

CHAPTER ONE

A pink hue from the light of the streetlamp filtered in through the sheer curtains that hung in the bedroom window. Anna breathed in the fragrance of the lavender scented fabric softener as she laid underneath the soft quilt of her queen-sized bed. It wasn't long before the shouting resumed at the house next door to Anna's. This was why Anna had always hated city row homes. Every little noise could be heard from the house on either side of you. The stillness of the night only amplified any noises coming from next door. The neighbors might as well have been right there in her bedroom having another one of their frequent fights.

"But Hector, I love you! Please, please stop seeing her!"

"Fuck you. Maybe if you didn't eat so much and hadn't gained fifty pounds you wouldn't be so fat, and then I'd still want to fuck you".

"Fuck me? No, fuck you Hector".

The next sound Anna heard was that of a body hitting the neighboring wall. A few seconds later Anna could hear the footsteps of Hector as he stomped down the stairs. As expected, the slamming door followed right on cue. This of course would be followed by Hector getting into his car, starting the engine, and speeding away from the house. The coffee can muffler left its echo long after Hector had pulled away from the curb. Anna knew that the incessant crying would begin any moment. Sitting up in her bed, she lit a cigarette knowing there would be no

sleep for her at this point and was becoming weary of this ritual that seemed to take place every Friday night at the Rivera household next door. Theresa was a nice enough woman, but she couldn't stand Hector. He was a fucking idiot. Anna leaned against the headboard and took a long drag of the cigarette. Exhaling, she watched the smoke dance in the faint light of the streetlamp as she thought back to when she first moved into this shithole of a neighborhood. The first night Anna spent in her newly rented home she was woken up at one o'clock in the morning to twenty-one gunshots right outside of her living room window. She remembered how she dove from her bed to the floor out of fear of being hit by a stray bullet that might happen to make its way through her bedroom window. Anna remembered laying on the floor for what seemed to be an eternity until she felt it safe to move. It seemed like it had been a living hell in this home ever since she moved in. There always seemed to be one thing after another with the people she called her neighbors. If the Rivera's weren't fighting, then another neighbor on the block was drunk and stumbling into trash cans on his way home from the Parkside Tavern on the corner. At least the drug lord who lived on the block left her alone. Anna liked to believe it was a silent understanding of *'you don't bug me, and I won't bug you'* kind of thing. Anna knew he had been responsible for the gunfire that night and decided it best to keep to herself until she could afford to move. The neighborhood hadn't always been this bad. In fact, it used to be one of the better places to live in the city. It seemed that the area had gone downhill at a pace slow enough that she hadn't even noticed the decline until she was in the thick of it. Her mind wandered to what her life had been like until six months ago. Back then Anna was just like Theresa Rivera. Anna would have done anything to make her marriage work. She had to give her bastard ex-husband credit for one thing though; Bob had never beat her. It was the only thing Anna could think of that he didn't do to wear her down. No, Bob preferred to take a mentally abusive approach to

their marriage instead. Anna had grown up in a strict Catholic household and had ended up marrying a born-again Christian. At least that was what Bob had told her he was. In Anna's mind, there was no way he could be truly born-again. In Anna's mind, God fearing men didn't treat their wives like shit. Anna chuckled to herself as she thought of all the times Bob had tried to use the Bible against her; to make her become subservient. Of course he only used verses from the Bible that could be twisted to suit his needs at the time. Anna remembered begging her ex-husband to work together to save their marriage. After years of being the only one doing any work, she realized Bob only told her he would work on it just to shut her up for the moment. Anna got what she wanted out of the divorce- half of everything they owned, along with her freedom and sanity back. It was only a matter of time before the divorce would be final and she would have half of what they had saved over the course of their ten-year marriage. She knew she would have to stay in this rental until she saved a little more money to afford to purchase another home in a safe neighborhood. Anna knew it wouldn't be her dream home though. All her life Anna had longed to build a log home in a secluded area of a mountain. She wanted at least 20 acres of land so she wouldn't have to deal with ignorant neighbors. Anna was a self-classified hermit and she liked it that way. Even her job was killing her on the inside. She made good money as a medical transcriptionist at the local hospital, but she hated working with so many people on a daily basis. Anna had been contemplating talking to her boss about letting her work from home. She had decided to take her time and come up with a good pitch. If he didn't like the idea, then she would freelance or sign up with one of the agencies.

Anna realized how strong her craving for a cup of coffee was at that moment. She decided drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes downstairs was a better option than listening to Theresa crying. Oreo, Anna's cat, let out a soft meow as Anna pulled back the covers and slid to the edge

of the bed. Anna felt so at peace around animals, and Oreo was the perfect cat. She wasn't the typical anti-social cat; Oreo loved being with Anna at all times. If Anna was cooking in the kitchen, Oreo was there watching. If Anna was in the shower, Oreo curled up on the throw rug and patiently waited. Anna leaned over to Oreo and pet her soft, black and white fur. Smiling, she stated to her cat "you know Oreo, you are the only thing that saves my sanity some days". Oreo purred as if to acknowledge that she already knew this fact. Sliding her feet into her slippers, Anna rose from the bed and put on her robe before making her way through the dark, down the stairs and into the kitchen. Oreo quickened her pace in order to walk directly beside Anna, as if she were Anna's guard.

While the coffee brewed in the kitchen Anna sat down at her computer to check her e-mail. Her inbox was usually filled with more junk mail than e-mail from friends. Anna didn't have many friends, and never felt the need to have more. She had Jason, her one and only real friend at work. She could talk to him about anything. Occasionally the two of them talked about getting out of the hospital and opening a holistic healing center. Both of them had taken numerous classes in various healing techniques and felt they had more to contribute to the world than typing doctor's notes all day. One of Anna's favorite classes included herbal remedies. She never realized how dangerous seemingly harmless plants could be. She wanted to put that knowledge to use someday running a center with Jason. Anna also had Susan; a friend she had met online years ago in a women's forum. Anna and Susan had instantly hit it off. They were so much alike in some ways, but complete opposite in others. Anna thought it was good they had differences because it made for interesting discussions. Susan lived in New York, and Anna in Pennsylvania. They had spent many days talking on the phone for hours on end and had met in person twice. Anna admired the fact that Susan was an accomplished freelance writer who had published

numerous articles in magazines and trade manuals. Susan was also working on a novel but would only let Anna read bits and pieces from time to time. Susan's latest venture was writing for an online role-playing game called Days of Olde. As Anna scanned her inbox she noticed an e-mail from Susan, or Ravenfae as she called herself online. Anna read the e-mail with enthusiasm as Susan explained in great detail about her latest work that had been put into the game. Susan begged Anna to join the game. Anna had played computer games before, but those were mostly single player mystery-type games. On rare occasions Anna would play a fighter game with Jason. She had never played games where she could interact online with other players from all around the world. The thought of it intimidated her a little. Anna decided to check if Susan happened to be online through the instant message program. Anna knew Susan usually kept late hours because she could get more work done while her family was sleeping. Anna signed on to the service and went to get a cup of coffee while the program connected. While Anna was in the kitchen she heard the familiar "ding" signaling she had received an instant message. She came back to the computer to see a message from Susan asking Anna if she was up because it was "Friday night at the fights again". Anna replied with the usual "of course", and then proceeded to ask Susan how it was going with the game. Susan typed away for what seemed to be hours, telling Anna all the latest news from the "Realms". Anna soon found out that was what the gamers called the game. Susan relayed a brief synopsis of her new material that was now in-game, and the inner workings of the game staff hierarchy. Again Susan urged Anna to join the game and promised to show her the ropes. Anna yawned as she typed that she would consider it. She realized the wailing from next door had ceased, and decided it was time to try to get some sleep.