

Twisted Screams

Chapter One

Sadie returned to consciousness with a start. Jesus, everything hurt. She pushed up to a sitting position and rubbed her head. When she moved even slightly, little sparks of bright light appeared in front of her eyes, and pain shot through her skull. She was no doctor, but she had to believe that wasn't a good thing.

What the hell had happened to her and where was she? Everything was foggy and unclear, made worse by the pounding in her head. How could she think when lightning bolts blasted across her skull? For at least a full minute she sat still, willing the waves of pain to subside. Tentatively, she tilted her head one direction and then the other. Her stomach didn't roll, and the sparks behind her eyes disappeared.

One more minute of stillness and she began to feel more like herself. She risked an unhurried look around, moving her head slowly so as not to trigger pain. Dim light filtered through windows caked with decades' worth of grime and fell across the dusty floor. A tall ceiling made the room feel massive. Lined up against the walls were rows of old metal bed frames that once had held their now-missing single mattresses. It was a dormitory, but where? She didn't remember the room or even coming into a building.

Think, Sadie, think. How in the world had she ended up in this dusty old building? Blackouts were not her thing, so surely if she tried hard enough she'd remember. Gradually, recollection rolled in and a whisper of relief loosened her shoulders. Unfortunately, it didn't help to make any more sense out of where she sat. She was so certain she hadn't gone into any building and definitely not into this room. She'd remember seeing this place if she had.

Earlier, she'd been out scouting locations for the television series her company would be filming over the next year. First, she'd checked out the old monastery on Mt. Spokane, and then she went to a fascinating homestead cemetery on the north side of town. Both turned out to be incredible and perfect locations for several episodes of the new series that would showcase the area. She'd been really excited by the finds, that much she did remember.

The cemetery was the last place she could clearly recall. Her next stop was to have been the abandoned grounds of the mental hospital west of the city, and if this was the

hospital, she had no clue how she got here. She couldn't recall leaving the cemetery or even walking back to her car, for that matter. It was at least thirty miles between the cemetery and the hospital, so how in the world did she get here?

Her hands on the floor, she pushed until she was up and on her feet. The dizziness returned and for a moment she swayed. Chills raced down her spine, and she was afraid she might crumple back down to the dirty floor. With effort, she managed to stay on her feet, her legs still trembling a little. She took a deep breath and coughed like an old smoker. Good grief. It smelled as bad as it looked. She put a hand over her mouth and nose, her eyes watering. Slowly she took her hand away and let the odor of the room wash over her.

She scanned the room, and as she breathed in and out, the scent of the empty room took shape. By all rights it should smell of dust and disuse, except what hit her with hurricane force was more than the dirt and mold of a long-unused space. Something very different assailed her senses. This, she decided, reminded her of unwashed bodies and stale sweat. Like an old locker room that hadn't been cleaned in weeks or months. The scent also held a freshness, as if those who had passed through to leave a trail of odor behind had exited mere hours ago. Deliberately she did a full circle, taking in the tall walls, old furniture, and the cobwebs hanging from the corners.

What exactly she was looking for, she didn't know, and frankly, nothing jumped out at her. It was an old, unused room, empty save for the black, dented frames of the numerous single beds that looked sad in their neglected, discarded state. Certainly those things accounted for at least some of the scent of decay and abandonment. It was what she didn't see that confused her. No tossed-aside clothing, no visible dampness or mold, nothing that would fill the air with the odor of a recently vacated locker room.

Her heart always in the game, she shifted from confused to work mode. Briefly, she considered how this room would play on film. Light and dark, shadows and sunshine, crowded and spare. That it would work on a number of levels sent a shock of excitement through her, and she wished she had her tablet in hand so she could take pictures and make notes. Then a shot of pain zipped through her head again, and all thoughts of work, cameras, and sets disappeared.

As she massaged her temples with her fingers it occurred to her that maybe it was all in her head. Judging by the way it hurt, she could have suffered a concussion, and if that was true, she might easily imagine things that weren't there. Yes, that must be it. She was suffering from a head injury, and that's why she couldn't remember how she came to be in this room. Or, for that matter, how she'd even hit her head.

The way she figured it, the best thing she could do was get outside and draw in a good long breath of fresh air. Get away from all the dust and God knows what else that was circulating in the air she was breathing in and out. Once her head cleared, she'd be able to figure out exactly what had happened. Come to think of it, her car was probably outside too, along with her cell phone and her tablet with mobile Internet access. Help was a quick call and email away.

At the opposite end of the room was a single closed door and, she realized, her only way out. It struck her a little odd as she made her way to the door that a room this large had only one avenue for ingress and egress. What kind of architect would design this type of room with only one door? Then again, it was an old building, and things in decades past didn't always make sense in today's world. With each step, her head pounded like someone was smacking her with a baseball bat. Whatever she'd done, she'd done it in a big way. This was going to take a bit more than fresh air. Probably more like an ice bag and a handful of ibuprofen. Or, though she hated to consider it, a trip to the ER.

At the door, she closed her hand around the brass knob and twisted. It was cold and hard in her hand, and it didn't budge, not even a centimeter. Well, now that didn't make a whole lot of sense, considering it had to have turned for her to get in here in the first place. She tried harder. Still nothing. She let her hand drop away and stepped back, biting her lip as she studied the stubborn door. Even though the pain inside her head was now pounding away at hurricane force, the truth pierced the fog: locked. Not just locked, either, but locked from the outside, as if whoever occupied the beds were prisoners more than occupants.

One more time she tried. "What's the definition of stupid," she muttered to the empty room. "Trying the same thing over and over and expecting a different result." Her self-incrimination fell on an empty and silent room.

Panic started to rise as the reality of her situation settled in, and her hands trembled as she patted her pockets. Maybe she hadn't left her cell in the car, but as she thumped her hands against her pockets, her heart sank; the cell phone wasn't on her. More than likely, she'd dropped it in the bag she used when scouting locations. She carried all sorts of things in that bag: a cell phone, her SLR camera, a sketch pad, some granola bars. The bag went where she went, so it had to be here somewhere. Again, she surveyed the room. It wasn't anywhere in sight. No closed closet doors or cubby holes where she could have dropped it. In fact, the only thing in the room besides the skeleton bed frames was her. Her bag wasn't here.

Forcing herself to stay calm, Sadie looked around one more time. If she couldn't make a call, she had to find another way to get out of this place. The windows beckoned to

her like the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. That was it: she could crawl out a window. It made perfect sense. Once more ignoring the pounding in her head, she hurried over to the old, dirty windows. The sooner she got the hell out of this room, the sooner she could get home to her bottle of ibuprofen and her nice comfortable sofa, where she could relax and put her feet up. Most of all, she could give Anna a kiss and tell her how much she loved her.

At the bank of windows covering the south wall, she stopped and stared, and tears began to pool in her eyes. Even if she could find a way to open one of them, it was pretty clear she wouldn't be crawling out. If she managed to break away enough of the rusted bars to squeeze through—and she was coherent enough to realize that was a long shot—the four-story drop would more than likely kill her. Her back against the wall, Sadie slid to the floor and gave in to sobs.

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“No fucking way.” Lorna Dutton stared at the phone and refused to touch it. While she understood it was an inanimate object, she had the feeling that if her fingers came in contact with the phone, it would burn them. She wanted nothing to do with it or the person on the other end of it, so she kept her hands clamped to her sides.

The very last person in the world she expected to hear from was Anna, yet that's exactly what Jolene Austin, her housekeeper extraordinaire who also happened to be her girlfriend's mother, was telling her as she held the phone toward her. Seconds before the phone rang, she'd been enjoying great coffee and great conversation in her bright kitchen, feeling optimistic about the start to the day. Talk about a buzz kill.

Jolene patiently waited, the phone held out toward Lorna, while her girlfriend, Renee, looked at her and raised an eyebrow. “Really?” she said with an edge of sarcasm. Renee was the best, and Lorna loved every minute she spent with her. Except maybe for this particular minute. She couldn't believe she was advocating that Lorna take the call.

Lorna pressed her lips together before blowing out a long breath, her hands still at her sides. This shouldn't require an explanation. “Yeah, really.”

What the hell did she want to talk to Anna for? She'd dumped Lorna like she suffered from a contagious disease, and, Jesus, how she'd felt like shit for such a long time. In

fact, she lived here on the coast of the Pacific Ocean instead of across the mountains in her hometown of Spokane because the future she'd thought she had with Anna had blown apart. Not in a pretty way either. No, it had blown like Mount St. Helens back in the eighties, covering everything with gray ash for hundreds of miles and making everything look like a barren, alien landscape. That's how she'd felt at the time, gray and lifeless. She'd come here to hide and wallow in her misery, though as it all worked out, she'd discovered a wonderful new life that the beautiful Renee completed.

Come to think of it, Renee should be supportive in this one. Of all people, she knew how badly Anna had treated her and how hurt she'd been. Renee was the one to help her come out of the darkness and back into the light. Step by step, day by day, Renee was there for her, and slowly she'd come to see that her life hadn't ended. In fact, it had just begun in so many ways.

Even given the happy ending to her tale of heartbreak, she didn't owe Anna a damn thing. She refused to let her cast a cloud over what was turning out to be a great morning, and she wasn't going to talk to her. Regardless of what Renee might think, she was going to hold a grudge, and that was that. She'd earned the right to dig in her heels on this one.

"No," she said firmly. "I'm not talking to her. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever." She turned her gaze away from the phone that Jolene still patiently held without bothering to cover the mouthpiece. Anna, she was quite sure, was hearing the conversation taking place in the kitchen. Perhaps the best thing she could do was have another cup of Jolene's excellent coffee, so that's exactly what she did. Her hands shook a little as she poured coffee from the carafe into the mug, and silently she cursed herself. She was not bothered by this; she was not. Holding the hot mug between her hands, she leaned against the counter and pretended nothing at all had happened to disturb their congenial conversation.

Renee shook her head before sticking her hand out. "Give it to me, Mom. If one of us is too childish to take a call, I'll have to be the adult here."

This time Jolene raised an eyebrow and a smile twitched at the corners of her mouth, but she still didn't say anything, just handed the phone to Renee. Lorna didn't move from where she continued to lean against the counter. She loved Renee, but her beautiful girlfriend wasn't going to make her do something she was dead set against doing. Right was right and wrong was wrong. She was right. Anna was wrong.

On the other side of the kitchen, Lorna's brother, Jeremy, was sitting at the kitchen table next to his pregnant fiancée, Merry. They looked at each other with expressions

that seemed to say, “Oh, shit.” It wasn’t a stretch to figure out what they were thinking. The old Lorna might wig out, but they needn’t worry. She hadn’t been that person for a long time. Not that it changed anything about the current state of things. She didn’t intend to talk to Anna; neither did she intend to let her call disturb her day.

“Anna,” Renee said in a friendly tone as she put the phone to her ear. “This is Renee Austin. I’m...” She paused for a second as she looked at Lorna and then smiled broadly. Her eyes were dancing as she continued. “Lorna’s fiancée.”

Lorna felt her mouth fall open, and she came perilously close to dropping the freshly filled coffee mug she held between two hands. Renee just looked at her, smiled even bigger, and shrugged.

“Lorna isn’t available right at the moment. Can I do something for you, or can I give her a message?”

Renee’s smile disappeared as she listened, and her eyes narrowed in concentration. As Lorna watched her, she started to lose her righteous anger, only to have it replaced by curiosity.

Renee was nodding as she spoke. “I understand, and I’ll talk with Lorna. I promise you, we’ll give you a call back as soon as possible.” Renee pushed the end button on the phone and stared at it as if it was the first time she’d ever seen one before she raised her eyes to Lorna’s. She didn’t move to replace the handset.

“I’m not calling her back,” Lorna declared. If she was five, she’d have stomped her feet too, but since she was slightly older than that, she just stood her ground sans the foot-stomping.

Besides, it didn’t matter what Anna had said to Renee. Lorna had no intention of returning that call. In fact, if she got her way, she never planned to speak to Anna again. True, she was incredibly happy right now, and it was way past time to let go of the hurt Anna had caused her. Knowing it and doing it, however, were two completely different animals. Each time she thought about Anna, fury rose in her chest and she couldn’t seem to let it go. Her reaction was stupid, and intellectually she understood that fact. It was all pure emotion, and so far she’d failed to bridge the gap between pain and forgiveness. Someday maybe she’d be able to do it, but that day hadn’t arrived yet. So whatever Anna wanted or needed, she was going to have to go somewhere else for help. She had plenty of friends on the other side of the mountains, and she could just tap one of them.

Renee studied her for a long moment, turning the handset over and over in her hands, and then said quietly, "I think you have to."

"No, I don't." This was obviously going to be one of those rare times when they didn't agree.

Holding up her hand, Renee said, "Hear me out. I think you'll change your mind when you know why she called."

"I doubt that," Lorna muttered, knowing that she sounded like a pissed-off little kid. Still, she couldn't think of a single thing that would ever change her mind.

"Her wife is missing."

Of all the things she'd anticipated Renee saying, that was the last. No, not the last, because it wasn't even a consideration. Wife? What the fuck? Since when did Anna have a wife? She didn't let any grass grow under her feet, did she? Lorna brought her gaze up to meet Renee's. "And that concerns me why?"

"It concerns you because you're in a unique position to help."

"What exactly am I supposed to help with?"

Renee sighed, almost as if she were explaining something to a child. Okay, so maybe she was acting a little childish, but she figured she was entitled when it came to Anna.

"Look, I get why this is difficult for you. I really do. It doesn't change my feelings about this. Anna's wife went out to do some work and never came back. The police aren't helping yet because they don't think she's been gone long enough. You're in a unique position to help find her, to make a difference."

So far she wasn't convincing Lorna. "If she truly is missing, the police will step in."

Shaking her head, she said, "Not for at least another day, and you know how time can be critical. This has nothing to do with what happened between you and Anna and everything to do with helping to find an innocent woman before something terrible happens. I know you, Lorna. If something happens to Anna's wife and you could have made a difference, you'll never forgive yourself."

"Crap," she muttered under her breath. Now she was starting to get to her. Too much of what Renee said rang of truth. It wasn't fair, and she shouldn't have to do something she didn't want to.

They'd just gotten home from spending time in Spokane helping Lorna's old friend, Theodora Lane, in a heartbreaking search for her twin sister, Alida. With the aid of a sheriff's department investigator, Katie Carlisle, they'd found her. Sadly, she was dead, as were a number of other women. The only upside to that trip was that their discovery had exposed a serial killer who was also a sheriff's deputy. They'd stopped him, and he'd never be able to hurt another woman again.

Not only did she not want to go back to Spokane right now, but she also didn't want to do a damn thing for Anna. She knew from firsthand experience that Spokane employed plenty of law enforcement for situations like this. In fact, the one thing she was willing to do was to call Katie and see how she could assist Anna. That was the extent of her inclination to help. She wasn't heading over the mountains again anytime soon. Period. Especially not for the woman who'd turned her back on her. Nope, not going to do it.

"Lorna." Renee reached over and took her hand. The look she gave her was full of compassion and understanding. "If there's a chance you can help her and save her wife's life, we have to go. It's the right thing to do and you know it."

"I don't owe her anything," Lorna bit out. She refused to bend to guilt or arguments that weighed on her sense of right and wrong. That wasn't playing fair, especially when it came to Anna. Where had right and wrong been when she was cheating behind Lorna's back? Where was it when she'd looked Lorna in the eye and said "I love you," knowing all the time it was a big fat lie? She was sorry Anna's bride was missing, despite the fact it grated on her that she'd gotten married about ten seconds after she'd dumped Lorna. In truth, it wasn't her problem, and she wasn't going to be guilted into making it her problem.

"No." Renee squeezed her hand. "You don't owe her one single thing. Baby, this isn't about Anna, and it's not about you. This is about a woman whose life might be saved if you use your gift."

Reaching behind her, she set the coffee mug on the counter, spilling some of the hot coffee as she did. Emotion welled up, and she took three deep breaths, trying not to let tears fall. This wasn't fair. "I can't..." But she couldn't finish.

"Yes, you can," Renee said softly. "You can, my love."

Lorna looked over at Jeremy and Merry, hoping for a little help. Surely they would understand, as they'd both been there for the fallout. They'd seen firsthand how crushed she'd been and how difficult it had been in the days afterward.

Merry spoke up. “What did Anna tell you exactly? I mean, how does she know her wife is actually missing? Any number of things could have happened. From what I gather, they jumped into marriage pretty damn quick.”

“You make a good point,” Renee said. “Her wife Sadie went to work early yesterday morning and never came back. Now consider this. If Jeremy didn’t show up tonight, was gone all day tomorrow, he didn’t answer his phone, and he didn’t check in, what would you think?”

Merry turned to stare at Jeremy, her eyes searching his face. “I wouldn’t think anything. I would know something was very wrong. He would never do that to me.” She reached over and took his hand.

Renee turned to look at Lorna. “Just as I would know if Lorna was lost or hurt or in danger, Anna knows something has happened to Sadie or she would never have risked a call to you.”

Jeremy nodded ever so slightly, his eyes holding Merry’s. “Gotta go with Renee on this one, sis. I’d know in a heartbeat if Merry was in danger.”

“Wha...” She couldn’t believe her own brother was turning on her.

He held up a hand. “Hear me out. You’re right that you don’t owe Anna anything, but this thing you can do is bigger than any of us. You’re kind of the superhero here, and it wouldn’t be very superheroish if you turned down a damsel in distress. If Anna believes something terrible has happened to her wife, I, for one, believe her.”

He winked, and her heart lightened somewhat. He always had a way of bringing her light when the darkness tried to intrude. His wink made her smile...just a little. “You do have a way with words.”

“To know me is to love me.” His grin spread across his face while Merry shook her head and rolled her eyes.

“Blowhard that your brother is,” Merry said with a smile, “he’s right. I think it’s important for a number of reasons to help Anna. We would all feel bad if she’s harmed and we didn’t at least try to help.”

“Is this your legal opinion?” Merry was, after all, the one attorney in their family.

Merry’s smile grew and she shook her head. “Nothing legal here. It’s one hundred percent my personal opinion. It isn’t about condoning what Anna did to you. That was

wrong and always will be. That said, this is about providing assistance to another woman who could be in danger. You were given that gift for a reason, and I personally believe it was for situations such as this. So, for what it's worth to you, I say we go."

Lorna studied each face in turn and then nodded slowly. "All right. I'm not dense enough to not know when I'm beaten. I'll call her back, but you all talked me into this, and that means you all get to go with me."

Renee kissed her on the cheek as she pressed the phone into her hand. "Deal. You know we're all here for you. Always."

"Can I get that in writing?"

"We do have an attorney present," Jeremy said and patted Merry on the shoulder. "And she can come up with one mean contract." He winked at her.

"I'll work it up when I get back to my computer," Merry said with a laugh. "I'll start with 'all for one and one for all.'"

Lorna took the phone and studied it for a moment. She looked up and narrowed her eyes as she studied Renee. "So, before I hit redial, tell me about this fiancée I have."

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Anna Frye put down the receiver and stared at it as tears began to drip down her cheeks. The call had shaken her more than she'd imagined it would, and she'd imagined all sorts of outcomes. If Lorna had told her to go fuck herself, she wouldn't have blamed her. Lorna was entitled to feel that way. She'd treated her like shit, and what she'd done to her was unforgivable. If the shoe was on the other foot, she'd never have taken that call.

Still, she couldn't help but reach out for any and all lines of defense. She'd done the best she could at the time, because back then, she didn't know how to end it. Somewhere along the way she'd realized that they were far better friends than lovers. She saw it and felt it, but Lorna didn't. Anna remembered being a bit shell shocked by the truth of it before going into protection mode. Things hadn't been right between them, and every day it seemed to grow a little worse, a little heavier on her shoulders.

When Sadie had come into her life, all the problems simmering between her and Lorna had become so glaring she'd never figured out how Lorna missed them. She didn't miss a thing and chose to take the coward's way out. No, more like grabbed it with both hands and ran. Her actions had hurt Lorna deeply, and no matter what had been happening at the time, it hadn't been fair to her.

Since then she'd wanted to go to her at least a hundred times and apologize. Lorna wouldn't talk to her and she didn't push it. Despite all her regrets, she knew she didn't have the right to insist, and to be brutally honest, she didn't push it because it was easier. She quit trying and told herself it was okay because if Lorna wouldn't talk to her, it wasn't her fault she couldn't apologize.

Lorna had always been the tougher of the two of them. Anna knew she'd broken her heart and at the same time knew she'd recover. That was the way it was with Lorna. She could face any fire and come out stronger on the other side. She had the heart of a warrior. Anna did not.

Now, she was desperate enough to face a fire of her own and risk the burn that would surely come. Six months ago, when she'd married Sadie, her world for the first time ever had felt complete. Regardless of the poor decisions she might have made in the past, the act of saying "I do" to Sadie was one hundred percent right. Happily-ever-after was never something she figured would come her way, yet when she wasn't looking that's exactly what had happened.

Until twenty-four hours ago.

The morning had started like most of them, with coffee and small talk at the kitchen table. It was a routine that warmed her heart just by virtue of its simple normalcy. She loved their mornings together and the way they set the tone for the coming day. Anna had headed out to her office, and Sadie went to work as well. Then poof, it was as if Sadie had dropped off the face of the earth. Her iPhone was off, her car was nowhere to be found, and she didn't come home. Anna had waited for hours, watching out the front window for the telltale lights of her car, thinking that perhaps she hadn't called because her phone battery had died.

Finally, Anna gave merit to the rising tide of fear and called the police. They weren't a lot of help. Sadie was an adult. Sadie hadn't been gone even twenty-four hours. Sadie would probably call. On and on it went with not one, but three different officers. By the time she finished talking to the third officer, she'd wanted to scream.

The police might think she'd run off, but they were full of it. Anna knew better. They had their rules and regulations, and they had their theories based on, Anna had to

admit, years of experience. But none of it changed what she felt in her bones: something bad had happened to Sadie.

She'd tried to explain her own theories to them, like the fact that the television series being filmed in Spokane afforded Sadie the opportunity to fully stretch her artistic wings. When she'd dropped out of sight she was scouting locations, and that, she'd told all three officers, was something that thrilled her. No way would she take off and give it up. This television series was the opportunity of a lifetime, and Sadie would never throw that away. She wouldn't want to leave town, because every time she went to work, she almost glowed with happy anticipation for what the new day would bring. When Sadie'd left the house that morning, she'd been really excited about the day.

After officer number three essentially blew her off, Anna felt she'd had no choice but to walk away from the police station. They couldn't, or wouldn't, help her at this point. But Anna wasn't about to let their lack of response deter her. Maybe law enforcement intended to wait, but she didn't. She had to think of some other way to find Sadie.

As she'd stood in the kitchen rolling it all over in her mind, Anna had looked down at the newspaper on the table and seen the article about Lorna and her newly discovered psychic ability. Frankly, she was surprised. In all their time together, Lorna had never admitted to so much as a twitch, let alone shown any sign of being a psychic. Still, the article was pretty flattering, as it described how she'd uncovered the truth about a hundred-year-old murder and helped capture a serial killer right here in river city.

She'd held the paper between her hands and stared at the words for a long time. If Lorna could do anything even close to what they'd written about her, it was worth a try. She'd do anything at this point to find her wife. Anything, and if that meant groveling to Lorna, so be it. Begging was absolutely on the table.

She started when Halle jumped up on the table and bumped against her shoulder. "You know better than to jump on the table." She scolded her cat but without any malice. The warmth of the little creature was a huge comfort to her.

The tortoiseshell cat rubbed up against her arm and purred. She'd never been much of a cat person until she'd met Sadie. Before then, she'd always believed the furry little things to be aloof and without much in the way of personality. She'd considered herself a dog person. They were far friendlier and way smarter. Or so she'd believed. Boy, had she been wrong on all counts. Halle was a character, and that was putting it mildly. She was smart, friendly, and entertaining.

Sadie and Halle came as a package deal. Get one, get both, and she'd been so in love with Sadie, she was willing to give it a try despite her anti-cat mentality. It hadn't taken long for Halle to suck her in. After getting to know her, she couldn't imagine not sharing her home with a cat. It was a win-win. She got the woman and she got the cat.

"We have to find her," she said against Halle's neck. "I hope we have help."

Halle rubbed harder, her purr loud in the quiet kitchen. It was almost as if she were saying, "We'll find her."

Chapter Two

Renee was a little worried despite her vocal show of bravado. She knew exactly how much Lorna had loved Anna and how deeply she'd been hurt at Anna's betrayal. It took a long time to bring her back from the despair that had turned her world gray, and the woman who'd emerged from that fog had captured her heart completely. In fact, she had realized not so long ago that she'd never loved anyone more.

Her road to this once-in-a-lifetime love had been long and bumpy and totally unexpected. She'd been the good girl, the one who did what was expected of her, like get married to a nice man everyone in her family loved. The last thing she'd ever wanted to do was disappoint the people who mattered to her. Her mother. Aunt Bea. They were so pleased the day she walked down the aisle.

Unfortunately, the marriage was a sham, and she'd realized it quite soon after she'd said "I do." Or if she was being really honest, before those two words had ever passed her lips. On her wedding day she'd stood in that dressing room staring at herself in the full-length mirror and didn't see a happy bride staring back at her. What she'd seen was a woman trapped and one too cowardly to set herself free. She'd stayed in the marriage because she'd believed it was the right thing to do. So what if she felt empty? So what if she felt like running away? She'd made a commitment and intended to see it through.

In the end, she had come to understand it was all an ugly lie that she couldn't continue to carry forward. She'd been incredibly unfair to her now ex-husband, Bryan, and unfair to herself. Both of them had deserved to be happy, and neither of them was.

She'd left Bryan, and despite the hurt she'd caused him, she'd believed with all her heart it was the right thing to do.

Even now, she could recall how angry he'd been with her, and he'd been justified in his feelings. Particularly considering that, at the time, she still hadn't crossed over to embrace her own truth. That came later, when she was finally able to admit it to herself. Denial was so comforting, but truth had a way of making itself known despite all obstacles.

Peace, at least for her, came the day she'd stepped out of the proverbial closet and accepted what she'd dimly known all along. She didn't abandon her marriage because she didn't love Bryan. In her own way she loved him very much and always would. But she didn't want to be his lover; she wanted to be his best friend. Her ideal lover didn't sport the shadow of a beard or pee standing up. No, her heart had longed for another, who was soft and rounded, full breasted, and all woman.

As she'd evolved into the woman she'd always wanted to be, Bryan's bitterness toward her had grown. Once again she couldn't blame him. It was tough enough going through a divorce under normal circumstances, but finding out your wife had left you because she wanted to love another woman, well, that could be a hard pill to swallow. He was a good guy, but even good guys had their limits.

Today things were still a bit strained between her and Bryan, and though she hated it, she understood. Perhaps someday he would be able to forgive her enough to be friends once again, and she hoped that day would come. She still loved him and prayed he would find it in his heart to love her again too.

If Lorna felt that same reluctance to be around Anna that Bryan did toward Renee, she really didn't have the right to push it. Except this situation was different, and despite her own reservations, deep in her heart she felt they needed to help. It was unfortunate that the aid needed to come primarily from Lorna. Just the same, it was unavoidable. The universe in its infinite wisdom had seen fit to bestow the gift of sight upon Lorna, and all Renee, Jeremy, and Merry could do was be there to support her.

Gazing at Lorna now, her heart constricted. Being there for Anna was the right thing to do, yet she hated the thought of having Lorna in the same room with Anna. Renee had seen pictures of the woman, and she was beautiful. In fact, not only was she beautiful, but she was incredibly accomplished as well.

In comparison, what did Renee really have to offer? Her home and livelihood had gone up in flames. She was essentially jobless and homeless. Well, she did have a million-dollar offer for her property on the table, and that was something, except it

was just money, and that wasn't likely to be the thing that would attract Lorna. She wasn't that shallow.

Asking her to be with Anna again was like throwing a match on gas-soaked logs. Who knew what kind of sparks still existed between the two women, ones that could potentially ignite? Their breakup had been ugly, but that didn't mean a reunion might not be tender or stir the sort of feelings that had brought them together in the first place. She could lose the life she was living now, the plans she'd made with Jeremy and Merry to rebuild her company after losing it all to a fire, and the dreams she had for a future with Lorna. By pushing this, she was putting everything important to her at risk.

She shifted her gaze to her mother, Jolene, who gave her a slight nod. Sometimes she had the feeling her mother could actually read her mind. It had been that way since she was a kid and hadn't changed in the years since. Mom knew the truth, just as she did, and she sensed the risks, just as she did. Turning away from this situation would be wrong. Her mom gave her another tiny nod, and Renee managed not to sigh. Sometimes a person just had to walk into the fire and hope to hell she walked out alive on the other side.

Her eyes went to the handset Lorna held. "Call her," she said. "And when you're done, we'll talk about the fiancée thing."

Silently she prayed she was making the right decision and wasn't about to lose everything she held precious.

v

Jeremy would be lying if he said he was one hundred percent okay with this recent turn of events. Yeah, he totally believed Lorna needed to take the trip back across the mountains. Whatever this psychic thing was that his sister had developed, she rocked it, and it seemed like it had some greater-good element they couldn't, or more accurately, shouldn't ignore. Karma could be a nasty bitch if blown off.

So far, she'd solved a hundred-year-old mystery here at the house, and then she'd helped find a murdered friend back in Spokane and in the process stopped a serial killer who didn't appear to be in the mood to stop killing. Without Lorna's psychic gift, who knew if anyone would ever have recovered the body of Catherine Swan or

stopped the killer in Spokane. Now, from what Renee told them, Anna's wife was missing and could be hurt or in danger. Anna's situation wasn't that very different from the other two.

Except it was different, at least in one very important way. Anna had hurt Lorna, and he'd been there during the aftermath. At one time he'd wondered if he'd ever get his sister back, and he blamed Anna for that. Yes, he got that every story had two sides, and honestly, he wasn't sorry they weren't together any longer. In his opinion, Anna wasn't the one for Lorna and never had been. That said, the way Anna had ended it was inexcusable, and a part of him would always hold that against her.

Despite everything, he didn't hold on to animosity. He could forgive even if he never quite forgot. He could be friendly with Anna even if he would never fully trust her. Did he wish her harm? No. Did he wish harm to the woman she married? Absolutely not. And, in reality, good people did not turn away from this kind of plea for help. He wanted to believe they were good people.

So he would urge Lorna to help and flex her super-power muscles and use them to get Sadie back home. He would urge Lorna to trek the high road, and he would be there beside her every step of the way. He didn't intend to take a bitch-slap from karma anytime in the near future.

Besides, in not too many months he was going to be a father, and that changed the rules of the game in a big way. He wanted to be the kind of parent a child looked up to. That meant doing the right thing, like helping out his sister's ex-girlfriend even when he wanted to tell her to fuck off. Oh, yeah, and he was going to have to clean up his mouth too.

“What are you thinking about, handsome?”

Merry came up beside him where he stood on the patio overlooking the expanse of ocean shoreline and put her arms around him. He loved the way she felt, her warm and swelling belly pressed against him. She was more beautiful than ever, and that was saying a lot considering she had been, in his opinion, stunning from day one. It was true what they said about expectant mothers. They glowed.

“I'm just thinking about this thing with Anna.”

Merry kissed his cheek and then laid her head on his shoulder. “You were right, what you said in there. Lorna has to help. We all do. My new-mother intuition seems to be kicking in, and it's telling me it's important we all do this together.”

“It’s going to be painful for her.”

“Probably.”

“We have to be there for her.”

“Without question.”

“I have to marry you soon.”

“Absolutely.”

He wrapped her in his arms, and this time he laid his head against the top of hers. “I love you.”

Chapter Three

Clancy jumped up on the bed and grabbed a single sneaker out of her suitcase. Looking at her as if to say “ha ha,” he jumped off the bed and carried it out of the room. Lorna laughed, knowing she’d find the sneaker, intact though slobbered up, near the windows in the living room. It was a game Clancy played with her daily. Usually he grabbed a shoe from the closet, but today he seemed to be making a statement by unpacking the shoe she’d tucked in the suitcase.

“I don’t think Clancy believes I should make this trip,” Lorna said to Renee, who was, like her, packing a small suitcase. “It would probably be a good idea to listen to him. Dogs have a good sense of right and wrong.”

Renee cocked an eyebrow and shook her head. “Clancy’s a smart dog, and he’d urge you to do the right thing. He’s just showboating by taking a shoe out of your suitcase. Nice try, though.”

Lorna smiled because even though she didn’t like it, Renee was right. Clancy was playing, and Lorna enjoyed the game as much as he did. Turning, she stared out the master-bedroom windows. Outside, twilight was settling in and darkness was following close behind. It had taken her hours to make peace with this trip. She should

have left shortly after taking Anna's call, but she couldn't get herself moving, and everyone had wisely let her work through her slow start in her own time.

"Why don't I feel anything?" she asked Renee. Honestly she wasn't sure if she meant she didn't feel anything toward Anna or that she didn't feel any psychic pull at all.

Renee walked up to stand beside her at the window. "I don't know," she said after a moment. "Maybe there's more to this than what you experienced with Catherine Swan and Alida Canwell. Who knows, considering there's no user's guide for what you can do. Or maybe we just need to be closer to Spokane for you to start picking up vibes."

Those two names Renee said so casually sent chills through her whole body. Catherine Swan was the murdered Makah woman Lorna had been led to by the ghost of her love, Tiana McCafferty. Alida Canwell was her childhood friend who fell victim to a vindictive serial killer. She had found them both and brought them home. As heart-wrenching as it had been to find the bodies of the murdered women, it had also been satisfying to know they were no longer lost and alone. Since she was stuck with this thing, whatever it was, it was comforting to know she could bring the lost home.

Which led right straight back to the original question: could she really turn her back on Anna's plea for help in finding Sadie just because her heart had been bruised? If she could, what did that say about her? Nothing good, that was for certain. No matter what direction she came at the question, she had to go, and she knew it. The knowledge didn't make this trip any easier. Having Renee at her side was the only thing that did.

Slowly she turned and looked at Renee. "So, tell me again about my fiancée."

A look somewhere between sheepish and delighted crossed Renee's face. "Well, it seemed like the right thing to say at the time."

"Really? That's what popped into your mind when you were talking to my ex?" The thought sent warmth flowing through her. Though they'd never talked about marriage, the idea was not unpleasant or unwelcome.

Renee's smile lit up her eyes. "Well, how was I going to get Anna's attention if I didn't give her something to think about? After all, she ran right into the arms of another woman, and I didn't want her thinking you were just sitting around moping, now did I?"

Lorna couldn't help but return her smile. "I kinda *was* sitting around moping, if you remember, and it wasn't pretty."

Renee put her hand against Lorna's cheek. "You know that and I know that, but she doesn't need to. This is what's called having your back."

"God, I love you."

"Right back atcha."

Lorna put her hand over Renee's where it still rested against her cheek. "So let's talk about this fiancée thing..."

Renee's smile grew, but before she could say a thing, Jeremy came winging into the room. "Come on, you two. Quit with the lovey-dovey stuff and get your butts moving. We've got pavement to burn. I hate driving the pass in the dark, and it's going to be dark really soon."

Renee grabbed her suitcase, gave Lorna a peck on the cheek, and zipped out of the room. Apparently, they'd be talking about it later. Lorna grabbed her own suitcase and headed toward the front door. Later was fine, but they would talk about it.

v

Anna tried Sadie's cell phone again and, just like every other time she'd called, had no luck. Over the last few hours she'd called everyone she worked with. Nobody had seen her since bright and early yesterday morning, but according to her coworkers, that wasn't unusual during this phase of the project. When Sadie was scouting, it could be several days before she checked in. She'd been known to cover hundreds of miles gathering pictures and making sketches of places she thought would work for a given movie or, as in this case, a weekly television series. No one in her office had given it a second thought that she hadn't called in yet.

Apparently the only one who knew something was wrong was Anna. The police didn't believe her. Sadie's coworkers didn't find it odd. She felt it deep in her stomach, and the sensation made her ill. Was this her penance for taking the coward's way out when it came to ending her relationship with Lorna? Maybe she had it coming, but to take it out on Sadie wasn't right.

From her point of view, they couldn't waste any time before trying everything possible to locate Sadie. Obviously from her fruitless efforts so far, she couldn't do it alone. Until the call she'd made to Lorna, nobody wanted to extend help of any kind, except Lorna. Anna wasn't entirely convinced she had bought into the idea that Sadie was in trouble either, but unlike the others, she was willing to help. It said a lot about the woman she'd turned her back on.

It also said a lot about her that she would walk away from someone like Lorna. Not in a good way, either.

Getting caught up in her own character flaws was a waste of precious time. It was water under the bridge. She couldn't change any of it now, and even if she could, Anna didn't believe she would. The realization that she and Lorna weren't the forever kind of couple hadn't dawned on her in a flash of understanding but rather in a gradually growing understanding that she had to be free.

At the time, she'd realized they were on different sheets of music. Clearly she could have found better ways to handle breaking away, but she chose a path that was selfish and self-serving. It was easier, but then again the coward's way usually was.

She frankly didn't deserve the help that was on its way. Lorna could, and probably should, have told her to go to hell. That she didn't made Anna want to start crying all over again. Once Sadie was safely back home, she would find a way to make amends.

Now, staring out the window into the darkness punctuated by the stream of golden glow of the streetlight, she waited for headlights to pull into the driveway. Each and every approaching vehicle made her jump. Each time another car passed by, her heart sank.

Again and again her thoughts turned to Sadie. She could see her as she was the morning she left, cheerful and full of life. She was always that way, and it was one of the things that had drawn her to Sadie. She needed that spark of positive energy in her life, and it made every day a little better because of it. The fact that Sadie was also beautiful and sexy and smart as hell didn't hurt either. For Anna, she was the total package, that once-in-a-lifetime chance that she'd grabbed with both hands. She wasn't going to let go now either.

After hours of watching the comings and goings of traffic out her front window, hoping each and every car held Lorna, her vigil paid off. The lights of a vehicle glowed in the distance, growing ever larger and brighter as they came slowly down the street. They were extinguished when the SUV turned and then came to a stop in

her driveway. Her breath caught in her throat, and her heart felt as though a band had tightened around it. Help was finally here.

She forced herself to move from the window and out the front door. The doors of the SUV opened and four people emerged. Three of them she recognized: Lorna, Jeremy, and Merry. The fourth woman she'd never seen before. The fiancée? She had to believe it was the woman she'd spoken with on the phone, and a flutter of something she didn't want to name hit her heart. She ignored it and charged out the door.

Without giving herself a chance to change her mind, she hurried to the driveway and threw her arms around Lorna. Tears streaked her face, and in the back of her mind she thought she looked tired, drawn, and well, just plain awful, and maybe that wasn't so bad. At least Lorna wouldn't have any questions as to how worried she was. "Thank you," she cried as she hugged the woman she'd once lied to when she'd told her she would love her forever. "Thank you."

v

The streak that came flying across the sidewalk to envelop Lorna in a hug was tall and beautiful. Slender in blue jeans and a white shirt, she was barefoot and devoid of makeup. Though she looked exhausted and stressed, she was lovely in a way Renee would never be. She hated her instantly and had to stifle the urge to scream, "Get away from my woman!"

As it turned out, Lorna gave her a brief, tight hug, then stepped out of the embrace. Her movements were calm and cool, and something about that quality put Renee at ease. Lorna casually slung an arm around the woman's shoulders and turned her to face the three of them. "Renee, this is Anna."

Her face was tear-stained and distraught, her poise and grace were alluring, and Renee wanted to load everyone back into the SUV and race straight back to the coast. All along, she'd convinced herself she was giving wise counsel to Lorna. Now that they were here, she realized how wrong she'd been. Anna was everything Renee was not. Tall, willowy, lovely, and from the looks of the house, wealthy. Of course, Renee had to remind herself she wasn't exactly destitute after the sale of her downtown Seattle building, so at least on that score she could stand neck and neck with the amazing Anna.

On every other score, she was sorely lacking, which made her heart hurt, and she desperately wanted to run and hide. Lorna hadn't wanted to come here and she'd been the one to push her. Now her own stupid ideals were going to be the very thing to take away the first real happiness she'd known. She was going to lose Lorna, and it was her own stupid fault.

It was more than just the way Anna looked. Her aura flowed around her like a rainbow cape of colors. In it, Renee glimpsed the soul of the woman Lorna had loved with all her heart. In it she detected not evil or hatred, but the mind, body, and spirit of a basically good woman. True, she'd done Lorna wrong. At her core, however, she wasn't a bad person, and that made Renee hate her all the more. She'd wanted to find her ugly and mean.

"Anna," she managed to say in a deceptively calm voice. It was amazing what she could dredge up when she had to. She solemnly shook the other woman's hand. "It's nice to meet you," she lied. "I'm so sorry it has to be under these circumstances."

"Thank you for coming. You have no idea how much this means to me. All of you." Her gaze took in all four of them. Though Anna sounded sincere, Renee wouldn't quickly forget how she'd just fallen into Lorna's arms like lovers reunited after a long absence. No, definitely not going to forget that.

Jeremy came from around the SUV and gave Anna a quick hug. "I'm so sorry," he said. "Let's figure out how we can help you bring Sadie home. You remember Merry?"

Anna nodded and held out a hand. "Merry, you look wonderful."

Merry took both of Anna's hands in hers. "I wish we were here for just a plain old visit, Anna. I'd tell you all about the baby. Once we find her and bring her home, that's what we'll do. I promise."

"A baby," Anna whispered softly as her gaze swept over Merry.

Merry nodded. "Yes, Jeremy and I will be parents in a few months, but we'll have time enough to talk about that once we get your wife home."

"Thank you." Anna's eyes brimmed. "I'd like that."

Renee wished she could feel the friendliness that came so easy to Merry. It helped under these difficult circumstances, but it was hard not to be tense around the woman

who had hurt Lorna so deeply. It was hard not to feel inadequate when face-to-face with such beauty. Sometimes life could be such a bitch.

“Come inside, please,” Anna said to all of them.

Though Lorna kept her arm around Anna’s shoulders as they headed toward the house, she turned her head and looked at Renee. That little bit of eye contact told her a lot and made her feel better. A little better, anyway. She still wanted to run back home, dragging Lorna with her.

v

The Watcher was confused. Standing at the edge of the ocean, the waves hitting his feet, he was disturbed and, for the first time ever, frightened. Something was in the air, but he did not know what it was. It was different and so far away he could not clearly make it out. It was like an ominous shadow that continually shifted in the wind.

She was gone from the big house, called across the mountains once more, and his heart knew she would again put something right. It was not evil that stalked her. Not like before. Nor did he sense the darkness and the pain that had come to her on the other occasions seeking to be brought into the light.

No, this was something far different, and he did not know how to help because he did not know where to start. Something beckoned from the world beyond, and it stayed just outside his touch and sight. Frustration made his hands shake. How could he guide her if he did not know the path?

In his ears, the sound of sobs echoed. Despair pulled at his heart at the mournful echo, and resignation weighed down his spirit. Somewhere beyond his vision, beyond his help, souls beckoned. Where? Why?

Lightning slashed across the sky and thunder roared. He tilted his head to the night sky and watched as the light show danced and crackled. Above the stars the answers awaited, if only he could reach through the veil and touch them. He raised his arm and stretched his fingers toward the night sky. He touched nothing.

Would she be lost forever if he failed to help her now? He worried it would be so. He wanted to guide her hand and, by guiding her, walk his own path toward redemption. They were part and parcel of each other; of that truth he was most certain. Through this last year he had come to understand they must take this journey together, and by doing so they would come to discover a truth that would open up heaven to both of them. Yet he could see nothing, hear nothing, and the way was blind to him. She was in this alone.

For tonight, all he could do was pray.