any sense of vulnerability. Besides, the police department had done a complete search of the premises and cleared it of danger. They also positioned two squad cars at the warehouse's front and rear exits as an added precaution."

"But isn't it true serial killers often return to crime scenes to relive the event? Don't some even take trophies?"

"Yes, but a killer returning to the scene occurs more when a crime's committed in a public area. Mingling with throngs of curiosity-seekers enables a killer to move freely among them, without fear of arousing suspicion. Since my crime scene was isolated and in a remote location, I had no sense the killer would return." Kylie's voice faltered. "I'd underestimated him. He did come back, or maybe he'd never left. Maybe he'd outsmarted all of us."

Maya placed an index finger against Kylie's quivering lips. "My sweet... You don't need to go on if..."

"No. I've hidden in shadowed memories for way too long. I guess I needed the right person to open up to, besides my shrink."

"And you've found her," Maya said.

Her words brought a smile to Kylie's lips. "Yes, I believe I have."

Kylie allowed a few moments of silence to pass before continuing. "The killer attacked me from behind. He snatched me by my hair—I wore it longer and plaited back then—and wrenched my head so far back I got a clear view of his crazed face. Not that identifying him would've

made any difference. After all, he'd sexually assaulted and viciously murdered three women. I had no reason to think, to even hope, he'd spare my life.

"That's when I began to emotionally shut down. I have no idea how many times he punched me before I lost consciousness, but when I woke, he'd stripped me naked and positioned me, spread-eagle, on top of a square, metal pallet within a few feet of where the third victim lay. He'd tied my wrists and ankles to restraining hooks on each of the pallet's corners.

"I couldn't move or scream, not even when he began to cut me. Tiny pricks to the skin at first, then punctures of varying depths. The more confident he became, the more vicious his assault. When he began slicing and peeling away sections of my skin..."

Maya gaped at her. "Jesus."

Kylie went on as if she hadn't heard her. "An hour later, when the patrolmen did a routine check of the warehouse, they discovered Haskins dead in a fire tower stairwell. The killer had slit his throat. They found me semiconscious and drenched in blood. Concerned I wouldn't live long enough for an ambulance to arrive, the burlier of the two untied me and hoisted me onto his shoulders. He raced down four flights of stairs outside to where the backup squad car rushed me to the nearest hospital."

"They saved your life."

"Yes. If I hadn't bled to death, I certainly would've succumbed to shock."

Maya wrapped Kylie in her arms. "Did he... were you raped?"

Kylie shook her head. "I remained hospitalized for over two months due to emotional trauma. During that time, I also underwent a painful series of skin grafts to repair the more ravaged areas. Physically I'd recover, but the scars would always be a gruesome reminder. I suffered from post-traumatic stress and debilitating panic attacks. Nightmares tormented me two, three times a night. I virtually lived in fear. Months of intense psychotherapy brought me to the point where my therapist decided I was ready to reenter the land of the living. I argued with him to let me stay in the hospital. He adamantly stuck to his decision and signed the discharge papers. He said I needed to stop using the hospital as a 'safe place,' that my healing process couldn't begin in earnest until I took the next step toward recovery."

"Were you using the hospital as a safe place, as he'd said?"

"Although I hate to admit it, the idea of picking up the pieces of a life interrupted and returning to society, alone, with so many predators waiting in the shadows, terrified me. So with not much more than a credit card and a full tank of gas, I requested a leave of absence and headed here."

"Why did you choose Verhoven?" Maya asked.

"Verhoven represents many cherished, childhood memories. It's as close to safe as I've ever felt in my life. I couldn't think of any other place that would allow me to come to terms with the attack in my own way and in my own time."

Maya cupped her face in her hands. "Kylie, I can't help wondering. Why do you think the murderer let you..." She stopped short.

"Let me live?" Kylie asked.

"Yes."

"I've spent many sleepless nights trying to relate to his reasoning. I finally decided the murderer found me interesting enough to torture, but not significant enough to kill. For one, I didn't fit his victim profile. He attacked me at random, without any planned strategy. I happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. For some unknown reason, he'd lingered at the crime scene, and when he saw me snooping around, he took advantage of another chance to torture and

maim. I even entertained the idea the killer might have challenged himself, to see if he could control his compulsions and refrain from killing me, as he hadn't with the other victims."

It didn't pass Maya's notice that Kylie remained dry-eyed as she recounted her tragedy. Maya saw it as a sign of her steady progression toward emotional confidence and stability.

"You're a survivor, my beautiful Kylie, who's finally returned from a long, hard journey. You'll now attain peace of mind."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I'll be here to guide you."

"Keeper of lost souls, huh?"

Maya smiled.

"Is that all you'll be, Maya? Until the day comes when you decide your good deed's accomplished and you move on?"

Maya pulled her close. "I can't imagine moving on to anywhere without you beside me."

Before Kylie could respond, Maya kissed her into silence.

Hours later, Kylie took pleasure in massaging Maya's body with coconut-scented lotion. As she spread a thin layer across her chest, she asked, "Will you tell me about Donia?"

"I haven't spoken to anyone of my loss."

Kylie paused in spreading the lotion. "Your beautiful blue eyes have turned stormy gray and troubled. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

Maya sighed. "You're my soul mate, Kylie. It's not my intention to conceal secrets from you. Donia was my friend, my lover, my mentor. I'd barely turned twenty when we met. She taught at a university I visited."

"What did she teach?"

"Parapsychology."

"So Donia ignited your passion for psychic phenomena?" Kylie asked.

"She ignited many passions. Donia represented many auras to me..." Her voice trailed off. "I find it difficult speaking of her in the past tense. To me, she remains a vibrant part of my life. She guides me through dreams and consoles me through memories. To speak of her in any way other than in the present, tarnishes her memory."

In a voice somber with reflection, Maya said, "Donia didn't die by an unfortunate accident. Someone murdered her."

Kylie couldn't stop her body from jerking in shock.

"My God. How long ago?"

Maya couldn't tell Kylie the true reason behind Donia's death, so she altered the story. "Ten years ago. A passerby found her in an abandoned tunnel on the outskirts of a park we frequented. You see, we often indulged ourselves in twilight excursions. It never ceased to amaze us how different nature appeared when backed by a full moon instead of the sun's blinding glare. We never went too far in, just enough to satisfy our curiosity. That night, one of Donia's classes let out early. Instead of meeting at the house, which was in the opposite direction of the park, we agreed to meet at the entrance to the bike path."

"I'm so sorry, Maya."

Maya looked at her with a face ravaged by inconsolable grief. "Her killer must've been hiding in wait and dragged her into the tunnel. Donia would never have dared enter such a dark, dank place alone. I try to convince myself her attacker took her unaware, and that she didn't suffer, so I can put my demons to rest long enough to allow me some respite."

"Did the police ever catch Donia's killer?"

“No. He, like many other degenerates, still walks, still stalks, while Donia lies in yet another cold and dark place. I tortured myself with guilt because I hadn’t been there to protect her, to save her. She died alone...”

“You can’t blame yourself.”

“Her death made me realize true evil existed in the world, and there had to be some way to prevent its poisonous spread.”

Kylie squeezed her hand. “My hope is time will heal your wounds and strengthen your spirit to endure.”

“Time may dull them, my dear, sweet Kylie, but they’re not meant to be healed or forgotten. I’m more driven by the need for revenge than the need to overcome hardship and come out worn-weary but alive in spirit.”

Although startled by Maya’s vehement tone, Kylie understood her anger. She, too, had often imagined what would happen if she ever encountered her attacker face-to-face. Would she flee? Would she emotionally turn off and allow the same fate to occur? Or would she stand her ground and lash out at him with her teeth and her fingernails, shred him as he’d shredded her.

Before her thoughts could get away from her, Maya reached for her hand.

“Come. We’ve spent enough time reliving tortured memories. Our future beckons.”

MAYA RAN HER tongue along Kylie’s inner thigh, relishing the skin’s silky smoothness. “Do you really have to go?”

Kylie stroked her hair. “If you keep doing that, you’ll convince me to stay another hour or two.”

“Or three, or four,” Maya murmured. Her lips skimmed over Kylie’s tuft of dark hair.

“Maya...”

Maya sighed in resignation and moved up to eye level. “What’s so important that demands your immediate attention?”

“Some unfinished business.”

“Ah, your aura of mystery surfaces yet again.”

“No mystery, just an issue I need to follow up on.”

Again, Maya tried to probe Kylie’s subconscious and, again, met resistance. It frustrated her that she couldn’t read the person she cherished the most at all times. But she recalled Donia’s words: “Sometimes, you can’t read the people you’re closest to.”

“Well, if you must go, sweet Kylie, I will not distract you any longer. I need to go into town, so we’ll take the snowmobile. It’ll be much easier to maneuver through side streets. I’ll pick you up on my way back. Will that give you enough time to see to your unfinished business?”

Kylie nodded.

LEA’S RESTLESSNESS HAD her tossing and turning in bed and crying out in her sleep. She’d tried to reach Kylie by cell since late afternoon and well into the evening hours of the previous day, without any luck. Since the snowstorm had downed trees and knocked out power lines, she’d given up reaching her via the cabin’s landline after a dozen futile attempts.

Initially, she'd kept her concern at bay. Other than the sporadic power outages, Harvey hadn't alerted her to any fires or other nature-invoked catastrophes in the area. Lea also remembered Kylie telling her she'd stocked up on groceries and firewood. She'd rationalized that Kylie was as safe and secure as other townsfolk and that she should give her nerves a rest.

Still, at the break of dawn, Lea woke with a heightened feeling of unease. She again tried Kylie's cell phone with no response. A strong sense of urgency compelled her to hop into her battered pickup and drive to the cabin.

WHEN LEA ARRIVED, her worry lessened. She found the driveway cleared of snow and Kylie's SUV gone. She guessed Kylie's frustration at being left homebound had her up and about at the first sign of daylight.

Unsure how much time had elapsed since Kylie left the cabin, Lea decided to drive along the main road to scan for any road hazards while she awaited her return. As she shifted the pickup into drive, the steady rumbling sound of an approaching vehicle invaded the woods' early morning serenity and caught her attention.

A snowmobile, carrying two passengers, appeared around a bend. Only the driver wore a helmet. As it came closer into view, Lea recognized the helmetless one's tousled auburn hair blowing in the breeze. Kylie.

When the snowmobile sidled up to the cabin's front door and the driver removed her helmet and revealed her identity, Lea's relief turned to confusion.

Although not formally introduced, Lea knew of the elusive Maya Holworth from raging town gossip and an occasional glimpse of her in or around town.

It surprised her that Kylie knew her. After all, scarcely a week had passed since her return to Verhoven, which didn't leave a hell of a lot of time for her to strike up a friendship with a stranger.

Lea's confusion quickly changed to embarrassment when she saw Maya swivel on the seat. She stretched her legs over Kylie's thighs and leaned in for a long, passionate kiss. For the past twelve or so hours, she'd worried Kylie might've fallen prey to a psychopath when instead she'd apparently spent her free time with a newfound lover.

"She sure as hell didn't waste any time," Lea said under her breath.

Too late, her gut instincts urged her to make a hasty escape. Kylie had already seen her and, with a friendly wave, motioned for her to join them. Maya's level, expressionless gaze tracked her as she approached.

Lea forced a smile.

"Hey," Kylie said, giving Lea a peck on her cheek.

"Hey," Lea said.

"I didn't forget about you," Kylie said. "My cell phone died. I intended to catch up with you at your place."

"You still remember where I live?"

"Give me some credit, Carlson. It hasn't been that long ago since I picked your brain for my thesis."

Or fucked my brains out for that matter, Lea thought, without a tinge of guilt.

"Have you met Maya Holworth?" Kylie asked.

"No."

Maya extended her leather-gloved hand. Lea held it lightly in her bare one.

“Sheriff Lea Carlson,” Maya said. “It’s a pleasure to meet the woman responsible for keeping Verhoven safe and sound.”

Lea sensed a tone of condescension in the way Maya said “safe” that instantly put her on the defensive. Or maybe jealousy had gotten the best of her and she’d imagined the sarcasm. Either way, Maya riled her and evoked a strong sense of mistrust.

Lea glanced at Kylie to see if she’d picked up on Maya’s tone, but her smile hadn’t wavered.

“Ms. Holworth. You’ve become quite the object of town gossip. An air of mystery surrounds you.”

“Oh, I’m sure rumors abound.”

“Small towns thrive on gossip. Are you having any second thoughts about relocating to Verhoven?”

“Quite the contrary. I’m surrounded by so much beauty, I’m eager to experience more.” As Maya spoke, she looked at Kylie.

There was no mistaking the sexual innuendo or Maya’s heated gaze. I was right about them, Lea thought. Crap.

“Since I’ve planned my own agenda down to the minute, I mustn’t delay,” Maya said.

“Again, I’m glad we had the chance to finally meet, Sheriff Carlson.”

Lea faked another smile.

Maya offered Kylie her hand to assist her in getting off the snowmobile before she donned her helmet and motored off.

Lea scowled at the love-struck expression on Kylie’s face as she watched Maya disappear from view. When Kylie turned to her, Lea felt blinded by her bright clear eyes and beaming smile. She tried not to gag.

She fought down the urge to say something snide. “Damn, it’s cold out here! Are you going to invite me in?” Lea hoped she didn’t sound overly cheerful.

Once inside, Lea busied herself building a fire, and Kylie brewed a fresh pot of coffee.

Lea tried a nonchalant approach. “I didn’t know you and Maya Holworth were friends.”

“Oh, I met her by accident. Her snowmobile broke down in front of the cabin the night of the storm. She said the engine had overheated. Anyway, I invited her in to warm up and give the engine a chance to cool off.”

“I see.”

“I find her quite interesting. She seems to know a great deal about Verhoven, especially the history behind her new residence, the old Stanwood House.”

“She must’ve stayed long enough for you to get pretty cozy.”

“The coziness didn’t happen until later.”

“Later that night?”

Kylie turned to her. “Is that your roundabout way of asking if we had sex?”

“That wouldn’t be any of my business.”

“You’re right. It wouldn’t be. But it didn’t stop you from implying.”

Kylie’s steely gaze shamed her. “I’m sorry, Kylie. I hadn’t heard from you yesterday, and with a murderer using Verhoven as a hunting ground, I started to worry.”

Kylie’s annoyed expression softened. “Oh, Jesus. I’m sorry, Lea. I’m an idiot. I should’ve kept you in the loop. Sometimes I can be so damn inconsiderate.”

“There’s no need to apologize. It’s my job to make sure everyone’s safe.”

Before Kylie could say anything further, Lea changed the subject. "Did ViCAP turn up any encouraging leads?"

"No."

"Damn it."

"Don't get discouraged. Rest assured, you haven't lost half of your Dynamic Duo yet. If possible, I want to consult with the medical examiner. It's to our advantage he's examined both victims."

"No problem there. His name's Lawrence Dawson, and he's a close friend of mine." Lea scribbled Dawson's phone number on a sticky note and pressed it to the refrigerator door.

"Larry's as on-board with our undercover work as Harvey. He despises Strokowski as much, if not more, than I do."

"He must be some friend."

"Yes." Lea waited a beat before adding, "As are you."

"Even if I've caused you needless worry and distress?" Kylie asked.

"Half of that is self-imposed due to an overactive imagination. I've got to keep telling myself you're a big girl now, not some feisty, rebellious teenager out to break all the rules."

"I'm not so feisty anymore," Kylie said.

"No?"

Kylie shook her head.

"What changed?" Lea asked.

"My life."

Chapter Twelve

LEA'S CELL PHONE rang twenty minutes after she left Kylie's cabin. She glanced at the station house's number flashing across its tiny screen.

"Yeah, Harvey?"

"Alice Clarke called. She's observed something she's convinced is important to the investigation. Since Denkins's been in the crapper for the past half hour, I'm taking first dibs on the follow-up. His drones won't even know I'm gone. I'll pick you up in five minutes."

THEY FOUND ALICE wearing a frayed, crochet-knitted shawl over a thin housedress and pacing on her front porch. Old age had caused curvature of her spine, which gave her a hunchbacked appearance.

Conscious of her frailty, Lea greeted her with a toned-down hug. There was no mistaking the worried expression in her eyes or the firm set to her lips.

"Alice, you'll catch your death of cold standing out here," Lea said.

"It'd take more than the weather to put me six feet under."

Lea laughed. "I'm well aware of that."

Lea opened the front door and ushered her inside before she and Harvey followed.

Shushing their polite refusals for sweets, the spirited woman flitted to the kitchen to retrieve a tray of butter cookies and a carafe of coffee. As Lea glanced about the small, cozy living room, she focused on a familiar sight on a sideboard table: a glass jar filled with lime- and lemon-flavored candies. The jar used to sit perched on the edge of Alice's desk during her tenure at the library. Lea remembered the many times as a child her grubby hands had dipped into that jar and how Alice never reproached her for taking seconds.

After Alice ushered her guests to the couch and served them, she eased her body into a wingback chair.

Lea took a moment to appraise her. Wisps of soft gray hair framed her full face and enhanced her warm, sky-blue eyes. Her complexion was amazingly wrinkle-free for her advanced age, and she didn't have on a smidgeon of makeup.

"Sheriff Carlson, I'm not one to poke my nose in anyone's business, nor prone to gossip. I keep my own counsel, but I've been in such a quandary since last I saw you and Deputy Wilkes."

"I assure you, Alice, whatever concerns you confide to us will remain confidential. And please, since you've known me since my toddler years, call me Lea."

Alice's arthritis-crippled fingers worried the edges of a frayed doily resting on the chair's armrest. "I found the girl's behavior rather inappropriate and disconcerting."

"What girl?"

"Amelia... Amy Meyers. Do you know her?"

"She's Reverend Meyers's daughter, right?"

“Poor girl,” Alice said. “She wasn’t always so troubled. Just since her mother died. Some type of seizure disorder took her. Epilepsy, I think. A cruel act of fate placed Amy at her bedside when she passed. What a horrible experience for one so young to witness. Ever since then, whenever I see Amy, she appears so forlorn, as if she’s carrying the world’s burden on her shoulders.”

“Do you see her often, Alice?”

“More times than I can count over the past few months.”

“Where?”

“Across the way.” Alice pointed to the bay window, which revealed a front view of Michael Sanders’s property.

“She visited the victim?”

“I’m not sure visit is the correct word. Dr. Sanders employed Amy.”

“To do what?”

“Various chores during the week while he worked in the city, such as taking in the mail, watering plants. General housekeeping tasks.”

“Amy had a key?”

“Yes. That, in itself, didn’t arouse my concern, but of late I’ve seen her over when Sanders was present in the home. Maybe I’m old-fashioned, but the idea of a maturing young girl spending time with an adult male who’s not a family member, no matter how innocent it may be, is improper.”

“Have you seen Amy around the property in the days following the murder?”

“Yes, and that’s what’s upset me so,” Alice said. “Yesterday and today I’ve seen her on the perimeter of the property.”

Again, Alice motioned out the picture window. “She stands there in the freezing cold staring at the Sanders’s house and smiling.”

Confused, Lea asked, “Smiling?”

“Yes, smiling, even laughing at times. It’s a joyful laugh, a gleeful one. And there’s something else, Sheriff Carlson.”

“What’s that, Alice?”

“She no longer seems to carry the weight of the world on her shoulders.”

ONCE IN THE Jeep and moving along winding, snow-compacted roads, Harvey broke the tense silence. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

Lea shuddered. “Alice’s intimation couldn’t have been clearer. She definitely suspected some form of sexual or physical abuse had transpired in that house.”

“There’s no way Amy Meyers could’ve killed Sanders,” Harvey said. “She’s a waif of a girl. She wouldn’t have the strength to bind and string him up.”

“I agree, which leads me to believe she had help. A grief-stricken, enraged father is my first guess.”

Harvey’s eyes bugged out, and his jaw dropped.

“Why so surprised, Harvey? You don’t think a man of the cloth is beyond feeling rage and acting on violent impulses for the sake of avenging an innocent child? His own child?”

Harvey’s skin turned pasty white. “Sweet Lord Jesus.”

“We’re going the wrong way. The Meyers’s residence is on the east side of town. Turn the Jeep around and put the pedal to the metal, Harvey. Now.”

KYLIE STEPPED FROM the shower as her cell rang. Dripping wet, she raced into the bedroom and snatched it off an end table where she had it recharging. She ran a finger across its flashing green screen.

Maya’s sensual voice drifted into her ears. “You’re on my mind.”

The sexual undertone to Maya’s voice had Kylie’s body thrumming like a tuning fork. “Where are you?”

“I’ve discovered a fabulous café in town, where I’m delighting in a mocha latte and a scone. Would you care to join me?”

“The only café open this time of year is Umbertos.”

“Yes, Umbertos. You’ll adore its ambience. Will you come?”

MAYA SAT ACROSS from her and interlaced their fingers. “You look exceptionally radiant this morning. The backdrop of a raging fire brings out the passion in your eyes.”

Kylie looked away.

Maya squeezed her hand until her gaze returned. “You shouldn’t be self-conscious of your beauty. It’s a reflection of your inner self.”

Kylie shivered when Maya leaned down and kissed her fingertips.

“God, what you do to me,” Kylie said.

“And what is it that I do to you?” Maya teased.

“Heighten my awareness of self and make me want you with every part of my being. How can you be so attuned to my emotions?”

“Because you’ve trusted me enough to expose your innermost thoughts... fears... passions... secrets. To achieve this special bond in so short a time is remarkable. It’s a level of conscious commitment many are incapable of attaining, and yet one I hold most important in deciding who I offer my heart to.”

Maya’s words startled her.

“Your heart?”

Maya smiled. “Why, yes, Kylie. You’ve captured my heart.”

Kylie’s insides fluttered with excitement. “I’m convinced you’ve got me under some sort of spell, Maya.”

“If there’s a spell, it’s been cast on both of us, my sweet.”

They held eye contact for a long moment.

Maya leaned back in her seat. “She’s very attractive, in an intense, serious sort of way.”

“Who?” Kylie asked.

“Sheriff Carlson.”

“Lea? She’s a friend...”

“Don’t forget the eyes are the windows to the soul. You two share a past. Is it a sexual one?”

“At one time.”

“It’s obvious Sheriff Carlson’s feelings for you haven’t waned.”

Kylie rolled her shoulders. "Sometimes it's hard for people to forget the past."

"I'm wondering if I should be jealous."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure if you have unresolved feelings for her as well."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because in your time of greatest need, you decided to return to Verhoven to seek solace."

"Maya, I told you that ever since my childhood, Verhoven's always made me feel safe."

"Towns don't make you feel safe, Kylie. People do."

Instead of disputing Maya's observations, Kylie said, "Let's change the subject."

"We could discuss the recent murder," Maya said.

Kylie jerked. "How do you know about that?"

Maya pushed the morning edition of the *Verhoven Times* across the mosaic-tiled table. "It made front-page news. Apparently, an anonymous witness came forth. The article also states Sheriff Carlson's taken a leave of absence from her position, and the FBI is actively involved in the investigation."

Kylie snatched the paper and scanned through the story. The more she read, the more her temper flared. "Lea didn't take a leave of absence. She quit."

Her irritated tone prompted Maya to apologize. "If I'd known you weren't aware of recent happenings, I never would've shown you the paper."

"It's not your fault."

"Does the murder have anything to do with Sheriff Carlson's appearance at your cabin this morning?"

"Yes. Lea came to me a few days ago for help in putting together a behavior profile of the killer. You know, to lend insight into the murders." As soon as she said it, she realized her mistake.

Maya's eyebrow arched. "There's more than one?"

Kylie sighed in resignation. "Yes. Two."

"Is this the unfinished business you spoke of earlier?"

Kylie nodded.

"Who witnessed the other murder?"

"I wasn't a witness to the murder, but I found the body."

Maya's grip tensed on her hands. "How unfortunate. Just when you're coming to terms with your own personal crisis, you get entangled in another."

"I had the option to decline to help and didn't take it," Kylie said. "I made the right decision to review the case files and offer my findings. It's helped me get my life and career back on track."

"Have you gotten a sense of the murderer's personality?"

"There's much speculation, but no solid determinations."

"Do you suspect a serial killer's involved?" Maya asked.

"I'm not at liberty to expand on any information that might compromise the investigation."

"Of course." Maya took a sip of her latte. "Tell me, Kylie, what are your views concerning vengeance?"

"On a personal level?"

"Yes."

"Courts exist to uphold the law and impose judgment on criminal offenders."

"True. Are you convinced their judgment is always fair and righteous?"

“No system is flawless,” Kylie said. “But I’m confident more often than not justice prevails.”

“Good conquers evil?”

“I think so.”

“So you don’t agree with in ‘an eye for an eye’?”

“If we allow vengeance to possess us, we become what we abhor. Violence breeds violence.”

“I see. How about we go for a walk?”

Once outside, Maya and Kylie walked arm-in-arm as they enjoyed a picture-perfect winter’s day. Crisp, clean air and a gentle, refreshing breeze wafted across Kylie’s skin. She gazed up at a serene blue sky where no clouds obscured the sun’s brilliance.

As sidewalk shops wouldn’t open for business for hours, they contented themselves with window gazing. Kylie’s attention drifted more to Maya’s charismatic presence than any elaborate shop displays. Despite her irritation at news of the murder leaking out, she felt at peace with herself and attributed such serenity to Maya’s quiet understanding and easygoing nature. She didn’t want the morning to end.

“You’re smiling,” Maya said.

“Am I?”

“Positively glowing, if you don’t mind my commenting. Care to share your secret?”

Kylie leaned in to give her a passionate kiss. “You’re my secret.”

“Tell me. Is our secret one worth keeping?”

“Forever.”

Maya held her close for a few beats before reaching for her hand and pulling her along to the next display.

An excited voice interrupted their relaxed stroll.

“It’s you!”

Startled by the intrusion, Kylie whirled and saw a young girl standing no more than fifteen feet away at the corner of an intersection.

Prepubescent and petite in frame, she had a cascade of blonde curls poking out of her rainbow-patterned knit cap. Her cornflower blue eyes, button-shaped nose, and full lips enhanced a round face with cheeks reddened from the cold. She wore a black pea coat with mittens and a scarf that matched the cap.

She stared at Maya. “It’s you,” the girl repeated. “You’re my guardian angel. You’ve saved me, like I hoped and prayed you would. Oh, thank you, thank you, guardian angel!”

The girl scampered across the street and flung herself into Maya’s arms.

Dumbstruck by the girl’s fervent claims, Kylie turned questioning eyes to Maya and became disconcerted when she saw a brief flicker of panic appear in Maya’s eyes. Kylie found the emotion disturbingly uncharacteristic in such a self-composed woman.

Maya wriggled out of the girl’s exuberant embrace and held her at arm’s length. “My, my, I’m flattered by such a warm welcome from an adorable stranger. Is everyone in Verhoven as friendly as you?”

The girl’s brilliant smile slowly faded. “I don’t understand. You’re my guardian angel.”

“I’m afraid not.” Maya let go of her and turned from front to back and back to front. “See, no wings, no halo.”

The girl’s tone turned adamant. “But you have to remember me. My name’s Amy. You promised to watch over me and keep me safe.”

“Again, sweetheart, I wish I could remember such a cherubic face, but our paths haven’t crossed until this moment. I will remember you now, though, and with great fondness.”

Amy's eyes welled with tears, and her lips trembled. Unaware of or unaffected by Amy's distress, Maya reached for Kylie's hand and led her away. When Kylie chanced a glance back, it upset her to see Amy's bewildered expression as she continued to stare at them.

Maya pulled the engine key from a zippered pocket in her snowsuit.

Kylie gripped her arm. "Maya, what the hell just happened?"

"What?"

"That girl. That talk of you being her guardian angel."

Maya shrugged. "It's obviously a case of mistaken identity. Besides, I'd describe myself as more devilish than angelic. Don't you agree?"

"I don't know about you, but I don't see a slew of guardian angels floating around Verhoven."

"A child's imagination is a precious gift."

"That's more than imagination, Maya. She's convinced she knew you and devastated you didn't recognize her."

"I don't understand why you're upset. Did you want me to encourage the child's fantasy?"

"No."

"Then I'm confused why you're so affected by her behavior."

"She just... I don't know. I hate that we left her there, near tears and disillusioned."

"I'm sure she'll move on to another fantasy person in no time at all."

Once she'd straddled the snowmobile's seat and turned over the ignition, Maya asked in a half-teasing, half-challenging tone, "Will you join me, or do you wish to keep pace by running alongside? I prefer you ride since I have more energetic activities planned when we return to Holworth House."

In silence, Kylie slid on behind her.

LEA CONSIDERED REVEREND Robert Meyers unimposing, almost frail in appearance, with a receding hairline and thick, wire-rimmed glasses that magnified rheumy-blue eyes. His pasty complexion and pale, pink lips made him appear sickly. A white polo shirt and pair of tan khakis hung limply from his slight frame.

Lea noticed his casual attire and concluded it must be his day off from doing God's work, at least from the pulpit.

She began her questioning. "We apologize for the intrusion, Reverend Meyers."

"Why, Verhoven's finest! You must be here about the murder."

By then, neither Lea nor Harvey showed any surprise. They'd both seen the morning paper. Lea couldn't resist inwardly gloating that Denkins and his oafs took the heat for failing to keep news of the murder under wraps. Dumb schmucks.

The reverend's eyes darkened, and his expression changed to one of great indignation. "Is it true what I've heard? That you and Deputy Wilkes found him dangling from a ceiling rafter?"

Intent on keeping questions to a minimum, Lea said, "Reverend, I'm sure you understand the sheriff's department can't divulge any information to the public that might compromise—"

"Of course. It's just so heinous and disturbing. And to think my daughter, my Amy, might've been in danger if she'd happened by the house during that poor man's brutalization." He shuddered and crossed his arms.

“We share your concern, Reverend, and are intent on doing whatever it takes to keep Verhoven safe.”

“Pardon my asking, but why are you and Deputy Wilkes here, Sheriff? The morning paper indicated the state authorities and the FBI had taken over the investigation, and you’d taken a leave of absence.”

Lea had anticipated Meyers’s question, so she was ready to gloss over the facts.

“Yes, that’s true, but Deputy Wilkes and I volunteered to assist with interviewing any residents who knew the deceased.”

“You both should be commended for your willingness to join forces. Whatever I can do to help, just ask away. Besides, I’d much rather talk to one or, in this case, two of our own than complete strangers. Please, come inside.”

Meyers led them into the living room and motioned toward a couch that fronted a blazing fireplace.

“Feel free to make yourself comfortable by the fire. It’s bone-chilling outside.”

“Indeed it is.”

Once seated, Lea wasted no time getting down to business. “Reverend, how long have you known Michael Sanders?”

“I met him a few months ago on a train travelling to the city. You see, I’m not only a devoted servant of our Lord, but I’m also a theology professor at a community college in Manhattan. I make the two-hour commute three times a week. On one of these trips, we struck up a conversation where I learned Dr. Sanders is a psychologist who specializes in bereavement counseling. Although his practice and main residence are based in the city, he’d recently purchased a home in Verhoven and expressed eagerness to spend many weekends here as opposed to dealing with the hustle and bustle of big city life.

“He asked if I knew of anyone who’d be interested in doing some chores for him during the week, so he wouldn’t be bogged down with them on the weekends. In hindsight, he was a godsend to me. As I’m sure you’re aware, Amy and I suffered a great loss last fall.”

“Yes, Reverend. I was sorry to learn of your wife’s passing.”

“My Beth. Such a wonderful mother and dutiful servant of the Lord. Our lives have been transformed into a living hell since the tragedy. We’ll never be the same.”

His face clouded over. For a moment, Lea sensed he’d ventured to a dark, mournful place. When she politely cleared her throat, he snapped back to the present.

“Oh, please forgive me for my lapse, Sheriff. Let’s see. Where did I leave off? Oh, yes. Over time, I felt enough of a kinship with Dr. Sanders to confide to him of our family tragedy and my concern over Amy’s distressful behavior.

“You see, over a period of months, she became detached from me and close friends. Every time I tried to talk to her, she’d become belligerent and withdraw that much further into a depressed mood. She couldn’t sleep or eat and became increasingly restless and anxious. I often thought she acted as if she blamed herself for my wife’s death, which made me worry she might harm herself out of misplaced guilt. Not long after, I came to the disheartening realization prayer could no longer be a substitute for professional intervention. But with my salary, the cost of therapy would’ve presented a significant financial burden. Dr. Sanders proposed a solution to both our dilemmas. If Amy would maintain his home, he’d provide her with the counseling she so desperately needed, on a pro bono basis.

“As you can imagine, I leapt at the offer and introduced him to Amy. He gave me a house key, and we set up a standing appointment for Saturday mornings at nine sharp.

“I welcomed the relief of knowing not only would Amy be kept busy—an idle mind is the Devil’s workshop, you know—but she’d also be nurtured back to emotional stability. Since Dr. Sanders’s murder, I was afraid she’d relapse.”

“Reverend, did you maintain contact with the deceased during Amy’s counseling?”

“Why, yes. Dr. Sanders provided weekly prognosis updates.”

“And had Amy responded to therapy?” Lea asked.

“Yes, but not near as favorably as I’d hoped. Dr. Sanders assured me that it often took months for a patient’s repressed feelings to surface and not to lose heart.”

“So Amy only met with Dr. Sanders on Saturdays?”

“Yes.”

Lea chose her next words with care. “And to your knowledge, the deceased never visited his vacation home during the week?”

“Not to my knowledge. Dr. Sanders didn’t seem to allow much time for self-indulgence. He was an extremely dedicated clinician. Besides, I’m sure Amy would’ve mentioned it. Why do you ask?”

Lea hesitated. Here we go, she thought. “A reliable source informed us that not only has Dr. Sanders frequented his Verhoven residence during the week, but Amy’s been seen on the premises at odd hours.”

Meyers looked surprised. “Well, that can’t possibly be true. Your source must be mistaken.”

“Our source is reputable, Reverend.”

Meyers scowled. “What do you mean by odd hours?”

“Evening hours.”

Again, he looked confused.

“Do you occasionally visit the chapel or rectory after dusk, Reverend? Say on the nights when you return from your teaching engagement in the city?”

“Well, as you can imagine, various issues do arise in my absence. Usually on Mondays and Wednesdays, I use the church library to peruse scripture in preparation for my Sunday sermons. I also stop in at the rectory to attend to parishioner phone calls. At most, I’m gone no more than a few hours.”

“So, Amy could’ve snuck out of your home without you knowing?” Lea pressed.

“Yes, but Amy’s under my strict orders not to—”

Lea interrupted him. “Reverend, you’ve expressed concern over Amy’s unresponsiveness to your attempts to communicate since your wife’s death. Is it possible she may have come to regard Dr. Sanders as a father figure, to compensate for what might be presently lacking in your own parent-child relationship?”

Meyers’s relaxed body language changed with the sudden shift in Lea’s line of questioning. He straightened and tensed his body as if prepared to fight.

“There’s something else, Reverend. We suspect Dr. Sanders has subjected Amy to some form of abuse.”

A deep, anguished moan escaped his lips. He doubled over on the couch as if physically struck and cradled his head in his hands.

“I sympathize with what you must be feeling, Reverend, and I assure you if I didn’t suspect illicit behavior on the part of the deceased, I wouldn’t voice my concern.”

“You’re suggesting Sanders harmed my Amy?” Meyers asked, his voice cracking.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“That’s absurd. I would’ve known. I would’ve seen the signs.”

“Is it possible we could talk with Amy? She’s the only one who can confirm or disprove our suspicions.”

Meyers bolted from the couch and stood glaring down at Lea. “No. I won’t permit you to fill Amy’s mind with such perversity.”

“Reverend Meyers,” Harvey said. “I understand this is difficult for you—”

Meyers cut him off. “Sheriff Carlson, I don’t approve of your line of thinking, let alone what I’m afraid would be your line of questioning.”

Lea calmly rose from the couch and showed not an ounce of intimidation at Meyers’s scathing glare and emphatic words. “Reverend, you must understand this information presents a viable motive for Sanders’s murder.”

“Motive? You think Amy’s physically capable of such extreme violence?”

“No, I don’t, which leads me to believe someone else could’ve done the killing for her. Someone close to her. Can you account for your whereabouts on the night of Michael Sanders’s murder?”

There, Lea thought, I’ve cast the lure. Now let’s see if he bites.

Instead of Meyers defending himself, he broke down in tears. Lea sensed his reaction had nothing to do with her insinuation but instead resulted from mourning the loss of his daughter’s innocence.

A door slammed in the hall, and a child’s voice carried into the living room.

“No! Stop it! That’s not true. Leave my daddy alone.”

In a whirlwind of fury, Amy raced into the room and threw her arms protectively around her father’s waist.

“Please, Daddy. Please don’t cry. You’ve cried way too much already.”

It troubled Lea to watch a child comfort a parent in emotional distress instead of him comforting her.

Amy shot Lea a warning glare.

Yes, Lea thought, my gut instincts are dead-on.

Harvey saved the awkward moment and helped ease Lea’s tension. “Reverend, why don’t we go into the kitchen and I’ll fix you a cup of tea.”

Meyers shook his head.

“Go with Deputy Wilkes, Daddy,” Amy said. “You won’t be far away. I’ll keep Sheriff Carlson company while you catch your breath.”

Meyers cast a beseeching look at his daughter. “Is it true?”

She gave him a grim smile. “Let Deputy Wilkes make you some tea, Daddy. We’ll talk later.”

With head down and shoulders sagging, Meyers followed Harvey out of the room.

Once out of earshot, Amy spoke. “He doesn’t need to know, Sheriff Carlson. He’s suffered so much. He’d blame himself.”

“So what we suspect is true? Sanders harmed you?”

“He said he’d tell my father my mother died because I hadn’t obeyed him and looked after her as I’d promised.”

Amy’s heart-wrenching tone and tear-filled eyes had Lea reaching for her to offer comfort. “Amy, your mother died because of complications from pneumonia and a preexisting condition. There’s nothing you could’ve done.”

Amy’s voice broke. “You don’t understand. It is my fault. I could’ve helped her if I’d stayed with her like I’d been told.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks and spattered the backs of Lea's hands. "I left her alone. I got bored sitting there watching her sleep, so I went out front to play with friends. I hadn't gone far from her bedroom window. I figured I'd hear her call out if she needed me. I didn't think anything would happen. But something did. She had one of her seizures and her pills... her pills were too far away for her to reach. Don't you see? If I'd stayed in the room..."

Jesus, Lea thought, and gently squeezed Amy's hands to reassure her. "Your mother's death was an accident, Amy."

"No."

"You can't keep blaming yourself."

"Dr. Sanders told me that, in the Bible, people atone for their sins by physical persecution. He said only through pain can sins be forgiven. I believed him. I..." She broke down.

Lea tried unsuccessfully to console her. She couldn't imagine the emotional toll of trying to keep such a dark, hideous secret or the physical toll of hiding the scars.

Amy regained her composure and swiped at her eyes. "If my guardian angel hadn't come to me in my dreams and told me she'd take care of the bad man, I don't know where I'd be right now."

"Guardian angel?"

"Yes."

"Guardian angels are figments of the imagination, Amy."

Amy's grief-stricken expression turned to anger. "You're not spiritual, are you, Sheriff?"

Lea wanted to kick herself for not realizing Amy, raised in a religious household, would naturally believe in angels. After all, how could angels not exist if demons like the man who victimized her did?

The child's unwavering eyes bore into Lea's.

"Not particularly," Lea said.

"Then you don't know that sometimes a spirit takes human form and helps people in need. I've seen her, you know, spoken to her, even touched her."

Lea straightened. "Who?"

"My angel. I saw her in the Town Square this morning, dressed in a black snowsuit. She had a friend with her, a red-haired woman. I watched them ride away on a snowmobile."

Chapter Thirteen

ONCE INSIDE HOLWORTH House, Maya moved toward an antique liquor cabinet. A crystal decanter and a set of old-fashioned whiskey glasses rested on its lacquered surface. She poured burnished-gold-colored liquid into two glasses and held one out to Kylie.

“An aperitif?”

Kylie shook her head.

Maya put the declined glass down and took a sip from hers. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing always means something.”

Kylie couldn’t explain her unease. The encounter with the young girl upset her, and Maya’s eagerness to brush off the incident perplexed her. She couldn’t shake the bizarre feeling something had transpired between them that went far beyond her comprehension. Or maybe her imagination was working against her, making her feel paranoid.

Maya went to her and pulled her close. As always, Kylie melted in her embrace.

Maya kissed her seductively on her neck and trailed her lips along Kylie’s jaw line.

“Do you want me as much as I want you, Kylie?”

“Oh God, yes.”

“Then let’s go to bed.”

Whereas on prior occasions, Maya devoted much attention to foreplay, this time her motions seemed hurried, impatient, on the verge of being rough. There were no tender kisses, light caresses, or whispered longings. When Maya neared climax, she lay atop Kylie and buried her face in her neck. She thrust her pelvis against her in a wild, unrestrained fit of passion that startled Kylie with its forcefulness. As she came, Maya threw her head back and let out a guttural moan. Never once during their sexual encounter did their eyes meet.

Afterwards, lying apart from each other, Kylie again felt the tension of an invisible wedge between them.

“I’ve upset you,” Maya said.

Kylie didn’t answer.

Maya turned toward her. “Was I too rough?”

Kylie shook her head.

“Then what is it?”

“Your attitude troubled me. You seemed cold, distant. I felt your mind wandering.”

“I’m sorry for acting so selfish in not being attentive to your own desire. I must’ve become caught up in the moment.”

“I’m not looking for an apology. We don’t always have to be in sync, Maya. Making love doesn’t always have to be about mutually pleasing each other. But I felt invisible to you. Like I was some prop. Just a body to... fuck.”

Kylie’s words had Maya reaching for her and holding her tight. “I’d never think of you in such a cruel, heartless, or demeaning way. You’re my life, Kylie. I’d be nothing without you.”

Maya's vehement words and pained expression made Kylie feel guilty. "Maybe I overreacted. Maybe I'm too sensitive. Maybe I think too much instead of going with the flow."

"Enough." Maya kissed Kylie into silence. When she drew away, she said, "We've had enough emotional turmoil for one day. Let's take a nap, my lovely Kylie, my lovely charge."

Kylie felt her skin prickle. "Charge? What do you mean by charge?"

"Shh," Maya said. "Sleep."

Despite Maya's contrition, the sex disturbed Kylie. Something's happening, she thought. And I'm helpless to do a damn thing about it.

ALTHOUGH KYLIE HAD few long-term lovers and none, long-term or otherwise, since the attack, she found it strange to wake up alone. Now that she'd found Maya and experienced such an unwavering sense of security, she craved waking to Maya beside her. Or maybe their earlier misunderstanding continued to bother her and she needed reassurance.

She wriggled from beneath the tangled blankets and padded naked to the open bedroom doorway. She glanced down the narrow hall.

A golden sliver of light emanated from the Meditation Room's cracked door. Curious to see what psychic realms Maya chose to transcend to on this particular night, Kylie moved into the hallway. As she didn't want to disturb her, only sneak a peek, Kylie pressed her back flush against the wall and inched her way quietly toward the elongated triangle of light. Minding where she walked, she couldn't help wincing every time a floorboard creaked.

When abreast of the room, she craned her neck so she could glimpse through the narrow slit where the door didn't meet the jamb.

Maya knelt in the center of the room on the sisal rug, with a candle's flickering flame highlighting her features. She appeared in a trance-like state, with head raised and eyes closed. Her forearms rested on her thighs with palms upturned.

Maya's expression surprised Kylie. It didn't display inner tranquility, but rather tense concentration. Furrowed brows creased tender skin. A muscle pulsed in her right jaw. Kylie imagined she could hear Maya grinding her teeth.

When Maya spoke, her words and harsh tone prickled Kylie's bare skin.

"Our secret must remain between us, Amy, or my mission is in danger. You're to forget I ever existed. Your torment is over. I've given you peace of mind. Live your life empowered by this peace."

It took a maddeningly long time for Kylie's stunned thought processes to comprehend the significance of Maya's words. Even then, a strong sense of disbelief repressed reason.

Amy. The girl in the Town Square's name was Amy. The girl who swore she knew Maya, her guardian angel.

And what the hell did Maya mean by keeping her mission secret? What mission?

Try as she might, Kylie had difficulty making sense out of such a bizarre scene and such a bizarre conversation with a child whose physical presence couldn't be seen.

Maya's deceit stood out foremost in Kylie's mind. She had known the girl, Amy. And she'd denied it. Realization of Maya's betrayal shocked Kylie into letting out a loud, involuntary gasp.

Startled out of her trance, Maya whipped her head around. She glared at Kylie with burning red irises and lips drawn back in a feral sneer.

The rest happened in a blur.

Consumed by fright and panic, Kylie stumbled backwards and lost her balance. She fell and struck her head hard on the wooden floor. The last she remembered before passing out was Maya's malicious expression when she discovered Kylie eavesdropping.

WHEN KYLIE CAME to, her surroundings conflicted with what she remembered prior to losing consciousness.

Instead of lying naked and shivering in the hallway where she'd fallen, she found herself dressed in a roomy T-shirt and propped up in bed with Maya at her side, pressing something hard and brain-freezing cold against her aching forehead. With an agonized groan, she flinched away from Maya's extended arm. Her sudden movement brought on a violent bout of vertigo that made her grip the mattress to maintain balance.

"Relax, Kylie. I know it's uncomfortable, but you need to keep the icepack on the area to minimize swelling."

After the room stopped spinning and a wave of nausea passed, Kylie asked, "What happened?"

"You were in the throes of a horrible nightmare. Your arms kept flailing, and your legs kept lashing out at some unseen enemy. Your frantic movements sent you sprawling from the bed. You knocked your forehead against the nightstand and have an egg-sized bump to show for it."

Kylie followed Maya's gaze to the upended beech table. Beside it, a stained glass lamp lay in a shattered heap of kaleidoscope-tinted shards.

A vivid memory replaced Kylie's confusion: Maya in the Meditation Room communicating with someone telepathically, telling her a deep, dark, dangerous secret must be preserved at all cost. Amy.

Kylie's eyes narrowed. "I saw you, Maya. Saw you in the Meditation Room."

"No, my sweet. You're mistaken."

"You were talking to someone who wasn't in the room. To that girl... Amy."

"No. You were dreaming, Kylie. I haven't left your side."

Kylie persisted. "It seemed much too fucking real to be created in my subconscious."

Maya held her close and stroked her bare arms. "Much as psychic phenomena are often unexplainable, the subconscious holds its own chamber of mysteries. The nightmare will lose its hold on you after your sense of what's real and what's imagined returns. I must say, I'm worried you might've sustained a concussion. I'd feel better if you'd allow me to take you to the hospital for an examination."

Kylie cringed. A memory surfaced of her being rushed by patrol car, lights flashing and sirens blaring, to an emergency room in the life-threatening aftermath of her attack. She never wanted to see the inside of a medical facility again.

"I'm fine, Maya. Headache and temporary disorientation are normal after a head trauma."

Maya appeared unconvinced.

Kylie tried to reassure her. "If I begin vomiting, slurring my speech, or ranting, you have my permission to call 911. Is that a sufficient enough compromise?"

"I'm not comfortable with your decision, but I'll do as you wish. Will you at least rest?"

"Will you lie beside me?"

"For as long as it takes for you to recover. And then some."

LEA SPENT THE ten-minute drive from the Meyers residence to her apartment reviewing Meyers's and Amy's statements.

Harvey cast a sidelong glance her way. "While you spoke with Amy, I contacted the chapel to see if anyone could vouch for Meyers's whereabouts on the night of Sanders's murder. Lilly Springfield, Meyers's staff assistant, stated Meyers arrived a little before seven in the evening and left close to ten o'clock."

"Dawson cites time of death between two a.m. and four a.m. Meyers's alibi won't hold any weight."

"It's the best we have. Reverend states he came home and checked in on Amy. He then made himself a bologna sandwich and retired for the night. Both deny leaving the home until morning."

"What's your gut telling you, Harvey?"

"It's telling me neither is involved. Did you see Meyers's reaction? Amy's revelation devastated him. No one's that convincing an actor. What a nightmare for them."

Harvey pulled into the driveway and shifted the Jeep into park, but kept the engine running. He turned to her.

"Now what do we do? Our first promising lead's ended up another dead end."

Lea decided not to mention what Amy told her about a "guardian angel" traversing the spirit world and assuming the physical presence of the introverted Maya. Lea had already come to her own conclusions over what might have prompted the girl to concoct such a ludicrous misconception and didn't feel the need to share them with Harvey.

"There are other leads to pursue," Lea said.

"Name one."

"It's rare that deviants begin preying on victims later in life. I'll bet odds Sanders hasn't lived a choirboy existence. As far as we know, Amy's the only minor he's treated in Verhoven, but what about the ones he's counseled in the city? We might uncover a whole slew of abuse victims."

"Damn. You think some other kid's parent discovered similar abuse, stalked him to Verhoven, and dealt due justice?"

"I don't think it's that far of a long shot. When you get back to the station house, request Sanders's address book and appointment log. Find out how many adolescent patients he's treated for bereavement issues."

Harvey opened his mouth to speak, must have thought better of it, and clamped his lips.

"Yes?" Lea asked.

"Something's wearing on me, Sheriff."

"What?"

"I know I haven't been with the department long..."

"Speak your mind, Harvey."

"There's a part of me, a big part of me, that doesn't want to catch the killer or killers of our victims. Neither of them seemed of much account while alive. I get a strong sense the world's got a better chance of staying safe with them dead."

Unbeknownst to Harvey, Lea struggled with the same sentiment.

“I guess much credence could be placed in the old expression, ‘an eye for an eye,’ huh?” Harvey said.

“I guess.” Harvey continued to stare at her, waiting for her to say more. She finally did. “But the law’s the law.”

“I guess.”

“And we took an oath.”

“You’re right about that, Sheriff.”

“And it’s our obligation to see it through.”

“You know, sometimes being a law enforcement officer sucks.”

“That it does, Harvey.”

ONCE INSIDE THE apartment, Lea grabbed a beer. She collapsed on the couch and took a long swig. She leaned her head against a well-worn back cushion and closed her eyes while she reviewed the afternoon’s disturbing events.

She agreed with Harvey that neither Meyers nor Amy committed the sadistic, ritualistic murders. She’d also eliminated Maya as a viable suspect.

Lea ticked off reasons to support her conclusions: Amy hadn’t mentioned Maya by name and hadn’t seen her, other than in a dream, prior to that morning. A logical explanation would be Amy resorted to relying on an imaginary person, a guardian angel, to help her emotionally cope with the residual trauma caused by Sanders’s abuse. Her allegation stemmed from mistaken transference of a dream image to a human form. The fact that Maya resembled this imaginary protector was purely coincidental. But in accordance with law enforcement procedure, Lea would conduct an interview and investigate all leads, regardless of their credibility.

She chalked it up to her own crappy luck the interviewee ended up being someone she didn’t particularly like—or that she didn’t particularly like Kylie sleeping with. Even though jealousy had reared its ugly head, Lea wouldn’t let it deter her from doing her job.

MAYA KEPT HER voice soft and seductive against Kylie’s ear as she coaxed her from a light doze. “Do you feel better, my love?”

Kylie winced and managed a painful half-nod. When she came full awake, she said, “You know, that girl, Amy.”

Maya shot her a wary glance. “Yes?”

“Her perception of you is all wrong.”

“How so?” Maya asked carefully.

“I view you more as a modern-day Florence Nightingale sort than a guardian angel sent from the heavens to save souls in need.”

As sudden as Maya’s guardedness arose, it dissipated. “Someone needs to keep watch over you.”

Kylie struggled to sit up. “What do you mean?”

Maya considered her words before speaking. “Please correct me if I’m mistaken, but isn’t your main purpose in coming to Verhoven to attain peace of mind?”

“In the beginning it was... I mean is.”

“Yet from the outset of your arrival, you’ve been surrounded by upheaval. You not only discovered a dead body but also agreed to assist the local sheriff in compiling a profile of the victim’s killer.”

With a tinge of defensiveness in her tone, Kylie said, “The murder found me. I didn’t find the murder.”

“But you’re determined to find the murderer.”

When Kylie opened her mouth to object, Maya rested a fingertip on her lips to silence her. “I realize you’re a victim of circumstance, but with the turmoil you’ve experienced...” Maya hesitated.

Kylie squeezed her hand. “Go on. We have no secrets, remember?”

Maya smiled past the painful pang of guilt that ripped through her heart. If only you knew the truth, she thought. “I’m concerned that perhaps becoming involved in this murder investigation isn’t in your best interest in your present state of mind.”

Maya had anticipated Kylie’s reaction and met her cold stare without so much as a blink.

“I see. So you think I’m still a helpless victim of my past attack and that focusing on the recent crimes will ruin any ground I’ve gained in my personal healing process? That I might suffer a relapse?”

“Please understand, Kylie. I’m concerned about your emotional well-being.”

“I can’t put my life on hold forever, Maya.”

“Nor would I ask you to. Just for a little while longer.”

Kylie leaned her head against a pillow and sighed.

“You need to rest,” Maya said. “I’m sorry to leave you, but I have to run some errands. We can’t exist on bodily pleasures alone. Will you be okay while I’m gone?”

Kylie offered a curt nod. “Somehow I’ll manage,” she said, her voice dripping in sarcasm.

TIRED OF THE bed’s confines, Kylie decided a hot shower would help ease her frustration and take the edge off her restlessness. The weight of fatigue, coupled with the painful ache of strained muscles, made getting to the bathroom a labored experience.

Once there, she adjusted the showerhead’s spray and water temperature and stepped into the ceramic-tiled stall. She turned her back to the stream and reveled in the pleasurable sensation of rivulets of warm water pulsating over her sore body. Immersed in a state of self-indulgent bliss, Kylie didn’t make any effort to lather up until the pads on her fingertips shriveled to resemble small prunes.

She finished rinsing and reached for the turn-off valve when she heard a knock at the front door. Soaked, Kylie quickly stepped from the stall and squirmed into a robe. She left a path of wet footprints behind her as she walked down the hallway.

Through the front door’s triangular glass pane, Kylie saw Lea’s eyes turn stormy and her expression harden as Kylie approached. It was obvious Lea wasn’t thrilled to see her in Maya’s house and in such attire.

Bracing herself for not only the anticipated burst of frigid winter air but Lea’s frosty demeanor, Kylie turned the knob and opened the heavy oak door wide enough for her to enter.

In a tone iced with sarcasm, Lea said, “I see it didn’t take you long to share more than a ride on Maya’s snowmobile.”

Temper stoked, Kylie slammed the door and threw her arms wide in exasperation. “What I do with Maya is none of your business.”

Lea at least had the good sense to look sheepish. “I apologize, Kylie. That was totally unprofession—” Instead of finishing her sentence, Lea took a sharp intake of breath.

Her reaction confused Kylie. “What?”

In an unsteady voice, Lea asked, “What happened to you?”

The accident, Kylie thought. Lea noticed the bruises. Christ, I must look worse than I feel. “Oh, you know me. Once a klutz, always a klutz. I took a header last night. My body’s a black and blue mess.”

“Those scars aren’t from any fall, Kylie.”

Kylie followed Lea’s gaze downward. Her bathrobe sash had loosened enough to expose the area between her breasts to below her navel. An all-consuming numbness enveloped her as she gaped at her scarred body. If Lea hadn’t cupped her chin and lifted it so their eyes met, Kylie might’ve stood there, paralyzed and gawking, for hours.

“Who hurt you?”

Suddenly, the emotional burden of recent events came crashing in on her. Although Kylie tried her damndest not to cry, tears pooled in her eyes and streamed down her cheeks.

Visibly shaken, Lea held her. “Kylie, those scars... they’re knife scars, aren’t they?”

Kylie nodded into Lea’s shoulder.

“You were attacked?”

Again, she nodded.

“Jesus.”

Lea lowered her onto the couch and sat beside her. She searched Kylie’s eyes. “I had no idea.”

“How could you have known?” Kylie sniffled. “We haven’t exactly been devoted pen pals over the past five years.”

“I didn’t have a say in that.”

“I know. It’s not a decision I’m proud of. I didn’t want to cut you out of my life, but to keep you in would’ve been unfair.”

“I don’t understand why you kept your ordeal a secret from me once you came back. If I’d known you’d returned to Verhoven to recuperate from a physical attack, I never would’ve asked you to consult on the murders.”

Kylie felt her anger swell. First Maya had doubted her emotional readiness to delve into a killer’s psyche, and now Lea seemed to share Maya’s misgivings. Her frustration exploded and Lea received its full brunt. Now dry-eyed and furious, Kylie pushed herself up from the seat cushion and stood. She thrust her fists on her hips and glared at Lea.

“This may come as news to you, but I’m not that fragile, that emotionally volatile, or psychotic. So you can stop worrying that a goon in a white coat will cart me off in a straitjacket to the nearest asylum with me shrieking like a lunatic.”

Lea seemed stunned by Kylie’s reaction. “I’m not concerned with your sanity. I just can’t help thinking that if you’d felt closer to me... I mean if we’d parted on better terms five years ago...”

“You can’t foresee or alter fate, Lea. What’s done is done.”

“But I could’ve protected you.”

Again, Kylie’s frustration surged. “Let’s get one thing straight. I don’t need protection from anyone or anything. Never have. Never will.”

“You’re right. You’ve always looked out for yourself first.”

Kylie glared at her. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Forget it.”

“I knew we’d somehow end up rehashing the past. You’re not one to let sleeping dogs lie, just like you’re not one to deviate from a set path. I refuse to play the blame game with you.”

“What path? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Life’s pathways aren’t always so clear-cut and defined. People learn from experience. They’re not afraid to search for a greater purpose.”

“You’re losing me, Kylie.”

“I could never comprehend why you were content to remain a small-town sheriff when your potential to achieve something more fulfilling was always within your reach.”

Lea’s face reddened. “It astounds me that all these years later, you’ve held onto the narrow-minded notion I could set my sights so low, when yours were set so high. Did it ever occur to you that, in the blink of an eye, tragedy can destroy aspirations? Maybe now that you’ve gotten a taste of what it’s like to feel lost and afraid, you’ll be less judgmental.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’re not the only one with a damaged past.”

When Kylie saw Lea’s saddened expression, she regretted losing her temper. “Will you tell me?”

“Why? It doesn’t make a difference now.”

“In spite of what you might think, I care about you, Lea. I want to try to make things right.”

Lea waited so long before she spoke, Kylie didn’t think she’d confide in her.

“Our childhoods are similar in that I spent every summer as far back as I can remember here in Verhoven. A stay-at-home mother and law enforcement father raised me—your average middle-class family.”

“What level of law enforcement?”

“My dad worked the beat for a few years, put in his time, before he made detective first-grade. We lived in a modest, three-story row home in the Bronx. This may sound like a contradiction, but I never had to want for anything, yet I didn’t feel spoiled. Maybe it’s because I didn’t need the best of everything. While most of the neighborhood kids spent their summers pounding the pavements in the city heat and getting into all types of mischief, we spent ours renting a place in Verhoven. The day after school let out for summer break, my mother had the old sedan packed up and ready to go for the season. Since my father had to work, he visited on the weekends.

“My days revolved around water-sporting on the lake and striving for the ultimate tan. I never felt bored for lack of something to do. The downside to the arrangement was I didn’t get to spend time with my father during the week. You see, I wasn’t just the stereotypical ‘daddy’s girl,’ but also the stereotypical ‘tomboy.’ My father and me clicked in a way that frustrated the hell out of my mother. For every frilly dress and pair of patent leather shoes she bought me, my father would bring home a new baseball glove or hockey stick. It often felt as if they sparred in a ‘who likes who better’ competition.”

Kylie smiled. “It sounds like you loved them both very much.”

“I did. I know it disappointed my mother, but I couldn’t bring myself to show any interest in hosting imaginary tea parties, painting fingernails fluorescent shades, applying layers of makeup, or baking and frosting cookies. I wanted the freedom the boys had to run around bare-chested,

wearing converse high tops. I wanted to rough-and-tumble my way through the day whether it consisted of climbing trees, searching for hidden treasures, or chasing out-of-bounds balls.”

“I can definitely picture you as a young kid doing all those things.”

“But most of all, I wanted to follow in my father’s footsteps when I grew up. That changed one Friday night in the middle of June, when my father, a man who prided himself on his punctuality, didn’t show up at the lake house in time for dinner. My mother hadn’t heard from him since early that morning, when he’d left the house to investigate a break-in and desecration at a local synagogue.

“As you can imagine, my mother became more frantic as the hours passed without word. When word did come, it took the form of a patrol car arriving at the lake house at three in the morning. My father’s district captain and a close friend, Lawrence Dawson, broke the news to my mother and me. They told us my father had been shot to death in an unmarked sedan while eating a fucking sandwich. He didn’t sacrifice his life to a heroic confrontation with a dangerous criminal, or rescue of a damsel in distress, not even from climbing a ladder to save a petrified cat from falling from a tree. The poor guy had been on his lunch break when some scum decided to randomly walk up and put a bullet into his brain. So fucking senseless.”

Kylie’s eyes filled with tears.

“I’m so sorry, Lea.”

“After that, my dreams of becoming a big-city cop were shot to hell. My mother’s incessant worry I’d meet the same demise if we stayed in the city resulted in our selling the house in New York and relocating to Verhoven. My father’s pension and death benefits allowed us to live in moderation with some money left over for savings.

“We might’ve distanced ourselves from the violence, but the law enforcement bug continued to eat me up inside. As soon as I graduated high school, I applied for a deputy position with the Verhoven Sheriff’s Department. It satisfied me to the point where I could ‘protect and serve,’ but where my mother wouldn’t be a basket case fretting over me for the ten years she lived after my father’s death.

“Now you know why I’m a small-town sheriff and not a big-city cop. It’s ironic that the more time I’ve spent in Verhoven, the more it became ingrained in me. I’ve come to realize sometimes what you really want is right under your nose. I’ve found my niche. Maybe I’ll change my mind in a few years, but for now, I’m content.”

Kylie reached for Lea’s hands. “I misjudged you. You’ve found your destiny, but I’m still searching for mine. Even more so since the attack.”

“Maybe you’ve found your destiny, and you haven’t fully realized it.”

“How so?”

“Well, you’ve made your way back to Verhoven. You once told me it’s the only place you ever felt safe. That has to count for something. I think you might’ve come full circle.”

Kylie agreed with Lea’s observations. She’d returned to a place where life possessed substance and meaning, where appreciation of its simplicities made her realize life needn’t be so damn complicated. Damn, she thought. Talk about searching for something that’s right under your nose.

“Kylie, it’s important for you to realize I would never have held you back from your dreams.”

“I didn’t know that then and didn’t want to stick around to find out. At the time, I considered myself footloose and fancy free. Commitment didn’t have any significance in my life. I thought of it as a restrictive, suffocating burden.”

“One albatross too many around your neck, huh?”

Kylie could tell Lea hadn't spoken the words in spite, nor did Kylie take them as anything other than Lea's resignation to reconcile with the past.

“Lea,” she said, and repeated her name until Lea made eye contact. “Back then, my motivation to succeed outweighed my feelings for you, for anybody. In truth, I didn't allow myself to become emotionally connected to you for fear it would hold me back. I would've resented the hell out of both of us if I'd stayed. I'm sorry about how it all turned to shit in the end. I never meant to hurt you.”

A long moment passed before Lea voiced her own thoughts. “For the longest time, I blamed you for my own weakness and inability to let go. And, of course, it's always easier to blame the other person when they're no longer around to put up much of a defense. The truth is, you never made me any promises. It's my fault that I expected more. The irony is, ever since you've returned to Verhoven, ever since we've had an opportunity to get reacquainted, I no longer believe chance is a one-shot deal.”

Kylie inwardly squirmed at Lea's words.

“You don't agree, do you?” Lea asked.

“I don't know.”

“Is it because of her?”

Although not named, she knew Lea meant Maya. Kylie couldn't meet her eyes.

“I wouldn't blame you, Kylie. After all, Maya's a beautiful, charismatic woman. Even I have to admit she possesses an intensity and energy that could be all-consuming. Is that what happened? Did you get caught up in her charms?”

Realizing she owed Lea an honest answer, Kylie looked up. “Yes.”

“And does she satisfy you?”

“She does.”

Kylie steeled herself for what she expected Lea to ask next.

“Do you love her?”

An awkward silence fell as Kylie struggled with her answer. “It's different with her.”

“That's too vague an answer for me, Kylie.”

“Some relationships aren't easily understood, Lea. It's better that way.”

“Better or safer?”

Kylie shifted her weight on the couch. “I'm not sure.” Trying to lighten Lea's disappointment, Kylie bent over and jokingly punched her shoulder. “You didn't come all the way out here to pick a fight with me, did you?”

“No.”

“Is there a break in the case?”

“By that do you mean have we identified our murderer or murderers? No, but we've come upon a strong motive for one of the killings.”

Lea filled her in on the recent developments involving the physical assault of a child.

“If an observant, concerned neighbor hadn't brought her suspicions to our attention, the girl's abuse may have never come to light.”

“That poor girl,” Kylie said.

“Yes, she's a strong one, though. She'll be able to rise above it, for both of them.”

“Both?”

“Her father's in a bad way.”

“He didn't know?”

“No. I think she went out of her way to protect him from ever knowing. He’s still recovering from his wife’s unexpected death.”

“So her father isn’t a suspect?”

“Not anymore. I ruled him out.”

Lea confided to Kylie her suspicion of the likelihood of Sanders preying on other adolescent patients. “As we speak, I’ve got Harvey running down a complete patient history.”

“Christ, Sanders could’ve abused innocent children for years.”

“Exactly, which means the list of suspects could range from a former patient who’s now an adult, to a parent or guardian of a current patient.”

“The list could go on and on,” Kylie said.

“I have a feeling this case is on the verge of becoming a full-scale, multi-jurisdictional investigation.”

“If it does go that route, thank God the FBI is accountable. You don’t want to get mixed up in all the sordid details of a pedophile case.”

“I guess this new development puts into question our serial killer theory, huh?” Lea asked.

“It appears that way.”

Lea sighed. “I can’t say I’m disappointed. Hunting for a serial killer is way out of my league, even if I have the best criminal behaviorist on my side. At this point, I’m tying up some loose ends, which is why I’m here.”

“What do you mean by loose ends?”

“Is Maya home?”

“You’re an hour too late. Maya’s in town, running some errands. Is it important? I could try to catch her on her cell.”

Lea shook her head. “That’s not necessary. Maybe you could clarify something for me. Were you and Maya in the Town Square yesterday morning?”

“Yes.”

“On a snowmobile?”

“Maya’s snowmobile.”

“Well, that part of her story rings true.”

“Whose story?”

“The girl I was telling you about. The Meyers girl. She insists a guardian angel appeared to her in her dreams and told her she’d protect her from harm. After her encounter with you and Maya, she’s convinced Maya is this guardian angel.”

Thunderstruck by Lea’s words, Kylie felt the blood drain from her face and her body grow cold and weak. Fearing the worst, she clutched the robe and asked in a voice that sounded hollow and very far away. “Is the Meyers girl named Amy?”

“Her full name’s Amelia. But yes, she goes by Amy. I hadn’t mentioned her name earlier because she’s a minor.”

Realization pounded Kylie a gut-wrenching blow. It all became clear. The events she remembered from the previous night had happened: from waking, to venturing to the Meditation Room, to witnessing Maya telepathically communicating with Amy, to Maya discovering her, to her panic to flee and falling, to finding herself in bed the next morning with Maya telling her she’d suffered a nightmare.

And Maya had tried her damndest to cover it up. Why? Her inner voice quickly answered. Because Maya is a murderer.

Kylie’s knees buckled. If Lea hadn’t grabbed her, she would’ve collapsed.

“Kylie! Are you okay?”

Pale and clammy, Kylie tried to clear her head while Lea’s face wavered in and out of focus. Through a haze of confusion, she managed to say, “Yes. I’m fine.” She tried to smile but sensed it resembled more a grimace than an expression of reassurance.

“The hell you are.”

Kylie struggled for an excuse. “I feel a little queasy. I haven’t eaten anything since last night.”

Lea brushed aside a section of matted, wet hair from Kylie’s forehead and examined the discolored bump above her right eyebrow.

“Maybe you should have that examined. I could drive you—”

Kylie vehemently shook her head, an unwise move since it made her more lightheaded and nauseous. “No way. I’m not going anywhere but to the kitchen to grab a pack of crackers and a can of ginger ale and then back to bed.”

“You could have a concussion.”

“I’d have symptoms by now. Trust me. I’m fine.”

When Lea opened her mouth to object, Kylie’s glare stopped her.

Lea sighed. “Well, since I can’t drag you by your hair to the clinic, I’ll have to rely on your judgment. Promise me you’ll rest up?”

With tremendous physical effort, Kylie managed a nod.

“Will you let Maya know I stopped by, and I’ll get a formal statement from her at a later time?”

“Oh, I’ll definitely let Maya know.”

Lea leaned over and kissed her cheek.

“Be well, Kylie. I like having my sidekick around.”

Chapter Fourteen

KYLIE COULDN'T STOP shaking, couldn't stop shuddering from the intense, heart-wrenching, mind-numbing fear coursing through her veins. How could her perception alter so drastically? How could doubt so dominate her emotions that it overshadowed all others? How could she suspect Maya of having anything at all to do with the violence that besieged Verhoven?

She struggled for a rational explanation. She couldn't deny Maya's secretive, mysterious nature. She also had a penchant for the supernatural. Did her fascination with the occult make her evil or dangerous? Did any of these bizarre traits and interests add up to Maya being a murderer?

Desperate to uncover tangible proof to dispel her mounting fear and distrust, Kylie raced down the hall to the Meditation Room. If a secret existed, Kylie knew she'd find it hidden there. Before she lost her nerve, she reached for the glass doorknob. Upon entering her lover's sanctuary, Kylie staggered to the ornate box in the center of the rug. The box's contents hadn't interested her before, but now they became her sole focus. She dropped to her knees. With trembling fingers, she opened its lid.

A pungent odor of incense invaded her nostrils and permeated the room. Kylie breathed a ragged sigh of relief as she gazed upon various scented incense cones and a few votive candles. Way to go, Vinson, she silently berated herself. Maybe you should get your head examined. You sure as hell seem to have gone off the deep end.

As she closed the lid, she noticed satin pulls on either sides of the box, the type that, if lifted, usually exposed additional storage space beneath. Again, a strong sense of foreboding overwhelmed her. Fighting the urge to slam the lid closed, Kylie pulled on the tabs. A secret compartment revealed an assortment of miscellaneous items: an intricately-carved amulet; a hand-woven leather bracelet; an old-fashioned turnkey; a few rolled joints; and a cluster of gemstones.

Kylie felt a resurgence of trust for Maya when she realized the items were merely keepsakes. On the heels of this renewed trust came guilt over suspecting Maya to be a cold-blooded murderer in the first place.

Now that her panic had dwindled and her confidence in Maya's innocence had been restored, Kylie examined the box's contents in detail. One particular item, rectangular-shaped and made of thin foam, stood out from the others. Kylie recognized it as a bookmark, the kind kids create in arts and crafts class. Some imaginative child had glued multicolored shapes to its surface in a geometric design.

Kylie smiled. Curious as to the special person who'd earned a spot of distinction in Maya's box of cherished memories, she turned it over.

Ice-cold numbness enveloped her. "Amy" was neatly penned in silver-glittered script along its length.

Kylie let out a tortured moan as the marker slipped from her fingers and landed next to another item—a one-way train ticket stub with New York City referenced as its point of origin and date-stamped the eve of the blizzard.

Again, she moaned. Her mind flashed back to the day she'd visited Maya on a whim and saw the naked, blonde-haired woman embracing her.

She remembered Lea mentioning somewhere in her notes a potential suspect in the Pendleton murder: a tall, blonde-haired woman by the name of Laura Richardson. If Lea's suspicions were on target, Richardson had traveled to Verhoven by rail and would've travelled on to a destination unknown if not for the downed train and ensuing snowstorm.

In her gut, Kylie knew the woman she'd seen with Maya in Holworth House had to be Laura Richardson. Her mind reeled with the stunning realization she'd discovered crucial, incriminating evidence in two murder investigations in Maya's possession. Again, a heavy shroud of distrust fell upon her. Not only had Maya known Amy, but she'd purposely referred to Laura as a "close personal friend" to conceal her identity from her.

Suddenly, from off to her right, she heard a soft, sadness-laden voice. Maya's voice. "I, too, was once a nonbeliever."

Immobilized by terror, Kylie found her eyes deadlocked on Maya's as she moved into her line of vision. "Yes, so much like you," Maya continued. "So afraid of straying from ingrained beliefs for fear I'd lose my sense of self and, ultimately, my sanity. Donia inspired me. She introduced me to my potential, taught me to accept its worth, and not fear myself."

A clear image of the older, attractive woman in the photograph hanging above the fireplace flashed in Kylie's mind.

"And yet in an instant, she was brutally taken from me, leaving me with her unyielding will to prevail and carry on, for her sake as well as for others."

When Maya knelt before her, Kylie's temporary paralysis broke and she recoiled from her touch. Maya's calm expression faltered. Pain and disappointment exuded from the depths of her exquisite, almond-shaped eyes.

"Kylie, it's not me you should fear. I would never hurt you, for in you I've found true devotion and willingness to sacrifice all that I am, all that I could be. I'd hoped more time would allow for me to show you the course predetermined for me many years ago, to help you understand I do this for others not strong enough in mind or body to stand up for themselves."

Despite her fear, Kylie found the courage to speak. "You've murdered people."

"No. I've rid the world of vile, evil creatures that prey on the weak."

"You brutalized them."

"My vengeance is unrestrained. My thirst for justice is quenched in the violence I impose."

"You made them suffer."

"Yes, as they made their victims suffer."

"But there are laws," Kylie said. "Justice can be served without a vigilante mentality."

"Laws are for the weak. Justice—my justice—is rendered far removed from any courtroom."

"It's against nature, Maya. You're against nature."

Maya's intense expression deepened. "Would your unyielding beliefs stand up to a challenge?"

Kylie stared at her incredulously. "What do you mean?"

"Travel with me, Kylie. Transcend mental and physical realms to a place where his next victim lies helpless and subdued."

"I don't understand."

“He’s on the verge of doing it again. He’s already made his first cuts.”

“Who?”

“You know who.”

Kylie stared at Maya in shocked disbelief. Her stomach roiled as she fought against the urge to vomit. Oh, she knew who he was. For months, she’d obsessed over nothing else except what he’d done to her.

Her panic increased until she felt choked by it. “You’re lying. You’re trying to lure me into this madness you perceive as justice.”

Maya remained calm and composed. “There’s no truth in lies. I speak only truth. You possess the ability to save her. Or will you let him win again, let his wrath of violence travel its sadistic course? Could you remain a witness? To see and not react? Tell me, Kylie, could you live with yourself knowing you could have prevented death but chose not to?”

“You’re out of your mind, Maya. Let me help you.”

“It’s not I who is in need of help. We don’t have much time. His victim’s life-force is diminishing as we speak.”

Frightened and bewildered, Kylie shouted, “You can’t possibly believe any of this. You’re delusional.”

“Travel with me,” Maya again insisted. “If you still have any feelings for me, please give me this one chance to show you. Then you’ll truly see a higher purpose is served by my actions.”

Kylie felt drained of physical strength and emotional resolve. When Maya reached for her hands, she didn’t flinch or jerk away.

Unbelievably, Maya’s power flooded through her, filling her with an all-consuming sense of calm.

Shock, she thought. I must be going into shock. Or I’m under a spell, a spell Maya has sole control over. Either way, Kylie didn’t struggle.

“That’s it, my dear, sweet Kylie,” Maya said. “Close your eyes, open your mind, and allow me to help you free your tormented soul.”

Lulled by her soothing voice, Kylie obeyed.

A MONTAGE OF images—some with the consistency of photographic stills, others played in a gray haze of flashbacks—assaulted her inner vision and senses as Maya telepathically projected Kylie into another world, a parallel world, of Maya’s insight and control.

Darkness and depravity, hopelessness and despair, haunted the expressions of victims—children and adults alike—who’d experienced evil beyond Kylie’s scope to imagine or comprehend. They reached out to her in a silent plea for her to touch them, to absorb their pain.

Before Kylie could react, the visions disappeared.

“We’ve arrived. You can open your eyes now.”

Maya’s words, and the ominousness with which she voiced them, brought the reality of what Kylie had experienced—and what she was about to experience—into terrifying clarity.

When she opened her eyes, she was no longer kneeling in the center of the Meditation Room, staring across at Maya with their hands clasped.

Instead, from a vantage point of less than ten yards and shielded from view behind a massive oak tree, Maya and Kylie looked upon a scene so despicable in its depiction of violence, Kylie clamped a hand over her mouth to stifle a scream.

With a full moon as a backdrop, a young woman lay naked, a helpless captive, in a weather-ravaged, forested area. Her arms and legs were spread-eagle, with her wrists and ankles strapped to wooden stakes protruding from winter-hardened ground.

Her bloodied and lacerated, milk-white skin showed signs of prolonged, unbearable torture.

“Oh, God, we’re too late,” Kylie cried. “She’s already dead.”

Maya tightened her hold on Kylie’s trembling body. “No, not dead, but her mind’s shutting down, closing in on itself. She’s suffering from the effects of shock and hypothermia. She won’t last much longer.”

The bone-chilling sound of unintelligible chanting diverted Kylie’s attention away from the victim’s limp body to a figure standing far off to her right. The woman’s attacker seemed to be taking extreme pleasure from viewing his sadistic handiwork.

Even with the woman’s blood smeared over his face and matted in his long, blond hair, Kylie recognized those black, depthless eyes and that demented smile. Maya had spoken the truth. This lunatic who was chanting and wielding a bloodied knife was Kylie’s attacker.

Violent memories assailed Kylie’s consciousness and threatened to paralyze her with fear. Maya’s voice kept her from spinning into emotional shock.

“Look at what he’s done to her, Kylie. You remember the feel of sharpened steel slicing into your skin, making you bleed?”

“Yes,” Kylie choked out.

“The excruciating pain? How you wished you could die?”

“Yes.” Kylie shuddered, not with terror, but with fury incited by Maya’s words.

“That’s right, my sweet. Let rage consume you. Let vengeance’s wrath incite violent action.”

Without warning, Maya pressed a cold, hard object into Kylie’s palm.

Kylie looked down at the hilt of a dagger and the metallic sheen of a finely-honed blade.

Maya closed her hands over Kylie’s. “We will do this. Together. We will triumph. We must wait no longer. We must move. Now.”

And together, they did, moving fast, far faster than Kylie could’ve ever imagined her body capable of achieving on its own. In a haze of unbridled fury and terror, Kylie saw the glint of vengeance glowing in Maya’s eyes. Did she share that same crazed look? She heard a banshee scream of bloodlust echo through the night. Was that Maya’s voice? Or her own? Kylie felt the painful, rigid pressure of their entwined arms and hands rising and falling, rising and falling again, and again, and again.

Until the end came.

BLACK NOTHINGNESS AND deafening silence surrounded Kylie. Deprived of such vital senses as the ability to see and hear should’ve sent her into a full-fledged panic attack, but strangely, she felt no distress whatsoever. Instead, she felt far removed from herself, as if trapped in a limbo of her own creation.

Somewhere in her numbed, traumatized subconscious, she was incapable of thinking. Incapable of feeling or reacting. She chose not to leave this dark shroud of oblivion, for she sensed the life she’d once known, and the woman who’d so enamored her, would no longer be hers.

Kylie felt alone, absorbed by the darkness and enveloped in the quiet. She felt safe here. Untouchable.

Chapter Fifteen

KYLIE AWOKE TO the sound of her own screams. When she tried to open her eyes, intense white light blinded her. She felt hands on her, soft at first, and then hard, restraining. Kicking and thrashing, she struggled against the pressure.

A distant voice shouted at her. “Relax, Kylie! It’s okay. It’s me. Lea.”

Kylie’s eyelids flew open. Lea hovered over her with a panic-stricken expression on her face.

“It’s over,” Lea said in a soothing tone. “It’s just a nightmare.”

“No!” When Lea’s strong grip didn’t loosen, Kylie stopped fighting against her overpowering muscle. “Please let me go, Lea. I’m not totally off the wall.”

Lea eased off. Kylie took in her surroundings and realized she was in a hospital bed, dressed in a pale-blue hospital gown, with an intravenous line sticking out of her right arm.

She looked at Lea. “How did I get here?”

Lea sat beside her. A nurse came to the doorway, but Lea waved her away.

“About an hour or so after I left you, I got a bad feeling. I couldn’t shake the mental image of the way you looked when I left you. So, I decided to come back and double-check on you. I’m thankful I did. I found you, unconscious, in one of the spare rooms on the first floor.”

Through a daze, Kylie realized Lea was referring to the Meditation Room. The recent past came crashing in on her, threatening to claim the last remnants of her sanity.

Kylie remembered her confrontation with Maya and traveling to an alternate world, an altered state. She remembered witnessing a victim’s life hanging precariously in the balance. She remembered lunging at her attacker and hearing his guttural screams as the knife she and Maya held entwined in their bloodied hands, plunged into his flesh.

Although afraid of what Lea’s answer would be, Kylie asked, “Maya?”

Lea fidgeted. “You need to rest.”

Kylie gripped her hands, tight. “Maya. Where’s Maya?”

“She’s...she’s...”

“She’s what?”

“She’s gone.”

Kylie stared at her in confusion. “Gone? What the hell do you mean by ‘gone’?”

Lea’s gaze nervously flitted to the nightstand.

Following her look, Kylie gasped in astonishment.

The ornate box from the Meditation Room sat within arm’s reach.

Without a word, Lea placed the box in her lap. Kylie stared at it a long time. She knew what this object signified and what it could divulge.

Herein lay proof of Maya’s abandonment.

With trembling fingers, Kylie lifted its lid. And she wasn’t surprised to find it barren of its former contents. Maya wouldn’t have left any evidence behind to implicate her in the murders. She would’ve been as clever in covering her tracks as she’d been in inflicting her vengeance.

All that remained was a folded sheet of parchment paper. When Kylie unfolded the paper, she read the heading's bold, typewritten letters: Deed, Property of Holworth House. A certified addendum accompanied the notarized, legal document, naming Kylie as Holworth House's owner of record.

The document brought the pain of reality crashing in on her. Now that Maya had succeeded in enlightening Kylie to the strengths and weaknesses of the human spirit, she'd moved on in her life, leaving Kylie emotionally shattered and abandoned.

"There's nothing left," she whispered. "Nothing left to remind me of what once was."

Just when grief threatened to consume her, Kylie remembered the hidden compartment.

When she found the courage to remove the box's upper tray, she stared, dumbstruck, at a lone item placed in the center of a satin cushion. Tears welled in her eyes, making it difficult to see. Kylie knew this item so very well and missed it so very much—a dainty, gold, heart-shaped locket strung on a thin chain. On her deathbed, her mother had given the locket to her. Passed down through many generations, the locket held a picture of Kylie as an infant, cradled in her mother's arms.

Kylie had worn the locket the night of the attack in the warehouse. Her attacker had taken it as a souvenir. And Maya had now returned the precious gift to her.

The true anguish of loss tore at Kylie's heart like the claws of bloodthirsty animals. She clutched the locket to her chest and surrendered to wracking sobs.

Lea left her alone to grieve.

Epilogue

KYLIE FANNED OUT a white sheet and draped it over a couch in Holworth House's main living area. In her mind, she ran through a list of last-minute tasks she needed to do before closing the place up for the fall and making the jaunt back to the city.

Six months had passed since that fateful day in Holworth House. During that time, Kylie had embraced the pain of Maya's abandonment instead of distancing herself from it. She realized only through experiencing the pain would she be able to keep Maya's memory alive. Forgetting would have been the ultimate deception.

She needed Maya's memory in her life as a constant reminder of how she'd changed Kylie, made her realize a parallel life did exist outside the realms of humanity. That psyches could merge and become one for the purpose of righting wrongs. And justice could truly prevail.

A sound from behind interrupted her reverie.

Lea stood in the open doorway, her hand gripping a bottle of champagne by its neck.

Kylie smiled. "A present? For me?"

Lea returned the smile. "I couldn't send you off to the big, bad city without a distraction to while away your free time."

Kylie laughed. "What free time? Hell, I've got cases stacked up waiting for me." She reached for the bottle. "I've got a better idea."

"What's that?"

Kylie moved toward the mantel and placed the bottle on its narrow ledge. She stood back and, with hands on hips, admired it.

"I'll leave it here, so we have something to drink when I return."

"Then I'll make sure I bring the ice and glasses."

"You've got yourself a deal, Sheriff."

"Just don't let too much dust accumulate on it between now and the next visit. I've kind of gotten used to you being around."

Kylie fixed her with a serious gaze. "I've kind of gotten used to being around."

Lea helped her close and secure windows before walking her outside to lock the front door.

Kylie noticed a Verhoven Sheriff's Department Jeep parked in the driveway.

"How long did you make Strokowski grovel at your feet and beg for you to return to the force?" Kylie asked.

"He's still on his knees."

"Glad to hear it. Keep him there awhile longer."

Lea laughed. "I intend to."

Since Kylie knew that neither liked awkward, prolonged goodbyes, they settled on an over-exaggerated hug and promised to keep in touch. As Lea turned away, Kylie said, "You know, I forgot how easy it could be." Lea squinted from the sun's glare.

"How easy what could be?"

“Finding one’s niche.” Lea grinned and ducked her head, but Kylie didn’t miss her blush. With a melancholy pang, Kylie watched her drive away. She sighed and moved toward her SUV. A brilliant flash of light caught her attention off in the woods. Shielding her eyes, she tried to focus on the object the light reflected off of. It remained hidden. But she imagined it was a pair of eyes. Intense, cobalt-blue eyes. “I miss you, Maya,” she whispered. She imagined she heard a whispered reply on the wind.

“Soon, my sweet. Soon.” Renewed hope surged through Kylie’s body. She would wait.

About the Author

Barbara has been writing fiction (psychic/supernatural, suspense/mystery, and horror/thriller genres) since the late seventies, and has had numerous short stories published. Most of these stories were inspired by intense childhood nightmares.

She works as a safety representative for a major utility company. Her free time (when not writing, of course) is spent enjoying her wife, her daughter, and any activities that involve being on, under, or near the ocean, for that is where she feels most in tune with her emotions.

Pulse Points is her first full-length, lesbian fictional work. If you crave shock value, being kept in the dark until the last possible moment, and being haunted by memories long after the last page has been turned, then this is a must-read.

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The insidious heart of a French Cardinal, a man of mysterious dealings, has set the elements of evil astir. In order to save Henry's England Ban Talah must first save the Lady of the Land from the bindings of the Cardinal's sorcerous, wintery enchantment, a spell that is also a wicked inheritance of ills against the healers of her people.

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Lee Grayson is a nature photographer whose father is a senator in New York. She's never felt close to him and her faith in people as a whole is lacking. She moves to the town of Harmon deep in the Adirondack Mountains after inheriting her great aunt's estate, but the local townspeople seem a little...off. Then she meets Ranger Jamison Kessler and learns there's a killer running rampant around the area. Jamison seems to be hiding things from her and Lee is starting to become suspicious.

Lee discovers that her aunt was a central part of this community and that she possesses the woman's unique abilities. She and Jamison are falling for each other, but things take a turn for the worse when the murderer sets his sights on Lee and a cure for his condition which he believes her to be harboring. Their situation is further complicated by the fact that the killer isn't even human. Neither is Jamison

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by S.Y. Thompson

Jamison Kessler and Lee Grayson are back in book two of the “Under” Series. Set one year after *Under the Midnight Cloak*, their adversary is very human. Someone has a fixation on Lee that manifests itself in a series of grisly murders rapidly approaching serial status and child abductions. These crimes are merely warnings, but what happens if Lee fails to interpret their meaning?

Jamison, Lee and the Panthera rush to save the lives of the innocent while they struggle to identify the instrument of so much suffering. Strains in relationships cloud their ability to see the whole picture. At the same time, U. S. Park Police Detective Patricia Hex shows up to help out but may soon become a threat to the Panthera community. Jamison’s concentration splits between Lee, a mysterious killer and trying to keep Hex out of the Council’s crosshairs. Her lack of focus may be all the stalker needs to get to Lee.

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by Sky Croft

The mission of a shadowstalker is simple: stalk, hunt, and kill creatures of the night, while protecting the innocent, unsuspecting public who have no idea of the horrors that lurk in the darkness.

For the Valentine women, shadowstalking is a way of life. Supernatural threats lie in wait around every corner, and danger is a regular occurrence.

Though the mission is simple, Cassie Valentine finds her life is anything but. Not only is she in love with her best friend, but past mistakes haunt her dreams.

Along with her mother, Eve, and her younger sister, Vicki, Cassie must learn to negotiate the perilous terrain of day-to-day life, while also coming to terms with the past.

Will Cassie be brave enough to overcome her fears and give love a chance? Or will the Valentine family fall when a legendary foe resurfaces?

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