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VOICES CARRY



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For our much-loved cousin,
Bonnie Bricker Almquist,
who took me to a place where
this story *could* have happened.

VOICES CARRY

The nightmare always began the same way.

Outside, the monotonous drone of cicadas would drift through the sultry midnight air. There would be faint light from the single bare yellow bulb that hung outside, over the front door, and cast a small pale spot of illumination within. Cheap handmade curtains, pulled back tightly to one side to permit the maximum amount of still air, hung on windows screened against mosquitoes and all those other things that flew about at night.

She lay upon her cot, her light brown hair tousled around her child's face, curled in sleep that had been long coming. She'd been willful that day, sneaking off during morning meditation to pick flowers to take to her older sister who'd been confined in the camp's infirmary with another of the recurring headaches that had plagued her that summer. One of the counselors had reported the girl's transgression to Brother Michael, and he'd chastised her—though not by name—before the entire camp at the end of evening prayers, rambling on and on about how some little camper's spirit needed purification. She'd been standing near the back of the group that gathered in the prayer circle, and hadn't been able to see him—she'd gone just about all summer without seeing his face—but she knew he'd been talking about her. Just about everyone knew that she'd been the one who'd made a forbidden raid on the flower garden that afternoon.

She'd been surprised at having been let off with nothing more than a public berating. It had been well worth a few moments embarrassment to see her sister smile at the offer of a few daisies and the handful of pretty stones, stones that could be rubbed for luck and hidden under the pillow while she waited for her headache to wane.

Only the sympathetic glances from some of the older girls as she'd passed them on her way to her cabin had disturbed her. She'd lain awake that night for a long time after lights out, trying to decipher what exactly it was that she'd read in their faces. After several hours of trying to define what she did not understand, she'd finally fallen into a sleep so deep that she hadn't heard the cabin door open.

Hadn't felt the thin blanket being drawn down, nor the hands that had, with practiced deliberation, lifted her from her bed and carried her with measured steps out of the cabin and into the night.

It wasn't until he stumbled on the path, jolting her, that she'd awakened, disoriented and confused. "What. . . ?" she muttered.

"Hush," he'd whispered gruffly.

"But where are you. . ." She attempted to twist away from him, but his arms only tightened around her.

"Hush, I said."

"But I don't want. . ."

Damp grass tickled her bare feet as she was lowered to the ground in one quick motion. One strong arm tightened around her neck, the hand clasped over her mouth.

He dragged her along, the light of the moon dimly illuminating the path into the dense woods before them and playing off the gauzy white robe that hid all but his hands.

She struggled, fear surging through her thin limbs with every step that he forced her to take.

"I've been watching you, Genevieve. You are headstrong and disobedient and in need of purification," he said in a low voice, not quite a whisper, now that they were on the path leading down through the woods toward the playing fields below, far away from the cabins. "It is my duty to consecrate your body and drive away the impiety that infects your spirit."

"Let me go." She kicked blindly backward, catching his right knee with the sole of her foot.

He grunted as her small foot hit its mark, then punished her with a blow to the back of her head.

with his fist.

~~“I can see that you will require more than the usual hallowing.” He spoke softly, calmly, directly into her right ear.~~

“Help! Hel—”

The hand clasped over her mouth again, and he dragged her farther into the woods, her heart racing frantically as she struggled against his strong arms.

Everyone knew that something bad lived deep in the forest, back beyond the pines. It was whispered among the younger girls that the woods were haunted, and sometimes late at night, she had thought she'd heard hushed cries carried on the sultry night wind. She, like the others, had sworn never to go past the dense wall of pines that bordered the end of the soccer field. She squeezed her eyes tightly closed. If one of the dreaded specters lurked about, she was pretty sure she didn't want to see it.

Finally, they reached a clearing where white candles set upon the ground glowed in the shape of a crescent arc and where, with one swift movement of a foot, he took her legs out from under her and dropped her, flat on her back, onto the ground.

Falling on top of her, he closed his eyes—those dark eyes that burned with an unnatural fire from within the frame of the hooded garment—and began to pray, even as he ripped her nightgown from the neckline to the hem.

The last thing he'd expected was a well-aimed foot, powered as much by fury as by fear, to land squarely in his scrotum.

Howling with pain, he fell back and to one side, just long enough for her to scramble onto his knees, onto her feet, and to disappear into the night.

Clutching the halves of the torn nightgown, she ran along the dark path, swallowing back her cries as jagged stones and thorns, burrs and sticks, tormented the soles of her feet. But she never stopped running, and she never looked back. She simply ran and ran and ran, through the deepest part of the woods, her heart beating like the wings of a tiny bird within her chest, her breath coming in anxious puffs from her tired, tortured lungs in spite of her best efforts to make no sound, lest he hear and find her. Beneath her feet, unseen things crackled, and overhead, something called to the night. And still she ran, with no thought but to escape from Brother Michael while at the same time avoiding whatever other demons inhabited the dark places.

At the edge of the woods, just a stone's throw from the shoulder of the road, she paused. Crouching behind a large oak and straining her ears to listen, she gathered her tattered nightgown around her so that it would not flutter in the slight breeze that had picked up. As the pounding in her chest and in her head began to subside, she realized that no footsteps followed behind her on the path. Was it possible that he'd given up trying to find her? Afraid to believe that he or something else equally evil was just beyond the last bend in the path, she did her best to blend into the shadows, alternately watching the road and watching the path.

Headlights from an approaching car lit up the night suddenly, then just as suddenly disappeared.

Somewhere nearby, she knew, was a lake. And around the lake, there were cottages. That would surely be her best bet to find a safe place to hide. But which way was the lake?

She leaned back against the tree, trying to get her bearings, trying to remember what Mrs. Allen, her teacher, had told the class to do when you are lost. This was the same Mrs. Allen who had taught them that when someone tried to touch you in places where you knew they shouldn't, that you needed to get away by any means possible and get help. Mrs. Allen's advice had already come in handy once that night.

When you're lost, retrace your steps.

Well, she couldn't very well do *that*. Not with Brother Michael—and who knows what else—back

there someplace.

~~She concentrated really hard, forcing herself to think, trying to take that journey again in her mind.~~

Brother Michael had taken her down past the tennis courts. Across the soccer field. She remembered seeing the goalposts in the moonlight. Then down a path slightly to the right, far into the woods, to the clearing where the candles had flickered and glowed. From there, it seemed she'd run downhill a lot.

She remembered that once she had stood on the top bleacher at the soccer field, and she had seen the lake straight ahead. There was a narrow stretch of beach there, but nothing else, a cyclone fence closing it off to the rest of the world. Somewhere off to the right, however, beyond the fences, there had been small houses. And, she reasoned, since she'd run to the right through the woods, the lake and its cabins should be just ahead, on the other side of the road.

She rose quietly, cautiously, then as quickly as she could, ran from the shelter of the trees to cross the road. Slipping furtively as a wraith into the small grove of wild roses, she waited, still listening for the sounds of a pursuit that did not come. When she was convinced, finally, that she had not been followed, she picked her way through the thorny bushes, and keeping to the shadows, walked toward the lake and the small community of summer cottages she knew awaited just around that curve in the narrow road.

All she wanted was a place to hide, a place to rest for a few hours. What she would do after the sunrise the next day. . . well, she'd have to figure that out in the morning.

Exhausted, she leaned against the mailbox at the end of the short driveway of the first house. The dog barking from the screened porch frightened her, and she skittered away in the dark, on feet too painful to think about, to the next house.

A dim light over the front steps cast just enough of a glow that she could find her way to the back of the small cottage, which had a deck overlooking a long expanse of grass that led down to the lake. Hugging the shadows, she crept up the three wooden steps and settled into the farthest corner, her back to the wall, her knees drawn up to her chest. She was cold all of a sudden, despite the night's heat and humidity, and she began to shiver. Pulling the torn nightgown tightly around her small form, she tried to keep sleep at bay by singing, in the tiniest of whispers.

"Jesus loves me, this I know. . ."

Over and over, until finally, even this comforting assurance could no longer keep her awake. She was barely nine years old.

Genna Snow awoke in a sweat, shaking and disoriented, her fingers twisted tautly in the sheets. She slammed herself upright, her back against the wooden headboard, and drew the soft, lightweight blanket up to her neck. And there she sat, shivering with the deep chill that invaded her entire body, her heart racing, while she tried to will her erratic breathing under control.

Eventually, her heart slowed to its regular beat, the sweating stopped, and her hands loosened their grip on the blanket. She stretched her legs out in front of her, the muscles aching from having been clenched so tightly in the same position for. . . how long?

From the next street, church bells chimed one, the only sound in her oh-so-quiet apartment.

One o'clock in the morning. The dream had come just past midnight.

No great mystery there, she thought as she swung her legs over the side of the bed where she sat for another moment or two, taking deep breaths. The dream had always come around the same time, though it had been so long since she'd had it that she had almost convinced herself that her demon might be gone forever. Disconcerted to discover she'd been wrong, Genna lowered her feet to the soft carpeting and trudged into the bathroom where she snapped on the light and without confronting her image in the mirror, turned on the faucet and splashed water on her face, over and over again, as if

wash away any last remnants of the dream. It wasn't until she lifted her head to dry herself with a so blue towel that she caught her reflection.

Damp hair the color of rich, dense honey, more brown than gold and mussed from sleep, curled around a face that watched the world from a wary vantage. Pallid skin, devoid of its usual natural blush, set off by dark hazel eyes that were wide-set and haunted.

"Hardly the face of a self-assured FBI agent," Genna muttered, dispassionately assessing the woman before her.

Turning off the bathroom light, she returned to her bed, where she straightened the summer weight blanket before getting beneath it. Punching the pillow to slightly elevate her head, she stared at the ceiling, trying to figure out why the dream had come back now. She'd done her best to keep certain old memories where she believed they belonged—in the past—and wasn't pleased that through the dream, they had surfaced to disturb her now, when she had more than enough on her mind.

That must be it, she assured herself as she turned over in the dark. *It must be just that there's so much going on at work right now—so many cases to deal with.* And that situation being compounded by the fact that Steven Decker, the Special Agent in Charge, or SAC, of the field office to which she'd been reassigned earlier in the year, had called her late in the previous afternoon to tell her that she needed to be in his office at ten the next morning. It wouldn't have done any good to have asked what Decker liked his little moments of suspense, liked to keep his people guessing. It was just one of the little games he liked to play with the agents under his command.

Maybe he's come up with a new report form he wants us to start using, she almost smiled, relaxing—finally—for the first time in hours. Decker loved his forms. . .

Genna reached one arm out from under the covers and smacked the alarm clock into submission when it taunted her at six the next morning. She smacked it again at six fifteen, then once more at six thirty. At six forty-five, she rose reluctantly and headed for the shower, annoyed with herself for having overslept.

Her disposition hadn't improved much by the time she arrived at her office just before eight A.M. and clicked on the harsh overhead light. Stepping over the piles of files that littered her floor, she dropped her briefcase onto her chair, turned on her computer, and sought coffee. Next she checked her e-mail and found responses from two law enforcement agencies in upstate New York that she'd queried about the arrests of alleged child pornographers suspected of being part of a larger network along the eastern seaboard. As a member of the Violent Crimes and Major Offenders Program, Genna's assignments were mainly kidnapping cases or cases involving the sexual exploitation of children.

The case she was working on at that moment was giving her major headaches. One step forward and three steps back. She shook her head, wondering when she'd get the break she needed. So far she'd received nothing but shadows where she needed substance. She printed out the information—sketchy though it was—before forwarding the notes via e-mail to several other agents in her office, then read the hard copy again as she sipped at her coffee and wondered if the respective police departments would be able to keep the suspects under lock and key until someone from her unit—preferably her—was able to get there and have a chat with all involved parties.

Three follow-up phone calls to the sending agencies later, she had memos of her own to share internally before refilling her coffee cup and rising to straighten her gray linen skirt and head for Decker's office, five minutes early, as was her style. She'd been taught that punctuality was a virtue and that early was infinitely better than late.

Sharon, Decker's secretary, was on the phone when Genna reached the end of the hallway that dead-ended where the SAC's office began.

"He said you'd be early and that you should just go on in," Sharon covered the mouthpiece with one

hand and waved Genna onward.

Genna knocked lightly on the half-opened door, then stepped in without waiting to be acknowledged.

“Good morning, Genna.” Steven Decker stood at the windows, looking out, greeting her without turning around.

“Morning, sir.” Genna took a seat in the chair at the right corner of her superior’s walnut desk and slid an unused coaster over to place under her coffee mug, waiting for him to begin with his usual line. *I guess you wondered why I called you in this morning. . .*

“I guess you wondered why I called you in this morning,” he said, turning now and walking toward her across a well-worn carpet.

Genna suppressed a smile and nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Do I recall correctly that you spent considerable time out in the western part of Pennsylvania while you were growing up? Near Erie, was it?”

“Yes.” Genna’s smile began to fade, and she wondered where this would lead.

“And your foster mother still lives in that area?”

“Patsy lives outside of Pittsburgh, though she does still own a summer cottage on Bricker’s Lake, maybe twenty miles southeast of Erie.”

“Would you say you know the area well, Agent Snow?”

Whenever Decker switched from first name to title, something official was in the air. Genna’s head sank. The last thing she wanted now was to be taken off her current case.

“Yes. I know the area well.”

“Growing Amish population in the area, I understand.”

“The Amish have been in that area for decades. Certainly for as long as I can remember.”

Decker walked around from behind his desk and sat on the left corner, opposite from where Genna sat. It was the most casual gesture she’d ever seen him make, and a sign that he was getting to the point.

“Have much contact with them—the Amish—when you were growing up?” He asked.

“Very little. Most of the Amish kept to themselves. I did get to know a few kids very slightly when I was thirteen or fourteen. Patsy knew their grandmother. She bought eggs and produce from Mr. Frick—Granny Frick, they call her—every week. Still does. I usually went with her, but I always felt pretty awkward there, you know. I was the odd one, the outsider.”

Genna leaned against the hard chair back and watched Decker pace a few steps in either direction. His hands shoved into the pockets of his trimly fit jacket, his face showing no small amount of concern. Finally his lanky frame found its way around the desk and lowered itself into his chair.

“We have a situation there. . .” he began, causing Genna to lean forward and ask, “At Bricker’s Lake?”

“Close enough. Wick’s Grove. You know the town, of course.”

“Of course. It’s the only town for several miles from the lake. I always think of it as the town that never changes. It still has the same grocery store, the same gas station with the same little newsstand run by the same families as when I was a kid.” Genna smiled. “Wick’s Grove is the only place I’ve ever been where there’s no dry cleaner, no pizza place, and no place to rent a video.”

“The Amish influence, I take it?”

“They own the greater part of the land in the area by far, have, for generations.” Genna nodded. “Wick’s Grove is little more than a crossroads on the way from Erie. It’s one of those places that time hasn’t seemed to touch.”

“Well, time’s catching up to it, I’m afraid.”

“What do you mean?”

“It appears that three young Amish men—cousins, we think—are suspected of being involved in laundering some of the money that’s coming in from Canada.”

“WHAT?” Genna almost fell forward from her chair. “That’s too preposterous. . .”

“Preposterous, maybe, but the information we’re getting indicates that there’s a connection with the Amish community and a local bikers’ club that calls itself JYD. Junk Yard Dogs.”

Decker tossed an envelope across the desk to a mute and stunned Genna, who caught it with both hands and opened it. A stack of black-and-white photos slid out. Decker watched her face as she thumbed through the pictures, occasionally raising an eyebrow in surprise.

“Who exactly are these bikers?” She waved several of the photos.

“A few Canadians, a few Americans. All ex cons—mostly drugs, weapons offenses, assault. Nothing surprising there. And the fact that they’re involved in drug trafficking isn’t anything new. What is new is the fact that they’ve managed to tangle a few of these Amish kids in their net.”

Genna shook her head. “It defies belief. You’re talking about people who don’t have electricity or modern farm equipment. To visit one of their farms is like going back in time a hundred years or so.”

“That’s pretty much what I’d like you to do. I’d like you to visit a farm. This farm.” He picked up a second, larger envelope, and held up a photograph. “I believe you’ve been there before.”

Genna turned sharply in her seat, swiveling around to look up at her boss.

“The Frick farm?” Her eyes widened with disbelief. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m afraid I am.”

“But. . . the Fricks. . . they’re the backbone of the Amish community out there. My foster mother has known Granny Frick for, oh, Lord, since Patsy was a child. . .” Genna’s voice trailed off.

“That’s why I’d like to send you out there for a few days to check into it.”

“But, sir,” she tucked a loose strand of hair behind one ear and tried to figure out how to remind her boss that she was not a member of ODCP—Organized Crime/Drug Program—“right now I’m working on the child pornography. . .”

He held up a hand to stop her in midsentence. “We have reason to believe it’s all run by the same organization.”

“But the Amish have never been involved in such things. They rarely associate with the English, even on a legitimate basis. I simply can’t conceive of anyone coming from that background—particularly a member of the Frick family—being involved in such things.”

“Every chain has its weak link, Genna, even the Amish community.” Decker sat back down on the edge of the desk and said, “I doubt greatly that the three young men we’ve been watching have any idea of just what they’re involved with. I suspect that one of them got suckered in by the organization and drew in the other two.”

“With what?”

“Drugs. Crack.”

“You think these kids are selling?”

He shook his head. “Using.”

Genna sat silent, digesting this, before asking skeptically, “You know this for a fact?”

“It’s the most likely scenario.”

Genna laughed out loud, shaking her head. “It’s the most unlikely scenario. I’m sorry, but I just can’t imagine it.”

“The photos speak for themselves.”

She picked up the photographs and went through them again. “With all due respect, sir, these photos of a couple of bikers making purchases from a roadside produce stand aren’t very conclusive.”

“Three times a week, same days, same times, same guys on the same bikes. Notice the large leather bags on the backs of each of the bikes.”

“Which they appear to be packing with tomatoes and peppers.” She tossed the photo onto the desk. “Maybe they’re making salsa.”

“Maybe they’re making change. We think they’re dropping off cash and the boys are moving it for them and getting paid in drugs. We thought maybe we’d send you out there for a few weeks just to nose around and maybe see what you could do to help out the state police.”

“Did they ask for our help?”

“I got a call a few days ago from Lt. Mallon, who’s been in charge of the ongoing operation. They know that there’s something going on but at the moment, they have no probable cause for a warrant. The locals just can’t get close enough to see what’s going on back there.”

“The Frick place is huge, and set back from the road by at least a quarter of a mile. The biggest farm in the area, by far. There are at least four, maybe five, generations of the same family living there. They’ve built onto the original house over the years, and the last time I was there, they were building a new place for one of the sons—one of Granny Frick’s great-grandsons, that is—who’d just gotten married. Their land covers a lot of acreage.”

“You think you can get back there without raising any suspicion?”

“I can probably get back to the farmhouse,” Genna nodded, “but I can’t very well start poking through their barns. What would I be looking for, anyway?”

“I don’t know,” he answered honestly. “But being the good investigator that you are, and having known these people over the years, I guess I’m just hoping that if there’s something obviously amiss that you’ll pick up on it and at least help the locals obtain their warrant.”

Genna tapped her fingers on the desk, trying to decide just how much a waste of her time this venture would be.

“How long has it been since you’ve had a vacation?” Decker asked.

“A while,” she conceded. Since the trip she’d taken to Mexico two years earlier with the man she’d been in love with at the time. Genna snapped off the memory before she had time to think about how wonderful those ten days had been.

“And your mother—that is, your foster mother—still spends her summers up there at the lake?”

“Patsy’s been summering on Bricker’s Lake for more than half a century. She always says she’d die on that lake, and she wants her ashes flung from the back of a powerboat so that she never has to leave.”

“I imagine she’d be happy to have you there with her for a week or so.”

“She’d be ecstatic,” Genna admitted with a nod. “So when do I leave?”

Decker held his hands up, a gesture of finality. “You can leave as soon as you can get packed.”

“But what about the case I’ve been working on? We just got our first really decent leads.”

“Liddy will take over while you’re gone. Fill him in before you leave.”

“Fine,” she said, though it wasn’t really. “I’ll just finish up the paperwork I started this morning for the file, then I’ll go over everything with Liddy.” Genna stood and smiled halfheartedly. “Thanks for the unexpected vacation.”

“You’re welcome.” Decker stood as well. “I’ll let Lt. Mallon know that you’ll be there by tomorrow afternoon.”

“I seriously doubt that these Amish kids have any idea of what or who they’re involved with,” Decker said as he walked Genna to the door. “And no one’s been able to get close enough to them to figure out just what their role is in all this.”

“I don’t know that I’ll be able to find anything that will be helpful.”

“All we’re asking is that you scope it out.” Decker opened the door. “You never know where it will lead.”

Genna chewed on her bottom lip as she walked back to her office. On the one hand, she hated

putting her ongoing case on ice, even for a week or so. On the other, thinking about how pleased Patsy would be to hear that Genna would be joining her at Bricker's Lake for a surprise visit put a smile on her face. Of course, Patsy wouldn't need to know any of the details or the reason for the trip. After all, what she didn't know couldn't hurt her.

Genna buzzed Paul Liddy and let him know he'd been tapped to fill in for her for a week. After briefing him and kicking a few ideas around for the better part of an hour, she packed up a few files she'd been needing to find time to read, and tried her best to ignore the calendar that insisted upon reminding her that today was her sister's thirtieth birthday. They hadn't seen or spoken to each other in eighteen years.

Pushing aside the images that threatened to crowd her, Genna snapped the lid of her briefcase and flicked off the light in her office, and headed out into the heat of a summer day.

At the precise moment that the oven timer went off and the phone rang, someone leaned hard on Genna's doorbell.

Without missing a beat, she turned the timer off with her left hand, lifted the cordless phone from the wall with her right, and reached the front door before the bell could ring a second time.

"No, thanks," she told the salesperson on the other end of the phone line, juggling the potato she had been about to pop into the preheated oven. "I don't need my basement waterproofed. I don't have a basement, and I . . ."

She'd leaned close enough to the peephole to see that the man waiting in the hallway had dark brown hair, cropped short, and was wearing the requisite dark suit and white shirt. In one hand, he carried a large bag from Genna's favorite restaurant, and in the other, a large bouquet of coral-colored roses. She opened the door and leaned against the jamb, blocking the entrance, and, not being able to think of one word to say to him, merely stared. She disconnected the phone call and stopped playing with the potato.

"And it's wonderful to see you again, too, Genna," he said in that deep voice she knew so well. "And yes, I think I'd love to have dinner with you, thank you."

"I don't recall having invited you to dinner," she replied with as little emotion as she could manage.

"But you were just about to." He grinned and held up the bag from Gagliardi's. "Tomatoes in balsamic vinaigrette. Grilled swordfish for you, veal scaloppine for me. New potatoes in dill and garlic butter for both of us. And a fabulous assortment of appetizers."

She smiled in spite of her best efforts not to, and shaking her head in resignation, accepted the coral roses, her all-time favorite. No one knew her better than John Mancini. Former FBI Academy instructor. Special agent. Former love of Genna's life.

"Tiramisù," he leaned forward and whispered, waving the smaller bag slightly in front of her. Genna laughed out loud and stepped aside to let him enter her apartment.

"You know, they always say that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. But I think we both know the truth about that, don't we?" John winked and walked past her and into her kitchen as if it was something he did every day and lifted the bag onto the counter. "Me, I can eat just about anything, but nothing seems to get your attention like a really great meal."

He opened a cabinet and took down two plates, then paused to ask, "The deck or the dining room?"

"Since you brought it and are obviously preparing to serve it, why don't you decide?" Genna turned off the oven and the timer, and dismissing the lone potato she'd planned to bake, opened another cabinet and reached for a blue glass vase, which she filled with water.

"Now, why aren't you always this agreeable?" he grinned at her from over one shoulder, the warmth of his smile nearly stopping her heart in her chest.

Ignoring him, not ready to accept the fact that she really wanted him there in her apartment, and needing an excuse to put a little distance between them, she plunked the roses into the vase and placed it on the counter before unlocking the door that led to the small balcony off the dining room. Not quite a deck, as John had called it, there was room for little more than a table, two chairs, and a large plant which she had, for the third summer in a row, neglected to fill with plants. On the railing sat a bird feeder, which she had forgotten to fill with birdseed, and a window box that held only some dried dill and the debris of last year's petunias and geraniums—planted by Patsy—that hung under the soffit window.

The table would need to be washed off before they could put plates on it, and the chairs would need

to be cleared of dead leaves before they could sit down. It would give her something to do, and prolong the conversation she knew they would have. Genna went back into the kitchen and reached around John for the roll of paper towels that fit snugly into a white plastic holder fastened to the wall behind him.

“Excuse me,” she said, avoiding his eyes. She grabbed the roll of paper towels at the same time John grabbed her arm and encircled her wrist with one hand. She waited for him to speak, a current passing through him to her, causing her pulse to race, the way it always did when John got a little too close.

“Are you all right?” He asked, finally, his voice softer, his eyes holding hers. “Things okay for you?”

“Things are okay.” She nodded. “You?”

“They’re okay. Good, even, you could say. For the most part.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

Genna backed away, unable to stand one more minute looking into his face, and to her surprise, he let her go. She opened the door beneath the kitchen sink and began to look for a plastic bottle of some sort of cleaner.

“The table and the chairs on the balcony need to be cleaned off.” She found what she was looking for and started back outside.

“You know, we could eat inside,” he suggested, almost as if he was the host and she the guest.

Genna paused to consider this, then decided that outside with John felt infinitely safer—meaning much less intimate—than inside with John. She forced a smile and said, “It will only take me a minute.”

“Fine. I’ll fix our plates.”

“Fine.” She nodded, and went back through the small door into the warm June night.

“Fine,” she muttered to herself as she sprayed first the table, then the chairs and wiped them down.

“Just peachy,” she whispered as she dried off all with the paper towels.

“What was that?” John asked as he stepped through the doorway, a fat yellow candle in one hand, a pack of matches in the other.

“I said, the chairs won’t take any time at all to dry.” Genna stood up, her hands on her hips.

John laughed out loud and, setting the candle on the table, reached for her, his arms twining around her waist and drawing her in as gently and smoothly as one might hold a child.

“Ah, Genna, I’ve missed you,” he told her. “Just let me hold you for one minute, okay?”

“Not okay.” She put her hands on his chest and pushed him back from her.

“You know, you hold a grudge longer than anyone I’ve ever known,” he pronounced solemnly.

“John, I do not feel like going there right now,” she told him, the last vestige of her smile fading. “Do you want to eat, or do you want to talk about the same old things again?”

“I guess eat.” He sighed. “Go ahead and sit down. I’ll bring dinner out.”

But sooner or later, before the evening ends, we’ll talk about those same old things again. However many times it takes. . .

“So what’s the latest?” John asked as he placed a tray laden with two plates filled with their entrees and another of appetizers wrapped in phyllo, on the tabletop. “What’s the latest big case?”

As if he didn’t know. As if he hadn’t spent nearly an hour in Decker’s office that afternoon.

“The dregs. Kiddie porn.” She grimaced involuntarily. “There’s a network that seems to be getting bolder and more prolific with every passing month. Really nasty stuff.”

Her face clouded. “I hate getting that close to it, but I love the thought of putting it out of business.”

She got up and went into the kitchen and returned with two goblets filled with ice water. She handed one to John and sipped at the other as she sat down.

“Decker tells me you’re taking a little unscheduled trip to see Patsy.” John lit a match and touched it to the candle’s wick, holding it until the flame caught and burned.

“Then I suppose he told you about the Amish boys and the bikers?”

“He did. Sounds pretty bizarre to me.”

“Doesn’t it? The Amish have such a closed community, it’s hard to imagine anyone penetrating that and drawing them into something that’s not only illegal but immoral.”

“Decker said they only want you to nose around a bit.”

“What else did Decker say?” She looked mildly annoyed to find that her latest assignment had become the topic of conversation between her boss and her former lover.

“That you’ve been working seven days a week for the past nine months and that he was happy to have a legitimate excuse to send you off to visit with Patsy so you could get a little rest.”

“He obviously doesn’t know Patsy,” she muttered and John laughed.

“That’s what I told him. Patsy still taking life on two wheels?”

“Every chance she gets.” Genna managed a smile. “That woman is sheer kinetic energy. I’ve never known anyone like her. She simply cannot sit still and is not capable of doing one thing at a time. When she’s on the phone, she’s cooking, she’s dusting, she’s emptying the dishwasher. She accomplishes more in one week than most people do in a month.”

“She taught you well.”

“Yes. Yes, she did, John.”

And she gave me a home when I was no longer welcome in my own. She took me in when I had nowhere else to go, and sheltered me when my world fell apart. She restored my faith when I had none. And she loved me when I had come to believe I was no longer lovable. Yes, Patsy taught me well. . .

“What are you working on these days?” Genna asked politely, no longer comfortable with the conversation.

Their knees touched briefly under the table. Genna deftly recrossed her legs.

“Same game, different players.” John shrugged. “You should try one of these appetizers, although they are at this point, and somewhat out of sequence with the meal. These are shrimp, scallops . . .”

“I’m allergic to shellfish,” she reminded him.

“I haven’t forgotten. I’m merely pointing them out to you so that you know which ones to avoid,” he said softly.

I haven’t forgotten a damned thing.

Aloud, he said, “These are chicken and those little triangles are mushroom.”

“Thank you.” Genna cleared her throat and stabbed one of the pastry-wrapped goodies that John had identified as mushroom. “What brought you to Woodside Heights?”

You did, dammit, would have been the honest answer. But knowing how she’d react to such a declaration, he said, “I’m on my way back to Virginia. Thought I’d stop in since I was in the neighborhood.”

No need to mention that her neighborhood was almost forty minutes out of Manhattan on a good day, and that a plane from Boston would have had him back at his own apartment outside of DC hours ago.

“Then you’re on your way back home from someplace else.”

“I’ve been in Boston for the past two weeks,” he nodded.

“The university?”

“Yes.”

No need to ask which university, since the murder of five young women over the same number of weeks had gripped the attention of the nation. As a special investigator with an unparalleled track

record and uncanny instincts, John had been called to Boston after the third coed had vanished without a trace. A sigh of relief could be heard from one end of the city to the other when a suspect—a assistant track coach—was apprehended two days ago.

“I heard about the arrest on Tuesday,” Genna said. “I thought it might be your work, quick and clean. No fuss, no muss.”

“Thank you,” John said, feeling enormously pleased at her praise. Professional admiration wasn’t exactly passion, but it would have to do for now. “I appreciate the compliment.”

“So. What comes next?” Genna moved past the moment before he could turn it into something else.

“Back to the office and the twenty-five or so cases that were pushed to the side while I went to Massachusetts.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask if that was wise, for him to jump back into the same frying pan that he’d jumped out of a year earlier when he’d taken a leave of absence from everything. Including Genna.

She was still fighting the urge to do so when he said, “You’re wondering if I should be dealing with this stuff again, after what happened before.”

“It crossed my mind.” She put her fork down.

“Those were very different circumstances. That case—the Woods case—was unlike anything I’ve ever been involved with. Every depravity, every evil that man is capable of, that was all embodied in Sheldon Woods. And I stayed on the case too long, I admit it, though it hadn’t seemed as clear to me then. I should have backed away when I felt it getting to me the way it did. I saw too much of his work, over far too long a time. I allowed it to get inside me. I let him control the case, the investigation. And in the end, he was controlling me.”

She picked up her fork and sliced a piece of potato in two, then moved the halves around on his plate. She’d heard the story before. She knew how it ended. The retelling of it wouldn’t change a damned thing.

“We don’t have to talk about it, John.”

“Of course we don’t. Talking about Woods might lead to talking about other things that could conceivably lead to talking about us.” John quietly put his own fork down on the side of his plate.

“How many times do I have to say I’m sorry, Gen?” He asked. “What do I have to do to make it up to you?”

“It isn’t a matter of making it up to me. It’s done, John. When something is done, it’s over.” Genna spoke softly, hoping to conceal the tremor in her voice.

“Genna, everyone makes mistakes,” he said, as softly.

“Your leaving me was not a mistake. It was a conscious action. You chose to walk away.”

“It wasn’t quite that simple.”

“It was only as complicated as you chose to make it.”

“Not to make excuses for my behavior, but you of all people had to know that I was in way over my head. I was drinking way too much and falling way too far down that deep hole. By the time I realized what was happening to me, it was too late. I had to let it all go for a while, Gen. I had to get my life under control again. I was too close to destroying myself, and more than anything, I was afraid of taking you with me.”

“I could have helped you. You should have let me be there for you.” Her voice rose in spite of her resolve to keep it from doing so.

“But you were with me. Every hour of every day. . .”

“Well, that was just fine for you. Unfortunately, I wasn’t aware of where you were or what was wrong or what I’d done. . .”

“It was never *you*. If it hadn’t been for you, I might not have had the strength to fight it. God knows

where or what I'd be now, if it hadn't been for you. . .”

“I went through hell, John.” Genna's voice finally cracked.

“If I could change that, I would. There was just so much going on inside my head, those first few months after we brought Woods in. If I hadn't walked away when I did, I think I would have ended up . . . well, ending it all.”

“Every time we try to talk, it always comes back to this, doesn't it?” She tried not to sound bitter.

“And it always will, until you forgive me and we straighten this out.”

Genna sighed. “I've forgiven you, John. Do I trust you not to do it again? Frankly, I don't know. It hurt too much the first time. We can be friends—I'll always be your friend. And I will always have total respect for you on a professional level. So that's it, as far as I'm concerned. Buddies. Colleagues. But that's all.”

“If that's all I can have, then that's what I'll have to take. For now. But you should know that I'll never give up on you.” John stood and dug his hands into the pockets of his jacket. “I loved you enough then to walk away when I was afraid I'd destroy you. I love you enough now to do whatever it will take to win you back. I'll wait for however long I have to.”

“John. . .”

“Those few months I spent by myself were the worst of my life. As much as I'd dealt with over the years, Woods was different. It affected me in ways, on levels, that I'd never suspected a case could. I'd been so close to the monster. . . I was becoming afraid that I could become him. It was all starting to creep into my soul and under my skin. I'd learned how he thought and what he wanted and how he went about getting it.”

“It's always been like that. For all of us.”

“You're absolutely right. It is. But the difference with the Woods case was that I couldn't get away from it. He wouldn't let up on me and there was no place to go to get away from him. Not until we caught him.” John stood and walked to the edge of the small balcony, turning his back on her to look down at the grassy area below. “Just my luck to have a homicidal pedophile pick me as his man.”

“I sympathize with everything you went through. God knows I couldn't have handled the situation as well as you did. But I wouldn't have walked out of your life without telling you why.”

“If I'd been thinking more clearly at the time, it wouldn't have happened that way. I was just so afraid of what might happen, so afraid that I'd hurt you somehow.”

“You did hurt me. In the one way that hurt the most.”

It hung between them, the way it always did every time they got to this point in this same discussion, and her words stung, just as they always did. For Genna, John's leaving her the way he had was the worst thing he could have done. It resurrected her deepest heartache and raised memories of a painful past. Abandonment. Betrayal. As a child, she'd been there. As an adult, she'd tried to put it behind her and just move forward.

To John's mind, he'd done the right thing, leaving when and as he did. Going toe to toe with the murderous Woods for three solid months had nearly broken John Mancini. The man who mutilated and murdered fourteen young children had contacted John—and only John—several times every day during his bloody reign of terror. Before he had been caught, Woods had become so brazen that he'd even called John while in the act of torturing his victim, forcing the frantic agent to listen, helplessly, as a child was brutally murdered.

By the time it was over and Woods was captured, there was little left of John Mancini that hadn't been badly mangled by the experience. Fight or flight, he'd thought at the time. Having no one to fight, he'd fled, hoping to cleanse himself of all the demons that had crept under his skin, hoping to emerge a stronger man for it. And eventually, he had, thanks to time off alone followed by months

working with a psychiatrist handpicked by the Bureau. He'd regained the sense of himself that he barely hung onto during those twelve weeks he'd been inside the mind of the most despicable killer he'd ever run across. He'd washed himself as clean as one could of it all, and somehow had survived the process. He hadn't realized that the price to regain his sanity and his soul would be the loss of the only woman he had ever loved.

John understood that to continue on with this line of conversation was a lose-lose situation. To permit the silence to keep on filling the space around them was just as deadly. He slapped his hands on the railing of the deck and returned to his seat at the table.

"My sister Tess sends her best and wants to know when you want that week at her beach house that she'd promised you." John cleared his throat, admitting defeat, and sliced into his veal. It was cold and somewhat chewy, and seemed little more than a prop at this point.

"Did she? That's sweet of her. I'm looking forward to seeing her at Angie's baby's christening. It was nice of your sister and brother-in-law to think to invite me."

"Everyone's happy for the opportunity to see you again, too."

"Is Tess still dating Nate?"

"She's been dating Nate since she was fifteen. Took a hiatus only long enough to marry Adam Conti, which we all know was the biggest mistake she ever made." John relaxed a little, relieved to have entered gentler waters.

"But she has her son. . ."

"The only thing Adam Conti ever did right in his entire life was to father that child. He's a good kid, Jeff is." John nodded.

"How is he?" Genna asked, equally happy to talk about something else—anything else—other than what had happened between them.

"Jeff is fine. He's doing really well in school and he's doing even better on the ball field. He's going to several football camps over the summer." John grinned. "He thinks he's going to be the next Dan Marino. That kid has an arm you wouldn't believe. He thinks he's got a shot at being the starting quarterback when he goes to high school this fall, but I keep telling him not to get his heart set on it. He can't assume that they'll let a freshman take that starting spot away from last year's man, you know?"

"Oh, sure." She waved her fork in the air. "I know all about that stuff."

"Sorry," John smiled, pleased that the Genna he'd known and loved was starting to resurface. "I get carried away sometimes when it comes to my nephew."

"I don't mind. He sounds like a great kid. I think it's wonderful that you're so proud of him."

"It would be hard not to be. He's been through a lot. The divorce was very difficult for him, and with his father remarrying last year, he had to let go of his dream that someday his family would all be back together again. I guess all kids go through that, when their parents split up, and you never know how it will affect them in the long run. So far, though, he seems to be keeping his feet on the ground."

"That's good. I'm glad to hear it." Genna stood up. "Coffee?"

"Sure. Want some help?" He offered.

"I can do it."

She picked up her plate and reached over to take his as well, and John fought the urge to grab her hand. But they'd had their go-round for the night, and he wasn't eager to start it up again. It had been too long since he'd been able to sit and watch a candle's light flicker across that much-loved face, to hear her voice not in memory but in real time, to bask in that smile that turned up at both sides of her mouth like a pixie's. These things would stay with him when he left her that night, and would have to do until he found the key to making it work for them again.

He handed her his plate and watched her disappear into the apartment.

She returned with two cups of coffee, then went back inside for the flat Styrofoam container of tiramisù and two small plates.

“Yum, this looks wonderful. This was really very, very thoughtful, John. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” was all he said.

They finished dessert and sipped their coffee, making small talk while the sun set behind them and the dots of light from the first of the season’s fireflies flickered across the expanse of grass below. They could have been any two old friends, catching up after an absence from each other’s lives. But they both knew better, and they both were saddened by the knowledge.

When the last of the coffee had been drunk and the last bit of small talk made, John stood to leave and Genna made no effort to talk him into staying. She walked behind him through the dining room and paused, when he did, at the doorway to her living room.

Glancing at the many photographs that lined one wall, John said softly, “It would have been nice if you had framed one picture of us from the good times, Genna. If only to prove that you thought there was at least one memory worth keeping.”

Without looking back at her, he opened the apartment door and disappeared into the hallway.

Genna had no idea of how long she stood leaning against the door, as if frozen in the moment he had walked through it. Finally, like a survivor of a battle she hadn’t wanted to fight, she moved on wooden legs. To the balcony where she blew out the candle and gathered the cups and saucers and dessert plates. To the kitchen where she rinsed the dishes under hot water before placing them absently in the dishwasher. To the front door where she slid the dead bolt. To her bedroom, where she sat on the edge of the bed and lifted the polished wood picture frame from the small table that sat under the window.

There was just enough light from the hall for her to make out the image of John standing at the top of a Mayan pyramid that was overgrown with vines, one arm around a laughing Genna, the other lifted in salute to the French tourist who had snapped the picture for them.

Hard to believe that little more than two years had passed since they’d been so happy together.

John had planned that trip and made all the arrangements for them after Genna had made a casual remark one day that she’d always wanted to see the Mayan ruins on the Yucatán peninsula. They’d spent a week in the jungle, then a long weekend on the beaches in Cancun. It had been the first time that they’d gone away together, and, as fate would have it, the last. They’d come back home just as Sheldon Woods had abducted his third victim, and the next few months had passed in a blur.

Genna knew she’d never been happier, before or since, than she had been for those ten days. She wondered if life would hold any more such perfect moments for her.

Unaware of the tears that rolled down her face, Genna gently returned the photograph to its place of honor on her bedside table, turned on the light, and began to pack for the next morning’s trip.

A low, dense gray cloud greeted Patsy Wheeler when she raised the wooden blind and looked out through her bedroom window to take her first look at this new day. Undaunted by the fog, she went into the small bathroom and turned on the shower, whistling while she stripped off her short-sleeved cotton nightgown, humming as she stepped beneath the hot spears of water and lathered her arms with her favorite lavender-scented soap. Singing as she dried her hair—"Don't Cry for Me, Argentina"—and later as she made the day's first pot of coffee—"Just You Wait, Henry Higgins," it being a show tune kind of morning—Patsy's natural exuberance could not be dampened by a little thing like early morning fog.

Dressed in white cotton shorts and a green pullover shirt, Patsy unlocked the screen door and stood just inside, peering out at the lake. The first of the bass fishermen were already out on their boats, silently gliding fifteen feet out from Patsy's dock, drifting through the pale gray remnants of the fog that had begun to lift as the sun rose. Content with the knowledge that all was right with her world, Patsy returned to her small kitchen and poured herself a cup of coffee, relaxed and happy on this peaceful Wednesday morning in midsummer.

A single woman in her sixty-third year, Patsy had never married. "Married to my career," she had often replied when inquiring relatives would comment on her state, and it was largely true. This coming fall, for example, Patsy would celebrate exactly forty years in the same school where she had started her teaching career the September following her college graduation. It was, in fact, the same elementary school she and her two sisters had attended.

If Patsy's life seemed to reflect a certain sameness, a lack of apparent excitement, it did not wait for fulfillment. She had chosen to stay in the house she'd grown up in after her parents had passed on, buying out both of her sisters' interests, because she loved the house and couldn't imagine living anywhere else. She'd had the same feeling about the cottage on Bricker's Lake. Her parents had built it years before, shortly after their marriage, and the entire family spent every summer thereafter swimming, boating, and fishing off the dock that jutted into the lake like a stubby finger. Every year, without fail, just as her parents before her had done, Patsy opened the cottage for the season on Memorial Day weekend, and closed it up for the winter on the first weekend in October. Oh, she had taken the occasional trip, visited Europe several times and enjoyed every minute she'd spent touring the French countryside and drinking Guinness in Irish pubs and exploring solid German castles. But she never tired of the cottage that faced the lake, never tired of her neighbors, though so many of the original folks were gone now, their little summer homes having changed hands. And over the past few summers, she'd seen more and more of the cottages rented out, an entirely new phenomena. But that was okay too. Patsy brightened. Always fun to meet new people, to make new friends.

Like that woman who is renting the Palmer place next door. Patsy unconsciously peered through the curtains at the well-kept cottage to the right of her own. Seems like a nice enough soul, though it would be easier to get to know her if she was here during the week instead of just on the weekends. Said her job kept her traveling so much, but she was looking forward to spending as much time as she could here.

Patsy tried to recall exactly what the new neighbor—Nancy, her name was—did for a living. Something about computers. . .

She hummed a few bars of "Camelot" and sipped her coffee, thinking how nice it would be to have a friend here at the lake this summer. Not that she was lonely, or that she lacked for friends. She had good neighbors here and back home in Tanner, a little town just north of Pittsburgh, and there were colleagues and students she'd known over the years. She never felt that her life wanted for much. C

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