

MILLS & BOON



Vintage INTRIGUE

**Confessions of
the Heart**

AMANDA STEVENS

Amanda Stevens

Confessions of the Heart

Аннотация

WAS IT LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT...Anna Sebastian wanted desperately to learn about the stranger whose transplanted heart beat within her chest...particularly once the erotic dreams and deathly silent late-night calls began. But when her journey brought her face-to-face with her darkly handsome fantasy lover, she debated whether to divulge the truth. For brooding widower Ben Porter was rumored to have murdered the wife whose tragic end had given Anna a precious second chance....**OR SOMETHING EVEN MORE DANGEROUS?** A former cop, Ben knew that Anna harbored secrets, just as he knew they would become lovers. But Anna's sudden appearance aroused more than his guarded heart and urge to protect. It awakened a dormant killer who'd chosen now to strike again....

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“I can’t seem to stay away from you.”

The admission stunned her, although Anna wasn’t sure why. She felt the same way, had from the moment she’d first laid eyes on him.

But things had changed between them now. She could sense it. Ben had risked his life to save her, and Anna knew if the situation were reversed, she would have done the same for him. The bond between them was no longer merely a physical attraction, if it had ever been only that. The connection now was deeper, more spiritual and much more complex.

Love at first sight? Anna wasn’t convinced she believed in the concept still, but whatever she and Ben had, it wasn’t going away. Not in a day. Not in a year. Maybe not ever.

Dear Harlequin Intrigue Reader,

Happy Valentine’s Day! We are so pleased you’ve come back to Harlequin Intrigue for another exciting month of breathtaking romantic suspense.

And our February lineup is sure to please, starting with another installment in Debra Webb’s trilogy about the most covert agents around: **THE SPECIALISTS**. Her *Hidden Truth* is a truly innovative story about what could happen if an undercover agent had a little help from a memory device to ensure her cover. But what if said implant malfunctioned and past, present and future were all mixed up? Fortunately this lucky lady has a very

sexy recovery Specialist to extract her from the clutches of a group of dangerous terrorists.

Next we have another title in our TOP SECRET BABIES promotion by Mallory Kane, called Heir to Secret Memories. Though a bachelor heir to a family fortune is stricken with amnesia, he can't forget one very beautiful woman. And when she comes to him in desperation to locate her child, he's doubly astonished to find out he is the missing girl's father.

Julie Miller returns to her ongoing series THE TAYLOR CLAN with The Rookie. If you go for those younger guys, well, hold on to your hats, because Josh Taylor is one dynamite lawman.

Finally, Amanda Stevens takes up the holiday baton with Confessions of the Heart. In this unique story, a woman receives a heart transplant and is inexorably drawn to the original owner's husband. Find out why in this exceptional story.

Enjoy all four!

Sincerely,

Denise O'Sullivan

Associate Senior Editor

Harlequin Intrigue

Confessions of the Heart

Amanda Stevens



www.millsandboon.co.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in a small Southern town, Amanda Stevens frequently draws on memories of her birthplace to create atmospheric settings and casts of eccentric characters. She is the author of over twenty-five novels, the recipient of a Career Achievement award for Romantic/Mystery, and a 1999 RITA[®] award finalist in the Gothic/Romantic Suspense category. She now resides in Texas with her husband, teenage twins and her cat, Jesse, who also makes frequent appearances in her books.



CAST OF CHARACTERS

Anna Sebastian —Lured to San Miguel by someone from her heart donor's past, Anna finds a new life, a new love...and an evil she could never have imagined.

Ben Porter —Can he protect the woman he loves from the evil that nearly destroyed him?

Katherine Sprague —Her heart gave Anna a new life. Will her memory destroy Anna's happiness?

Gwen Draven —She had a love/hate relationship with her sister, Katherine.

Gabriella Sprague —She is the one who found her mother's body. Is she also the one who lured Anna to San Miguel?

Acacia Cortina —An exotic beauty who claims to be descended from Mayan royalty.

Margarete Cortina —An eccentric woman whose strange beliefs have made her an outcast in San Miguel.

Hays Devereaux —Anna's ex-husband and a man with a grudge.

Emily Winsome —Her determination to prove Katherine was murdered could be the death of her.

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Chapter One

“Someone knows about me.”

Dr. English glanced up from Anna Sebastian’s lab reports and gave her a wink. “Not my wife, I hope.”

“You aren’t married,” she reminded him. And despite what his teasing tone seemed to suggest, Anna was not now, nor would she ever be, involved in a torrid love affair with her doctor.

Not that he wasn’t torrid love affair material. He was a real heartthrob, in fact, with his dark hair, smoldering eyes and a slow, sexy smile that had sent Anna into a tailspin the first time she’d seen it.

But that was before he’d reached inside her chest and literally ripped out her heart.

Since then she’d become immune to that smile. Nowadays she valued Michael English’s expertise as a heart surgeon far more highly than his skills as a lover, although she suspected those skills were considerable.

“Aren’t you even the least bit curious about what I said?” she persisted.

“First things first.” He gathered up the lab reports and gave her a look that was now all business. “How’ve you been feeling?”

“At the moment, like I had a run-in with a vampire.” She put a hand to her neck where a bandage covered the small incision made several hours earlier for her heart biopsy.

Michael scribbled something in her file. "Have the mood swings improved since we eliminated the prednisone?"

"What mood swings?"

"Laurel said—"

"Laurel is a born worrier," Anna scoffed. "She thinks if I feel the least bit tired or cranky or if I should—God forbid—cough, I'm experiencing rejection."

He gave her a stern appraisal. "Have you experienced any of those symptoms?"

"No." Anna shrugged. "I was just trying to make the point that my stepmother worries too much."

"Any fever?"

"No."

"Diarrhea?"

"No." It seemed a shame to have to discuss something so unpleasant with a man like Michael, but Anna was used to it by now. He'd seen her at her worst and then some.

"Shortness of breath, dizziness, irregular heartbeat?"

"No, no and no." She sighed. "You would think after nearly a year and no major complications, Laurel could relax a bit." She slanted him a glance. "So could you, for that matter."

"Anna." His voice took on the note she didn't like, the doctor to patient one that told her she was in for another lecture. "You can't afford to get complacent just because you've only had one mild episode of rejection. It could still happen. You have to check your vitals on a daily basis. That doesn't change. That's

forever. So is taking your medication. Non-compliance is the third-leading cause of rejection.”

“I am taking my meds,” she insisted.

“You never forget?”

“Not once.” The various medications had, thankfully, decreased to a more manageable number from the fifteen in the morning and another fifteen at night she’d been prescribed when she first left the hospital. She still sometimes felt as if she were running a pharmacy out of her medicine cabinet, but she took the pills and the liquids like clockwork every single day. No forgetting. No doubling up on the dosage. Even skipping one time could invite rejection.

Anna knew that only too well. Michael and the rest of her transplant team had hammered it into her head before and after her surgery. She’d had to memorize all her meds, know them by sight and what they were for, before she’d been allowed to leave the hospital.

“Lean forward.” Michael blew gently on the stethoscope before placing the warmed instrument against her back, and then he moved it around to her chest. Next he took her pulse, his brows drawing together in concentration as he counted.

He really was a handsome man. It would have been very easy to cross the line from professional to personal, Anna had to admit. He wasn’t just easy on the eyes, but was charming and funny and he loved to tease her. She couldn’t remember being teased that way since her mother had died of heart failure when

Anna was thirteen.

She'd inherited her mother's bad heart, but not her sense of humor. Always prone to a serious disposition, Anna had become even more intense and driven as a teenager, especially after her father remarried. She'd bitterly rebelled against her stepmother and had cut herself off from her family all through college and law school. Not until Anna learned her father was battling lung cancer had she finally taken the first step toward reconciliation.

She was grateful they'd made their peace before he died, but she knew she hadn't given him the one thing he'd wanted most—her acceptance of Laurel. Even in their mutual grief, Anna hadn't been able to warm up to her stepmother.

So it was ironic, she supposed, that Laurel was the one who'd talked her into seeing a doctor when she'd started having dizzy spells, Laurel who'd insisted Anna seek a second opinion when her first cardiologist had sent her home after treating her for an irregular heartbeat.

It was Laurel who moved in and took care of Anna when, several months later, the dizzy spells turned into exhaustion, Laurel who commiserated with her when she had to cut back her caseload at Matthews, Conley and Hart and later, when she had to take an extended leave of absence.

It was Laurel who'd been by Anna's side when she got the news that in the year since her first diagnosis, her heart had taken a complete nosedive, and a transplant was her only hope.

It was Laurel who'd driven her to the hospital when the call

had come that a heart had been found for her.

A new heart. A new life. A new Anna.

At least, she was trying for the latter. Facing her own mortality had made her take a long hard look at herself, and Anna had been a little shocked by what she'd found. Her whole adult life had been focused on her career to the exclusion of all else, including friendships, relationships and family.

The decisions she'd made had been brought painfully home to her when Laurel had kept a lonely vigil at the hospital, when only a smattering of cards and letters from well-wishers had been delivered to her apartment. She'd been forced to accept the unpleasant truth that, except for her stepmother—a woman Anna had treated badly for years—no one much cared whether she lived or died.

Of course, the senior partners at Matthews, Conley and Hart had a financial interest in her survival, but if she'd never made it off the operating table, they wouldn't have shed any tears. They would have coldly and analytically gone about the business of minimizing the impact of her demise on the firm, perhaps even finding a way to capitalize on it, just as she would have done if she were in their place.

Her ex-husband had once accused her of being a cold, heartless bitch, and she supposed in a lot of ways she had been.

Michael was taking a blood pressure reading, and Anna knew better than to say anything until he was through.

“So,” he said, returning the pressure cuff to the wall over her

bed. "What did you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said someone knows about you. What did you do?"

"I think someone from the donor's family knows who I am."

He lifted his brows in surprise. "That's impossible. Both the donor and the recipient's identification are kept anonymous. The surgeons don't even know who the donors are. The OPOs are designed that way."

"I realize that, but I don't know how else to explain the weird things that have been happening to me lately."

He frowned. "What kind of weird things?"

Anna lay silent for a moment. "This is going to make me sound completely paranoid, but I've been getting these phone calls. They always come at night, after I've gone to bed, and they usually wake me up. No one seems to be on the line, but I can hear music playing in the background. You know that tune 'Heart and soul, da-da, da-da, da-da...' Okay, I'm way off key, but you know the one I mean?"

He gave her a strange look. "You say these phone calls always come at night and they wake you up? Are you sure you're not dreaming? You've been through an ordeal, Anna. Both physically and mentally. Your whole life has changed in a matter of months —"

"I know," she broke in. "But that's not it. I'm not dreaming. I think the phone calls have something to do with my transplant."

"But even if they do that doesn't mean they're coming from

the donor's family," Michael argued. "It could be someone who knows you. Someone with a grudge who's trying to get under your skin a little."

She'd thought of that. Her aggressive style as a divorce attorney hadn't exactly endeared her to the spouses of her clients, or to some of her own colleagues, for that matter. Still, there was something deeply disturbing and symbolic about the phone calls.

"Look," Michael said. "I don't want you worrying about this. The last thing you need is added stress."

"I'm not stressed. God knows some days I feel as if I'm almost comatose." Anna didn't exactly miss the pressure cooker environment at the law firm, but a year post-op, she knew it was time to either go back to work on a limited basis or find something else to occupy her time. She couldn't exist for the rest of her life in a world of little more than meds, naps and daily walks. She knew of other heart transplant recipients who were climbing mountains. She needed a mountain.

"You're right. It's probably nothing." She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. "I thought I'd mention it, though, in case you want to report a possible security breach to Gift of Life."

He made a final notation in her file. "A security breach is highly unlikely."

"Right." Anna knew of computer experts who could hack into the offshore accounts of major banks to search for hidden assets. In the right hands, she doubted the systems at most organ

procurement organizations would present much of a challenge.

Michael slipped his pen into the pocket of his lab coat and closed her file. "You're doing great, Anna. Your lab and blood work all look good. You keep this up, and I won't need to see you again for another three months."

He walked to the door, then turned and gave her a stern look. "But I'm serious about the stress. Don't get all worked up about these calls. Unplug your phone at night if you have to. Give it a few days, and whoever this joker is, he'll get tired of his little pranks and move on to something else."

Move on to something else.

That was exactly what Anna was afraid of.

"SORRY YOU HAD TO WAIT so long," she told Laurel a little while later as her stepmother carefully navigated her Lexus through the massive Texas Medical Center parking garage.

Laurel smiled. "Don't be sorry. I know it sounds strange, but I always enjoy coming to the institute. The place is so amazing. Have you seen the Celebration of Hearts exhibit in the museum?"

The Denton A. Cooley Building, which housed the Texas Heart Institute, was indeed a marvel of twenty-first century technology, a state-of-the-art research, education and patient care facility named for one of the pioneers in heart transplant surgery. But Anna's familiarity with the hospital was limited primarily to the eighth floor. "I never made it down to the museum."

"Well, you should make a point to. They have a very

impressive art collection, and a lot of Dr. Cooley's personal mementos are on display, as well." Laurel turned to Anna, her green eyes sparkling with exuberance. "I find something new and fascinating every time I go down there."

"I'm glad you weren't bored." Her stepmother's zest for life, for even the mundane, never failed to take Anna by surprise, but she supposed that was one of the things that had attracted her father to the petite blonde in the first place. After all this time, Anna could finally admit that Laurel was a lot like her mother. She wondered how different her life might have been if she'd come to that conclusion years ago.

She'd cut herself off so needlessly from the people who loved her, and it was only in looking back, only with the angel of death knocking at her door, that Anna had come to realize it was fear that drove her. Not ambition, not greed, not even her dislike and resentment of Laurel. Fear that if she cared too much, she might end up losing someone else.

Her mother's death had affected Anna far more than she'd ever been willing to acknowledge, and her father—so much like Anna—had kept his own grief bottled inside. He'd refused to talk about her mother's death, refused to allow Anna to talk about it. They'd both become very good at pretending and hiding their grief from one another. That was why when he'd brought Laurel home, without any warning, Anna had thought it the worst kind of betrayal.

She hadn't been able to forgive him, hadn't wanted any part

of their happiness, because by then, she'd found something far more reliable and far less complicated than love. Success. Her professional life was something she had complete control over—or so she'd thought.

Deep in her reverie, Anna stared out the window as they pulled out of the parking garage and merged with traffic on the street. It was raining, and the rhythmic sound of the windshield wipers made her a little drowsy. It was a good thing Laurel was behind the wheel, she decided, resting her head against the back of the seat. Michael had given her the green light to resume driving six weeks after she left the hospital, but on biopsy days, she still had to rely on her stepmother.

Laurel had a few errands to run while they were out, including a stop at the pharmacy to replenish some of Anna's meds, and by the time they finally left the medical center, it was after three and traffic was already congested. As they headed north on Main Street through downtown, Anna impulsively gestured to a parking garage on the left. "Pull in there."

Laurel did as she was told, then flashed Anna a quick frown. "You're not going into the office, I hope."

Matthews, Conley and Hart occupied several floors of the J. P. Morgan Chase Tower, the tallest building in downtown Houston. Anna's office was on the eighty-fifth floor, and on a clear day, she could glimpse the Gulf of Mexico. But Houston was a city at the mercy of a subtropical climate and the belching smokestacks from its dozens of oil refineries. A clear day in the downtown

area was something of a rare occurrence.

“Anna,” Laurel admonished. “You really should go home and rest.”

“This won’t take long. Just drop me near the lobby, and then you go on home without me. You’ve waited enough for one day.”

“How will you get home?” Laurel worried.

“I’ll walk. I’m up to four miles a day,” she said when her stepmother tried to protest. “I think I can handle a few city blocks.”

“But it’s still raining.”

Anna held up her umbrella. “I’ve got my rain gear, and if it starts coming down harder, I’ll take a cab.”

Laurel found a place to park, then turned to Anna. “I’m worried about you, Anna. I’ve noticed how restless and preoccupied you’ve been lately, and I’m afraid you’re going to do something to jeopardize your health.”

Anna opened the door. “I have something I need to take care of, but it’s nothing for you to worry about. I promise.”

She got out of the car before Laurel could argue further and waved her on. Her stepmother hesitated for a moment, her brows drawn together in a deep frown, and then she reluctantly drove off.

From the lobby in the parking garage, Anna took the escalator down into the tunnels, a six-mile subterranean network that connected most of the major buildings in downtown Houston. The tunnels were air-conditioned and well lighted and contained

everything from chiropractic clinics to offbeat boutiques, but somehow Anna could never quite conquer the oppressive feeling of being underground.

Hurrying underneath Travis Street, she rode another escalator up to the sleek glass-and-granite lobby of the Chase Tower, and then waited for an elevator to take her to the sixty-seventh floor where the offices of BMI Global Investigations were located.

The bell pinged and the doors slid open. As Anna stood back for the half dozen or so well-dressed professionals to disembark, she noticed a man at the rear of the elevator. He was taller than the other passengers, which might explain why her gaze was drawn to him. But Anna suspected it had more to do with the long, thin scar that ran from the top of his cheekbone to the curve of his chin. She'd finally gotten used to her own scar so the sight didn't put her off, but she couldn't help wondering what had happened to him.

He wasn't dressed in a business suit as all the others were, but wore instead a dark-colored shirt and pants that seemed out of place in Houston on a muggy, rainy afternoon in July. The humidity outside was killer, but the man seemed oblivious to the weather, his fellow passengers and especially to Anna. He barely glanced at her even when they accidentally brushed shoulders as he got off the elevator.

"Excuse me," he murmured.

A chill shot up Anna's backbone. She could feel gooseflesh prickling along her bare arms as she was shuffled to the back

of the car. Through the crowd, she caught a glimpse of the man moving quickly away.

But just before the doors slid closed, he stopped suddenly and glanced back, his gaze searching the elevator as he lifted a hand to the back of his neck.

BMI WAS A LARGE private investigation firm founded by two former H.P.D. homicide detectives and an ex-FBI special agent who'd worked out of the field office in Houston for over a decade. They now employed over a dozen certified investigators and a specialized support staff that included computer experts and forensic accountants who were masters at ferreting out hidden assets and undisclosed bank accounts, a service Anna had found invaluable over the years.

Matthews, Conley and Hart used the P.I. firm exclusively, and Anna had worked with all three of the principle investigators at one time or another. They each had their talents and areas of expertise, but she felt a little more comfortable with Tom Bellows. He was the oldest of the three, and he'd always secretly reminded her of her father.

The receptionist did a double take when she first saw Anna step through the doorway, and then she gave her a wary greeting. "Hello, Ms. Sebastian. We haven't seen you in quite a while. Do you have an appointment?"

No inquiry as to her health, Anna noticed, but she could hardly blame the girl. Before Anna got sick, she would breeze into the office for a quick consultation with one of the investigators,

barely giving whoever was behind the desk the time of day. She was ashamed now to admit that she'd never taken the time to learn the receptionist's name. Nor had she ever noticed how pretty the girl was, with her long, silky hair and crystalline green eyes.

Anna glanced at the brass plate on the corner of the desk and committed the name to memory. "Hello, Juliette. I don't have an appointment, but I really need to see Tom Bellows. Is he in?"

"Hold on and I'll check."

"Thanks." Anna smiled her appreciation, and the receptionist was clearly stunned by her new, cordial demeanor.

When Juliette hung up the phone, she said in a careful voice, "You can go on back. Mr. Bellows has a few minutes before his next appointment." She glanced at Anna, and then quickly looked away, as if she wasn't quite sure how to respond to her.

Anna thanked her again, and then started down the hall to Tom Bellows's office. He was standing in the doorway waiting for her. At fifty-five, he was still a fit and handsome man with silver hair, piercing blue eyes and a tanned, weathered complexion that attested to his passion for deep-sea fishing.

"I thought Juliette had to be mistaken," he said in a serious tone. "But it really is you. Welcome back to the land of the living."

"Thanks." A very apt way of putting it, Anna thought as she followed him into his office. He motioned her to a chair across from his desk and she sat down, draping her raincoat across the

arm and placing her red umbrella on the floor beside her.

Tom sat down behind his desk and gave her a long, frank appraisal. "Last time I saw you, I wasn't sure you were going to make it."

She gave him a wry smile. "A lot's happened since then."

He nodded. "I heard you got the transplant."

"Yes, thanks for the card you sent." Tom's had been one of the few cards that had been waiting for her when she'd gone home from the hospital. It had meant a lot.

He was still studying her with undisguised curiosity. "I may be crazy, but I swear you look different. I can't quite put my finger on what it is."

"I lost quite a bit of weight," she said with a shrug.

"You were always thin. That's not it." He tilted his head. "It's the eyes." He stared at her for a moment longer, and then glanced away suddenly, as if disturbed by something he'd seen. "You've been through a lot. I can see that."

She nodded, suddenly very uncomfortable with the direction the conversation had taken. She cleared her throat. "You're probably wondering why I'm here."

"I assumed you were back at work."

"No. And to be quite honest, I'm not even sure I'm going back."

He lifted a brow in surprise. "They know that upstairs?"

"I haven't handed in my formal resignation, but I suspect they have a pretty good idea. It's been almost a year, after all."

He rubbed his chin. "They'd probably give you another year if you wanted it. An attorney with your abilities and instincts doesn't come along every day."

Abilities as in ambition. Instincts as in sheer, cutthroat ruthlessness. She drew a deep breath. "That was the old Anna."

He smiled. "I'll admit you do seem different, but I've never seen a leopard yet who can change its spots overnight."

"Maybe you haven't seen one whose life depended on it," she countered.

Tom seemed to consider the possibility for a moment. He shuffled some papers on his desk. "Why don't you tell me why you're here?"

"I have a job for you."

"But I thought you said—"

"It's personal."

"All right, I'm listening." But a frown already played between his brows as if he were anticipating something unpleasant.

"I want to find out the identity of my donor."

He glanced up, his frown deepening. "Then why not go through the proper channels? I read somewhere that transplant recipients write an anonymous letter to their donor's family, and it's delivered through the hospital. The family has the choice to either respond or ignore the letter. Eventually, if both sides agree, they can meet face-to-face."

Anna impatiently drummed her fingers on the chair arms. "What if the family decides they don't want to meet me?"

“Then that might be for the best.” Tom sat forward, gazing at her intently. He was clearly disturbed by her suggestion. “Look, Anna, I think you’re only looking at this thing from one side, but the safeguards are in place for your protection as well as the donor’s family. Let me give you an example. What if a bereaved mother finds out you have her son’s heart? What if she’s had a hard time accepting her son’s death? What if she starts calling you in the middle of the night or showing up on your doorstep unexpectedly? I’m not saying anything like that would happen, but it could.”

Apprehension tingled along Anna’s nerve endings as she thought about the phone calls. “I see your point, and I appreciate your concern, Tom. But I think it’s possible someone in the donor’s family may already know who I am.”

She told him then about the phone calls, and when she finished, he drew the same conclusion as Michael. “I agree that’s pretty strange, but it doesn’t mean the calls are coming from someone in the donor’s family. A lot of people...know about your transplant.”

She had a feeling what he’d meant to say was that a lot of people had it in for her.

“Your transplant was even mentioned in the paper,” Tom pointed out. “So it’s hardly a secret.”

Anna nodded. “My stepmother showed me the article.” Her name and medical condition had been included in a follow-up piece to a highly publicized trial she’d litigated for the firm. She

supposed it was possible that someone she'd crossed swords with in the courtroom, or even in the office, had seen that article as well and had, as Michael said, decided to get under her skin a little. "I know what you're getting at," she told Tom. "And, yes, I've made a few enemies. But I honestly don't think that's it. The phone calls are more—"

"Mind sick?" he supplied.

A shiver crawled up Anna's backbone, not unlike the one she'd experienced earlier in the elevator. She thought about the man with the scar, wondering again who had sliced open his face. And why.

She glanced at Tom. "I was going to say personal. It might even be that someone is trying to reach out to me."

"Which is exactly my earlier point," he reminded her grimly.

"Look, even if I knew who was responsible for the calls, it wouldn't change my mind." Anna leaned toward him. "I don't expect you to understand, but this is something I have to do. I know my donor was a thirty-nine-year-old woman, but I need to know what kind of person she was, the kind of life she led. Don't ask me to explain it, but I feel as if I owe her that much."

"Don't you think your gratitude would be better served by honoring her family's privacy?" Tom asked bluntly.

Anna drew a breath. "Are you saying you won't help me?"

He looked away, unable to hold her gaze. "I'm saying I have deep reservations about this. About your motives."

Anger darted through her. She sat back in her chair, eyeing

him coldly. "You know, Tom, I'm the one who brought Matthews, Conley and Hart to your firm. One call and I could just as easily take that business away from you."

His jaw hardened as he returned her stare. "I'm aware of that."

Anna was at once struck by remorse. She put a hand to her mouth. "Tom, that was completely out of line. I apologize."

Tom shrugged, but something had changed between them. Anna could see it in his eyes. "Don't apologize. In some ways, it's a relief to know the real Anna Sebastian is still around."

He studied her for a moment, as if he couldn't quite decide whether her remorse was genuine or not. "You know, Anna, I've always admired and respected you. I've even at times felt a certain fondness for you. But you've never made it easy for people to care about you."

"I know that."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm going to do this for you because you're right. I do owe you. But after that..." he trailed off on a shrug, and guilt and humiliation welled inside Anna where once she would have allowed herself to feel nothing but anger. Tom was about the closest thing to a friend she had, and now she'd pushed him away. Maybe he was right. Maybe a leopard couldn't change its spots overnight. Maybe she couldn't change them at all.

"If you'd rather I take this to another agency, I'll understand. And there won't be any hard feelings. No...repercussions."

He shook his head. "I said I'd look into it, and I will. I just

hope you know what you could be letting yourself in for.”

“I do. And I want you to know that I’m not going to hurt anyone with this information. Whatever you find out will stay between us.” She paused again. “I know it’s hard for you to understand, but this is something I have to do. I have to make sure...”

“You deserve your new heart?”

His insight stunned her. “Yes, exactly,” Anna murmured. “And I can tell by your expression what your opinion is on the subject.”

“It doesn’t matter what I think.” He stood, drawing the meeting to an end. “I’ll be in touch.”

He didn’t bother seeing her out.

Chapter Two

Anna felt deeply unsettled as she headed up Travis Street toward her apartment in the old Cullen Bank Building on Main. The weather didn't help. It was after four and the late-afternoon traffic was starting to stack up on the streets, but she was only one of a handful of pedestrians on the sidewalks. The rain had driven everyone else down into the tunnels. Even the terrace at Cabo's, a trendy Mexican restaurant and bar, looked damply forlorn in the drizzle.

Crossing the intersection at Preston, Anna began to experience a strange sensation of being watched. She glanced over her shoulder, saw no one behind her, and continued on toward Congress. She waited for the light, and then crossed the street. As she hurried toward her building, her gaze was inexplicably drawn to the covered bus stop at the corner.

A man stood inside, staring at the slow-moving traffic on Congress. He had his back to Anna, but something about him looked familiar. He was tall, with closely cropped dark hair and broad shoulders beneath a black shirt.

Her stomach fluttered as she stood watching him. For a moment, she thought he was the man from the elevator, and something told her to run—not walk—away from him. To hurry inside her building, rush up to her ninth-floor apartment and lock the door behind her.

But she couldn't seem to move. And then, as if sensing her scrutiny, he turned slowly to stare at her. Anna caught her breath, realizing at once why he'd seemed familiar to her.

Her ex-husband smiled as he left the shelter of the bus stop and started toward her.

"Hello, Anna."

"Hays," she said in surprise. Her hand had gone automatically to her heart, and now she self-consciously dropped her arm to her side. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you." Moisture glinted in his dark hair. "I saw you getting on the elevator in the Chase Tower, and I tried to catch you, but you didn't go up to your office." He shrugged. "I figured you had to come this way sooner or later."

His excuse sounded a bit convenient to Anna although plausible, she supposed. Hays worked for an oil and gas exploration company headquartered in the Chase Tower, which was how they'd first met.

She decided to play the meeting by ear. "So why did you want to see me?"

"I've been working out of the Dallas office for the past several months, and I just got back in town a few days ago. I heard what happened." His gaze dropped very briefly to her chest. "I guess I needed to see for myself that you were okay."

Anna wanted to accept his concern at face value, but there was something in his eyes that made her say warily, "You didn't have to go to so much trouble. You could have just called."

“Like I said, I needed to see for myself.” He stared down at her. “Can I ask you something?”

Anna shrugged. “Sure.”

“How does it feel to have someone else’s heart beating inside your chest?”

How was she supposed to answer that? Should she tell him she felt an appreciation bordering on reverence for her new heart? That she was deeply humbled by a second chance she’d done nothing to deserve? That she felt an almost spiritual connection with the woman who’d given her the ultimate gift?

She could tell him all those things, but she could never make Hays or anyone else understand if they’d never walked in her shoes.

“It feels just like my own,” she said, but that wasn’t altogether true.

He cocked his head. “I heard about this guy once. He got a new heart just like you, and he suddenly developed a strange affinity for pasta. Spaghetti, fettuccini, you name it. He never could stand the stuff before, but suddenly he couldn’t get enough of it. Turned out his donor had loved Italian food.” Hays arched an eyebrow. “How about it, Anna? Had any strange cravings since your surgery?”

“Not that I’ve noticed.”

“What, no new abilities or talents?”

“No.” She shivered a bit in the light rain. “But...I have changed.”

One brow shot up again. "How so?"

She hesitated, unsure how to phrase what she wanted to say, but more important, not certain how he would take it. "I'm glad you came here to wait for me, Hays, because there's something I've wanted to say to you for a long time." She adjusted the collar of her raincoat, buying herself a moment of time. "I regret the way things ended between us. I still think divorce was the only answer for us, but I'm sorry you were hurt by it."

His eyes widened, as if he were stunned by the apology, then he gave a low, bitter laugh. "God, Anna, who are you trying to kid?"

"I'm serious," she said, a little wounded by his reaction. "I'm deeply sorry that I hurt you."

He took a quick step toward her and put a hand underneath her chin, tilting her face up to his. He wasn't a tall man, but he'd always worked out, always kept his physique lean and muscular. At five-six, Anna had never felt threatened or intimidated by his physical superiority, but now, gazing up at him, she saw something in his eyes she'd never seen before. The bitterness and the resentment were the same, the anger hadn't changed, but now there was another, darker emotion she couldn't quite name.

She wanted to move away from him, away from his touch, but something of the old Anna wouldn't let her cower away. She remained still, gazing up at him with what she hoped was a nonprovoking expression.

His gaze took on a mocking glint, as if he knew exactly what

she was thinking. “Why, Anna,” he said softly. “If I didn’t know better, I might think they’d given you a soul along with that new heart. But the problem is...” His features hardened almost imperceptibly. “I do know you.”

He was still holding her face up to his, his dark eyes now burning into hers. Something smoldered in those black depths, something not quite sane, Anna feared.

Dear God, what had happened to him since their divorce? He’d been bitter and angry over the breakup, but she’d never considered him dangerous.

But now...the way he was looking at her...

Anna suddenly wondered if Hays was behind the phone calls. If he had a deeper, darker motive for his visit.

And she remembered just as suddenly the bouts of moodiness during their marriage. The bursts of temper. The way he would sometimes disappear for days at a time. He’d always blamed their marriage difficulties on her career, and Anna hadn’t bothered to dispute him because she knew her ambition was a big part of their problem. But now she realized that their incompatibility went deeper than that. Much deeper.

“I once thought you were the most beautiful woman I’d ever laid eyes on. That blond hair.” He tucked a strand behind her ear. “Those dark eyes. And a body any man would kill to possess. But look at you now.” His gaze roamed over her, taking in her pale complexion, her frail frame. “Do you know what you’ve become, Anna? You’re a freak, a modern-day Frankenstein.”

She tried to move away, but his grip tightened on her chin. “It would be wrong to blame you, though, wouldn’t it? The real monsters are the surgeons who patch together pathetic, soulless creatures like you from the dead and the dying.”

Anna said angrily, “Let go of me, Hays.”

His hand slipped to her chest, and with one finger, he uncannily traced the outline of her scar through her blouse. “Tell me something, Anna. What man is going to want to see that in bed?”

HAYS’S TAUNT followed Anna into her building, into the elevator, all the way up to the ninth floor. She’d experienced his animosity before, but nothing like this. He’d seemed so cold and cruel, and that strange glint in his eyes...

Anna shuddered, trying to put the confrontation out of her mind, but as she got off the elevator and walked down the hall to her apartment, she couldn’t get his words out of her mind. Tell me something, Anna. What man is going to want to see that in bed?

It wasn’t like she hadn’t thought of that herself. It wasn’t like she hadn’t stared at that scar in the mirror, trying to picture a man’s reaction the first time he saw it.

Luckily, she supposed, she had no one serious in her life these days. After her divorce, she’d avoided complicated entanglements and had pursued only the companionship of men who shared a similar philosophy to hers, namely, that she neither wanted nor expected an exclusive commitment, and her career

would always come first.

She'd convinced herself it was an outlook that would serve her well, but looking back after her surgery, when she'd had plenty of time to dissect her life, Anna had come to realize that the like-minded men whose company she'd sought were as shallow as she, their personal lives as empty and vapid as hers. Looking at them was like looking in a mirror, and the reflection was not pretty.

Anna could well imagine their reactions on seeing her scar. Naturally, they'd try to put a good face on it, but inside they'd recoil in horror and wouldn't be able to get away fast enough. She was flawed now and—even worse—high-maintenance. A double whammy for the commitment-challenged.

And the one of substance, that nameless, faceless man whom Anna had now started to fantasize about? The man who could look at her, scar and all, and still want her? Was he out there somewhere?

Unaccountably, her thoughts went back to the man in the elevator, and as Anna inserted her key into the lock and opened the door, she wondered why he'd had such a strong impact on her. He was a total stranger. She'd probably never see him again. No reason for her to feel this strange fascination for him.

Except, of course, for the obvious reason. They were both flawed.

Had women shunned him because of his appearance? Somehow Anna couldn't imagine that.

Closing the door behind her, she took off her soggy raincoat

and tossed it into the powder room just off the foyer, an action that once would have been unthinkable to her.

“Laurel, I’m home!” She brushed fingers through her damp hair as she walked into the living room.

When there was no response, Anna decided she must have beat her stepmother home. Then she heard voices coming from the den, and she hurried down the hallway toward the sound.

“Laurel!”

As Anna entered the room, the first thing she saw was her stepmother’s pale face, and she knew immediately something had happened. Something terrible.

Laurel stood in front of the television, so engrossed in whatever was on that she hadn’t bothered to sit. She didn’t appear to hear Anna’s approach, either, but then she glanced up. “Anna! Oh, I’m so glad you’re home. I’ve been so worried—”

She actually swayed on her feet, and Anna rushed to her side, clutching her arm. “Laurel, what is it? What’s wrong?”

“I still can’t believe it,” she murmured, one hand to her throat.

“What?” Anna’s gaze was drawn to the television screen then and to the news alert that had interrupted an afternoon talk show Laurel loved. A female reporter stood on the street in front of a large home in an older, upscale neighborhood.

But Anna caught only a word or two of the woman’s report because her stepmother started to babble. “He must have left the hospital right after we did. The police think he was lured home and the killer was waiting for him—”

Anna gripped Laurel's shoulders. "What are you talking about? Waiting for whom?"

All Laurel could manage was to point weakly at the TV where the reporter's calm, clear tone was a surreal contradiction to her agitation.

Anna turned once again to stare at the screen. The reporter was in the middle of her recap. "...on the scene live in the Museum District where a prominent Houston heart surgeon was found brutally murdered in his home a short while ago. This has been a Channel Eleven exclusive report. Stay tuned for all the late-breaking developments...."

Anna spun to face Laurel. "No," she whispered.

Laurel nodded, her eyes brimming with tears. "It was Michael, Anna. He's dead."

And suddenly all Anna could think about was what her ex-husband had said to her not ten minutes earlier. It would be wrong to blame you, though, wouldn't it? The real monsters are the surgeons who patch together pathetic, soulless creatures like you from the dead and the dying.

HUDDLED INSIDE the apartment, Anna and Laurel remained glued to the TV that evening, watching several local news broadcasts for the latest developments in Michael's murder. But the details remained sketchy. He'd been shot to death in the breezeway between his garage and house. None of the neighbors had heard gunfire, nor had anyone seen anything suspicious. His body had been discovered when a woman walking her dog had

gone to investigate her pet's frantic barking and strange behavior. No suspects were in custody, and though the police spokesperson didn't come right out and say so, it appeared there were no concrete leads.

After Anna went to bed that night, she lay awake for a long time thinking about everything Michael had done to save her life. And now he was dead. Who could have done such a thing?

Deep down, she didn't really believe Hays had anything to do with the murder, but his words continued to haunt her. When she finally fell into an exhausted sleep, however, she didn't dream about Michael or her ex-husband. She dreamed about the stranger with the scar.

He was lying naked in bed, watching her undress. His eyes were dark and smoldering, and as she slowly approached him, he reached up, snaking a hand around the back of her neck to draw her down for a long, deep, soul-shattering kiss that robbed her of breath and sanity.

For the longest time, they kissed. His tongue was deep inside her mouth, tangling with hers, mating with hers, making her yearn for an even deeper intimacy.

When they finally broke apart, she traced the scar on his face with her fingertip, and he let her for a moment. Then he grabbed her hand, pulling her on top of him, and she came willingly. Eagerly. She moved over him, and their bodies joined so frantically, she cried out. The stranger's hands slid downward, grazing her breasts, tracing her waist, grasping her hips as he set

a powerful rhythm. Anna's head fell back. She could feel herself losing control. In another moment...

She woke up, gasping for breath. Her skin was on fire. For a moment, she thought it was the aftermath of the dream, but then she realized her elevated temperature and heart palpitations signified something far more dangerous.

Her body was rejecting her new heart....

Chapter Three

Anna climbed out of her car in San Miguel and stood in the baking heat. July in South Texas could be brutal and she was only a week out of the hospital. She'd rushed this trip. She knew that. She should have given herself another few days to build up her strength, but it was too late to turn back now. Somehow she knew if she got back in her car and drove away she might never work up enough courage to come here again. And if she left now, her self-doubts might never be laid to rest.

Everything about Anna's surgery and transplant had been almost textbook perfect. Michael had been so pleased by how readily her body had accepted the new organ and how quickly overall she'd recovered. Except for taking her daily meds, Anna had started to believe she could have a normal life again.

But Michael's murder and the organ rejection, coming on the same day, had been two devastating setbacks that had shaken Anna to her core. Both had been grim reminders of how fragile her world had become. Nothing was ever going to be normal for her again, and for the first time since the transplant, she'd begun to question whether or not it had been worth it.

Then, on the same day she came home from the hospital, she received a call from Tom Bellows. He'd discovered the identity of her donor. Her name was Katherine Sprague, a thirty-nine-year-old author and teacher who'd died of a gunshot wound to

the head, leaving behind a daughter, a husband and a sister, all of whom still lived in San Miguel, a small town about thirty miles south of San Antonio.

But even more distressing than hearing about the family Katherine Sprague had left behind was the news of how she'd died. She'd put a gun to her head and pulled the trigger. Anna was alive because of another woman's utter despair.

Over the next few days, Katherine Sprague's suicide continued to haunt Anna. For hours on end, she pored over the notes Tom had faxed her regarding his investigation. She ordered all of Katherine Sprague's novels and read each of them in one sitting. She scoured the Internet for every scrap of information she could find. The research gave her something to focus on other than her own health problems and Michael's death. It gave her a purpose, a mission. It gave her a mountain.

But Anna also knew that her natural curiosity and interest in her donor's life was quickly becoming an obsession. She couldn't put Katherine's death to rest no matter how hard she tried.

And so she'd decided to come to San Miguel. Not to confront Katherine's family with the reality of her transplant, but to, in some subtle way, touch Katherine's life the way she'd touched Anna's.

She shivered despite the intense heat. She'd never particularly believed in destiny or fate, but she couldn't deny the connection she felt to the dead woman, or the strange pull she experienced as she stared up at Katherine Sprague's sprawling Romanesque-

style mansion with its arched windows and towering palm trees.

Located on the edge of town, the house was perched atop a small hill that provided a sweeping view of the San Miguel River. The spacious grounds were lush and colorful, but even with the exotic ambience—or maybe because of it—the mansion had a brooding quality, a faint air of isolation even though the nearest neighbor was just down the street.

There was something about that house...

Anna could almost feel the whisper of its secrets along her backbone.

Before she lost her nerve, she hurried up the paved walkway, climbed the steps to the wide stone veranda, and rang the front doorbell. Perspiration dampened her blouse as she waited for her first encounter with Katherine's family.

A man answered the door. He was tall and well built, with broad shoulders, dark hair and piercing gray eyes that seemed to gaze at Anna with more than a fair amount of suspicion.

But the impression might simply have been her own conscience, she decided, trying to calm her nerves.

He was dressed in dark clothing that provided very little contrast to the deep shadows in the hallway behind him. For a moment, he appeared little more than a shadow himself.

Except for those eyes...

Anna's breath quickened, and she experienced an odd sense of déjà vu as she gazed up at him.

Then the moment was over as he inquired impatiently, "Yes?"

Anna cleared her throat. "I'm—my name is Anna Sebastian. I'm here to see Gwen Draven. I believe she's expecting me."

"She lives in one of the guest cottages around back, but she's not there." His tone was blunt, still impatient. Not the least bit inviting. "She said something about running an errand. I guess she forgot she had an appointment." His gaze swept over her, and Anna winced inwardly at what he must see. A woman who, at thirty-four, should have been in the prime of her life, but instead was too thin, too pale, too fragile-looking to be considered attractive.

She'd pulled her blond hair back in the same French twist she'd worn for ages, a style that had once made her look cool and sophisticated, she'd been told. Now the severe fashion only highlighted her gauntness. Her eyes were shadowed underneath, and some of the medications made her hands tremble. At least, she tried to convince herself that was the reason for her sudden nervousness.

The man's gaze moved back up to her face. There was something in his eyes, an emotion she couldn't quite define, that spiked Anna's adrenaline to a dangerous level, leaving her a little light-headed.

She put a hand on the doorframe for support.

"Are you all right?" he asked with a scowl. "You don't look well."

"It's the heat—" She broke off as he shifted his position in the doorway, and a shaft of light fell across his face. For the first

time Anna saw the scar, and her adrenaline surged once again, causing her heart to pound uncomfortably.

She knew him! He was the man from the elevator, the one who had captured her attention that day in the Chase Tower. The man she'd dreamed about so intimately...

Oh, my God!

Anna tried not to stare, but she couldn't help herself. Finding him here, in Katherine Sprague's house, jolted her.

"Maybe you'd better come inside and wait for Gwen." His tone had warmed slightly even though Anna knew he'd been aware of her reaction. And he undoubtedly thought it was because of his appearance.

"I—I don't want to impose." Anna was stunned to find herself stammering. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been so disconcerted.

"And I don't want you passing out on my doorstep." He stepped back and motioned her inside. "We can hear Gwen's car in the drive when she gets home. Come in," he insisted when Anna still hesitated. "I won't bite." And then, as she moved past him, she could have sworn she heard him mutter, "Not before sundown anyway."

Anna waited in the dim, cool hallway as he closed the door, and then she followed him into a large living area off to the right. The room was done in autumn tones of browns and greens with an occasional splash of red thrown in for contrast. Strange wooden masks lined the walls, adding to the exotic flavor of

the décor, as did the dramatic touches of animal prints in plush throws and pillows. The furniture and floors were a gleaming mahogany, but the plastered walls, high-beamed ceilings, and filtered light from a row of shuttered French doors kept it just short of oppressive. Anna actually found it cool and restful after the blistering heat of outdoors.

“My name is Ben Porter.” He motioned her toward a seat. “I’m Gwen’s brother-in-law.”

“How do you do?” Anna recognized his name from Tom’s research. He was an ex-cop who’d married Katherine Sprague just a few months before she died.

Anna wanted to believe her reaction to the man had everything to do with the rather bizarre coincidence of finding him here, but even that day in the elevator, when he’d barely glanced in her direction, he’d sparked something inside her. She’d told herself the scar on his face had drawn her attention, aroused her curiosity, but she wondered suddenly if it was something more.

And this house.

It was dark and foreboding, with its heavy furniture and shuttered windows, and yet there was something enticing about it just the same. Some mysterious pull that made Anna want to explore all of its deep, dark secrets.

Her gaze flickered back to Ben Porter. She suspected he had his own secrets, and she couldn’t help wondering what it would take to unmask them. A kiss?

Almost against her will, she lifted fingertips to lips that were

unexpectedly tingling. She knew, suddenly, what it would feel like to be kissed by this man. She knew his touch, his scent....

He'd haunted her dreams. So how could he possibly be a stranger?

A deep awareness flooded through Anna, and she trembled. She had Katherine's heart. Did she also have some of her memories?

No, of course not! It wasn't possible. A heart was just an organ. Tissue and muscle. It couldn't retain memory. And yet...

Could it really be just a bizarre coincidence that she'd seen Ben Porter that day in the elevator, felt the impact of his presence, and now their paths had crossed yet again? Here, of all places...

His gaze turned quizzical. "Are you sure you're okay? Why don't you sit down and I'll get you something cold to drink?"

"No, please don't bother," Anna managed to say. "I've already put you to too much trouble as it is."

"By letting you come in out of the heat?" He shrugged. "That's not a problem."

"But I'm interrupting your afternoon. Maybe I should come back another time."

"No need for that. Gwen should be home soon." He gazed at her for a moment longer, and then turned toward the door. "Make yourself at home. I'll be right back."

Anna watched him disappear through the arched doorway, and then she turned, gazing around. An ornate bombé chest on

the far side of the room held a ceramic vase of orchids and several antique picture frames. Anna walked over and studied the photographs, then reached out and picked up one. It was the same black-and-white shot of Katherine that had been used on the jacket cover of her books.

She'd been an extraordinarily beautiful woman. A statuesque brunette with wide, dark eyes and full, sensuous lips. A woman of passions...

As Anna studied the photograph, she gradually became aware of the faint tinkle of a piano from somewhere deep in the house. She lifted her head, listening, as the seemingly random notes melded into a melody.

Heart and Soul.

"We have fresh lemonade," Ben said from the doorway.

Whether it was his voice or the music that violently startled her, Anna couldn't say for sure. But she dropped the silver frame, and the glass shattered against the wood floor. She stared at it in horror. "Oh, God. I'm so sorry." She knelt quickly and began picking up the glass shards.

Ben set the drink aside and moved toward her. "Don't bother with that. I'll take care of it later."

"I'm sorry," she said again. "I didn't hear you come in."

"I didn't mean to frighten you." His deep voice held a genuine note of regret.

"That music." Anna's hands were still trembling as she gazed up at him. "Do you hear it?"

He listened for a moment. "That's my stepdaughter, Gabriella. She's warming up for her piano lesson." He knelt beside Anna and put his hand on her arm. "I'm serious. Don't worry about the glass. I'll clean it up later."

A thrill snaked up Anna's arm at his touch. Their gazes met, his eyes darkened, and her stomach fluttered with awareness.

She tore her gaze from his and glanced down at Katherine's picture, which lay faceup beneath the fragments of glass. The woman's expression seemed at once amused and accusing, and Anna noticed suddenly that a tiny drop of blood was smeared across her features. "Oh, no! I've ruined the picture."

Ben shrugged. "There're plenty more around the house. Katherine was never camera shy." He reached out and took Anna's hand in his. "You've cut yourself on the glass. Let me take a look."

He turned her hand over and studied the tiny sliver on her thumb. "It's just a scratch, but you're still bleeding. Come on. I'll get you a Band-Aid."

"No, I'm fine—" The risk of infection was a constant concern since her transplant, and at any other time, Anna might have freaked about the cut. But now she was too distracted by the scars on Ben Porter's right hand to worry about her own well-being. The scars were long and smooth and deep, like the one on his face. She gazed at them, feeling oddly stimulated by the sight.

He got up abruptly as if all too aware of her scrutiny. "Come on. The bathroom is this way."

He led her down the hallway to a spacious powder room furnished in pink, gold and ivory. The décor in here was less exotic and utterly feminine, and Ben seemed overpoweringly masculine against the plush surroundings.

While he opened a gilded mirrored door and collected a box of Band-Aids and a bottle of antiseptic, Anna studied the chiseled line of his profile, the way his dark hair fell across his forehead, giving just a hint of vulnerability to an otherwise dark and brooding face. Shifting her gaze slightly, she saw that he was watching her watch him in the mirror.

A frown flickered across his brow, and Anna knew at once he thought she'd been staring at his scar. She hadn't been. She hadn't even noticed it.

It was his eyes that held her attention. Those lips...

The nerve endings connected to her heart had been severed during surgery. Her reaction to extreme emotion would be different from now on, Michael had warned her. So how was it possible that her new heart could pound so hard at Ben Porter's mere presence?

He turned slowly to face her, his gaze deep, probing. "You seem familiar to me." He searched her features, lifting a hand as if to smooth back her hair, but he didn't touch her even though Anna wanted him to. More than anything. She suddenly ached for his touch. "Have we met before?" he asked in a puzzled voice.

She shook her head, unable to speak. Unable for a moment to even breathe. What was going on here? What was wrong with

her? How could she react so strongly to a man she'd just met? How could she want him...when she knew nothing about him?

Something odd happened to her then. The bathroom disappeared, and Anna found herself gazing down into Ben's smoldering eyes as her hair fell in a curtain around her face. They were in bed, naked, the covers twisted from their lovemaking, their skin shimmering in the afterglow. And he wanted her again. She could see it in his eyes. The passion. The longing. The desperation...

As if lost in the same vision, Ben grabbed her shoulders and pulled her to him, then tangled his fingers in her hair as he lowered his mouth to hers.

But just before their lips touched, Anna gasped and sprang back.

He stared down at her in shock. "My God," he muttered. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. It's just..." He ran a hand across his eyes, as if trying to clear away the vision. "I'm sorry," he said again. "You probably think I'm some kind of pervert, grabbing you like that. But I swear I'm harmless."

As harmless as a cobra, maybe.

A door slammed somewhere nearby, and he looked instantly relieved. "That must be Gwen. I'll go tell her you're here while you take care of that cut." He backed toward the door as if he couldn't get away from her fast enough, but he paused in the hallway, glancing at her anxiously. "Are you sure you're okay?"

She lifted her chin. "Yes, I'm fine." She listened to the house

for a moment. “The music,” she said softly. “It’s stopped.”

Ben listened, too, and then shrugged. “Thank God for small mercies.” Then he turned on his heel and disappeared.

A YOUNG WOMAN stood arguing with Ben in the dim living room. When she saw Anna hovering in the doorway, however, her anger instantly disappeared and she smiled brilliantly. “You must be Anna. Ben was just telling me you were here. I’m Gwen. We spoke on the phone this morning.”

The first thing that struck Anna about Gwen Draven was her resemblance to her sister. She was a younger version of Katherine Sprague, but without the smoldering eyes, without the full, pouting lips and the hidden passions that, even in Katherine’s photographs, seemed to ooze from her every pore.

Gwen’s beauty was more subtle. And more wholesome somehow. She was only an inch or two taller than Anna and almost as slender, but where Katherine had exuded a steamy sexuality, Gwen radiated vitality. The line of tanned skin between her light blue top and her black low-rider jeans rippled with toned muscle.

Her hair was dark, shoulder-length and choppy, and when she carelessly pushed it back, the glossy strands fell perfectly back into place. She seemed the very epitome of youth, health and beauty, and yet when she approached Anna to offer her hand, there was a glimmer of uncertainty in her hazel eyes.

“I apologize for being late,” she said. “I completely forgot you were coming.”

“No apology necessary. I’ve obviously come at a bad time.” Anna’s gaze shot to Ben’s before she glanced quickly away. It was disturbing seeing him now, a stranger again, when only moments ago... “I’m sorry for the intrusion.”

Gwen waved aside her protests. “Don’t be silly. My sister’s friends are always welcome here.”

Ben had moved slightly away from them, but out of the corner of her eye, Anna saw him whirl, as if something had caught him by surprise.

“You knew Katherine?” His tone sounded startled. “I assumed you were Gwen’s friend.”

“Gwen and I spoke on the phone this morning, but we’d never met until now.” Anna was suddenly experiencing an acute attack of conscience. She’d wanted to meet Katherine’s family, wanted to tell them without telling them what Katherine had done for her. To that end, she’d devised a cover, informing Gwen earlier that she’d gone to the University of Texas with Katherine and had only recently heard about her death.

It was a plausible enough story, Anna supposed. Through her research, she’d discovered they’d both attended UT, and even though Katherine had been in graduate school when Anna was a freshman, it was certainly possible their paths might have crossed at some point. But credible or not, Anna was finding the sham harder to pull off than she’d imagined. She didn’t like deceiving Katherine’s family. They deserved better from her.

But it was too late to change her plans now. Anna couldn’t

just blurt out the truth. They didn't deserve that from her, either. After all, if they'd wanted any contact with her, they would have responded to her letter.

Ben's gaze was still on Anna, and her skin went hot and cold from the intensity of his stare. "I guess I jumped to conclusions when you said you were here to see Gwen," he muttered.

"She and Katherine went to UT together," Gwen explained. "Anna's been ill and only just recently heard about Katherine's death. She called this morning to see if she could stop by." She turned to Anna, lifting a perfectly shaped brow for verification. "Did I get it right?"

She asked the question as if she suspected the story might be a fabrication. Or maybe her suspicions were a figment of Anna's guilty conscience. She moistened her lips, all too aware of both Gwen and Ben's scrutiny. "Yes."

"Were you close?" The edge in his voice sent a chill up Anna's spine.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You and Katherine. Were you close friends?"

She took a moment to formulate her response. "No, I can't say that we were," she said carefully. "But she had a very definite impact on my life."

"How?" He was scowling now, obviously displeased, but Anna had no idea why. Because of what had almost happened between them in the bathroom?

"It's...difficult to explain."

He looked on the verge of challenging her for that explanation, difficult or not, but Gwen said smoothly, “A lot of people have said that about my sister. She had a special way of touching people’s lives. Our father used to say she was like the Pied Piper. Her devotees would follow her anywhere.”

“Exactly how well did you know her?” Ben persisted.

“For God’s sake, you sound as if you’re trying to interrogate the poor woman,” Gwen scolded. “Don’t pay him any attention, Anna. Once a cop, always a cop.” She took Anna’s arm. “Why don’t we sit down?”

She guided Anna to a sofa luxuriously upholstered in a deep green chenille. Tossing aside a leopard-print pillow, she drew her legs underneath her and turned to face Anna. Ben remained standing. He hovered near the windows where the filtered light cast him in an unnatural aura.

Anna watched him for a moment before tearing her gaze away. “I can’t stay long. I just wanted to stop by for a few moments.”

“You can’t go yet,” Gwen protested. “We never have company anymore. Sometimes I think I’ll go out of mind from boredom around here. We used to have people in and out of the house all the time, especially in the summer, when Katherine had her retreats here. Nowadays...well, it’s just not the same without her, is it, Ben?” There was the barest hint of mockery in her tone before she turned her attention back to Anna. “Anyway, you said on the phone you’re an attorney in Houston?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Did you and Katherine keep in touch after college?”

Anna paused. “No, not really.”

“Then you’d probably like to hear a little about her life.” Gwen smiled. “She was a tenured professor at the University of St. Agnes in San Antonio and the author of nine novels. Her books weren’t all that successful from a commercial standpoint, but they acquired a certain amount of critical acclaim, and over the years, she developed something of a cult following.”

“I’ve read her books and enjoyed them very much.” Anna was relieved that at last there was a ring of truth in her voice.

“Ben is a writer, too, you know. That’s how he and my sister met.”

He turned from the window with an impatient gesture. “I’m not a writer.”

“Yes, well, the only bestseller in this house has your name on it.” Was that a touch of resentment in Gwen’s voice?

Ben frowned. “That doesn’t make me a writer.”

“No,” Gwen agreed. “But it made you a lot of money, didn’t it? Not that you need it now,” she added under her breath. She glanced back at Anna. “He and Katherine met at one of Ben’s signings in Houston. It was at a little bookstore on South Main. Maybe you know it.”

“No need to bore her with the details,” Ben said dryly.

“Oh, don’t be silly. What woman doesn’t enjoy hearing a good love story? Especially one that involves love at first sight.” She gave Anna a sly smile. “Katherine used to go on and on about how

their eyes met across the crowded bookstore...and then later, how they couldn't keep their hands off each other. It was a real fairy-tale romance. My sister was a very lucky woman, Anna."

So lucky she'd felt compelled to take her own life, Anna thought.

Ben's mouth tightened as he glared at Gwen. "For God's sake, do you have to do this in front of a stranger?"

Anna rose. "Perhaps I should go—"

Gwen grabbed her arm and pulled her back down on the sofa. "No, please. Don't go yet. If Ben doesn't want to talk about Katherine, we can change the subject. Perhaps he could tell you about his book. Now there's an interesting topic." Her eyes gleamed with something Anna couldn't define and wasn't sure she wanted to.

She said cautiously, "What's it about?"

"It doesn't matter," Ben said with a dismissive shrug.

"It's about a serial killer." Gwen gave him a smug smile, as if she enjoyed goading him. Anna had to wonder about their relationship. The two of them obviously didn't get along, so why did they remain in such close proximity to one another? Why hadn't Ben moved back to Houston after Katherine's death? What kept him in San Miguel?

"You're from Houston so you probably remember all those murders three summers ago that the police attributed to a killer they called Scorpio," Gwen was saying.

Anna forced her attention back to the conversation. "Yes. As

a matter of fact, a girl who worked in my building was one of the victims.”

Ben turned. “What was her name?” he asked sharply.

His tone took her by surprise. “I don’t remember. Renee something.”

“Renee Canard.” It wasn’t a question.

Anna nodded. “Yes, I think that was it. She was killed in a parking garage across the street from my office. I didn’t know her, but the police came and interviewed people in the building after her body was found.”

Gwen had been sitting quietly during this exchange, but now she said suddenly, “What a strange coincidence. Ben was probably one of the cops you saw that day. You two may have even spoken, and now here you are.”

Anna’s gaze went reluctantly back to Ben. She wondered if he was thinking the same thing as she, that maybe such a meeting, no matter how brief, was the reason they had this strange connection.

“The killer was never caught,” Gwen said. “Isn’t that right, Ben?”

He started toward the doorway, as if he’d had enough of the conversation. “If you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.”

Gwen watched him leave, then turned back to Anna with a frown. “You’ll have to forgive Ben’s manners. He’s a little... abrupt at times.”

He’d left the room, but Anna could still feel his presence.

It was so odd. She'd never felt this way before. She'd never experienced such an intense attraction, and she knew he'd felt it, too. Why else had he tried to kiss her?

She strove to keep her tone even as she said, "Is he working on a new book?"

Gwen grimaced. "No. He's working on an old case."

"He's still a cop, then?" Anna asked in surprise.

Gwen shook her head. "He's not a cop. Ben will never be a cop again. Scorpio took care of that."

"What do you mean?"

Gwen hesitated. "I don't know how much you remember about that summer, but the police had no real suspects. They were very frustrated. Ben was one of the lead detectives on the case, and he...did something stupid. He used himself as bait to draw out the killer, and he very nearly became Scorpio's thirteenth victim."

Icy fingers played up and down Anna's spine as Gwen leaned toward her, lowering her voice. "The scars on his hand and face... Scorpio did that to him. And the scars on the inside are even worse. I don't think Ben ever recovered from that summer. He's still convinced Scorpio will jump out of the bushes one day and finish him off."

Anna suppressed a deep shudder. Whatever Ben was afraid of, she doubted it had anything to do with his personal safety. He didn't seem the type of man to dwell on a close call, even one with a brutal killer. It had to be something else he feared.

"I don't remember hearing about any more victims after that summer," she said reluctantly. "The killings stopped, didn't they? The police thought Scorpio might be in prison for some other crime or else he was dead."

Gwen shrugged. "No one knows what happened to Scorpio, or why the killings stopped so suddenly. But all those unanswered questions still feed Ben's obsession."

"Is that why he wrote the book?"

"Partly, I suppose. And partly because he was offered a great deal of money to do so. But enough of all this." She gave Anna an enigmatic smile. "You didn't come here to talk about serial killers, did you? You came here to talk about my sister."

"Actually, I just wanted to stop by for a few minutes to pay my respects and now I really should be going." Anna stood, suddenly anxious to get out of that house, away from Gwen Draven and her dark story, away from Ben Porter and his devastating effect on her. She needed space to breathe because for a moment while listening to Gwen, Anna had the disturbing notion that she was being sucked into Katherine's life and it just might be a place she didn't want to go.

To her relief, Gwen didn't protest her leaving. She got up to walk her to the door. "Are you going back to Houston tonight?"

"No, I don't think so. It's a long drive, and I'm pretty tired. I think I'll find a place to spend the night, and then head back first thing in the morning."

Gwen's gaze rested on Anna. "Look, this is none of my

business, but you mentioned on the phone this morning that you'd been ill recently. That's why you hadn't heard about Katherine." She paused. "Are you okay now? You seem so...fragile."

"I sometimes tire easily, but I'm fine," Anna evaded. "Thanks for asking. And thank you for agreeing to see me today. It meant a lot."

"I could tell that it did when you called."

"Katherine changed my life," Anna said. "I wanted her family to know that."

Gwen smiled. "Someday you'll have to tell me more about your relationship with my sister, but right now, I won't keep you. There's an inn on Old River Road called Casa del Gatos. It's sort of a cross between a bed and breakfast and a small hotel. It's actually quite charming if you don't mind rustic. When you leave here, just follow the street to the bottom of the hill and turn left. The hotel is all the way at the end. Some of the rooms have a nice view of the river."

Anna nodded. "Thanks. I'll look for it."

The two women said their goodbyes, and Anna headed down the steps of the veranda, then crossed the lush grounds to the street. She paused at her car, glancing back at the house and wondering if she'd accomplished what she'd set out to.

Neither Gwen nor Ben had spoken about Katherine's suicide, but Anna supposed that was to be expected. She was a stranger after all. No reason they would open up to her.

But at least she'd been able to see for herself where Katherine

had lived. She'd met her sister and husband, and had seen evidence of the very rich and full life Katherine had led.

So why had she committed suicide?

And why had Anna come away from Katherine's home deeply disturbed? It was as if there'd been something simmering just beneath the surface she hadn't quite been able to see.

As Anna stared up at the house, a movement from a third-story balcony drew her attention. Someone stood just beyond the railing, staring down at her. At first, she thought it was Gwen, but Anna wasn't sure even Gwen, for all her obvious physical fitness, would have had time to rush up two flights of stairs to the third story.

It suddenly occurred to Anna that the watcher might be Katherine's fourteen-year-old daughter, Gabriella, the one who had been playing the piano earlier. Anna couldn't distinguish her features, but for some reason she had the impression the girl was scowling at her with displeasure.

As their gazes met from a distance, a chill lifted the hair at the back of Anna's neck, and rather than waving a greeting, she opened the car door and climbed inside.

Chapter Four

Ben stood at the window of his second-floor office and stared down at the heavily landscaped grounds that were already deep in shadow even though the sun still lingered just above the horizon. Soon it would be twilight, and every bush and tree would become a potential hiding place for evil.

He grimaced, thinking that he might be starting to sound a little too much like Margarete Cortina, a local woman whose rants about demons and spirits, along with her devotion to a rather bizarre religion, had made her something of a laughingstock in San Miguel.

But Ben wasn't laughing, nor was he so quick to dismiss her beliefs as the ramblings of a mad woman. And for one simple reason. Like Margarete, he knew evil existed. He'd seen it. He'd almost been destroyed by it. And he would be a fool to dismiss the clues, no matter how subtle, that warned him now the evil was back. In a different form, maybe, but still deadly, nonetheless.

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