

*There was a time when I truly believed people were, for the most part, good at heart.
How I was able to ignore the darkness that slithered behind their eyes ...*

CHAPTER 1

Lina



I took a deep breath in and held it while squeezing my eyes shut. I wanted to focus solely on the simple act of letting the air seep from my body in a gradual stream, but when I grew lightheaded, my eyes popped open as I sucked air.

Standing in front of the white picket fence, I stared at the multitude of champagne roses weaving their hunter green vines gracefully through and around the fence. Soft hints of pink hues whispered from the centers of the blooms. Their petals covered the lush ground and rolled in a lazy dance with the warm summer breeze.

Movement in my peripheral vision pulled me from my stifled thoughts. I absently watched the swaying drapes in the neighbor's window; the notion of someone watching me encouraged me to move along. *What makes people want to spy on complete strangers? Trust me neighbor, there's nothing to see here.* With an unsteady hand, I pushed the gate open and entered. Crossing the large front yard, I followed along the slight s-curve of flat stones edged with pansies.

While I walked, I took in the view that the enchanting beach-style house afforded. The rather large home was not the typical box-style house; instead, it had a unique layout that caught the eye, making it esthetically pleasing. With its soft yellow siding and white trim, it held a happy, inviting charm.

A bay window curved on the left and a large porch, complete with swing, stretched across the front. The main entry to the garage was on the right side of the house, but a quaint door between two beautiful stained-glass windows permitted easy walk-in access from the front.

I love this house. The ache that followed squeezed the air from my lungs. Love aside, I found it difficult to scale the steps and move forward to the front door. Despite that small feat, I stood motionless on the welcome mat and knew I couldn't do this. I didn't want to face the pain.

The air grew thick with heat and my skin moistened. "Get inside," demanded a crackling voice that sounded much like nails dragging down a rough surface.

"What?" I jumped with a start and glanced around, but no one was there. Experience had my teeth bearing down on my lower lip to ensure I wasn't caught up in a vision.

With the dense heat pushing at my back, I turned the key, squeezed the handle, and let the front door swing open. Bright sunlight beamed in from behind, catching the intricate cuts of lead glass on the door and scattering an array of color across the wood floor. I stood frozen, unable to will my legs to move forward.

The second hand on my watch must have clicked about a hundred times. *How long have I been standing here?* I thought. *It's ridiculous to prolong the inevitable. Just go in. Just take a step and go inside.* The disturbing voice hovered on the hot air at the nape of my neck, "Get inside," and a bead of sweat ran between my shoulder blades. It was enough to get me moving.

The first step inside yielded familiar smells and took me back to a simpler time. Off to the left was the parlor. Rays of sunlight streamed through the large front windows bringing a placid glow to the room. I leaned against the archway as cherished memories flooded in forcing my lips to form a slight curve—not quite a smile, as that had been long lost. I saw my own big brown eyes in the little girl sitting on the rug, playing with her dolls.

My breath escaped me when I saw Nonna, my beloved grandmother, walk in. Elderly but beautiful, my heart warmed in her radiance. Her skin held the wrinkles of age and experience, yet glowed with joy and inner peace. Her eyes were gentle and filled with kindness. There before me stood a woman of true goodness, all tenderness and heart.

She reached down and stroked the little girl's face, my face, before pushing a couple of wavy locks behind my ear. The younger me shot a cheerful smile at Nonna then stood up and hugged her with all her little might. "Aw, my sweet daisy," Nonna chirped as she planted a kiss on top of my head, "I love you, Lina."

"I love you too," I whispered. There was something indescribably perfect about my grandmother. Tears welled up and blurred my view. I blinked them away, not wanting to miss the loving memory of my

Nonna, but alas, it vanished. With the recollection gone, the rays of sunlight reaching across the empty hardwood floor seemed to have dimmed in comparison.

This house belonged to me now ... this, and everything in it. I would gladly give it all back if it meant having Nonna here to greet me as if this were just another visit, and not what it truly was: my inheritance.

Could I handle living here? Could I handle the expectation of Nonna coming around the corner at any moment, watching hopefully, only to be disappointed every time she did not appear?

My nerves tattered, I expelled a long breath and stepped out of the room; I was exhausted. After recovering from the vivid memory, I dropped my keys on the console in the hallway and caught my reflection in the vintage, rose-trimmed mirror on the wall. *Suffering dandelions, I look exhausted.* The only thing that gave me some semblance of color was the stark-white sleeveless button-up blouse I wore.

Stepping away, my eyes rested on a pair of Nonna's worn, floral-print gardening gloves sitting on the table and my heart sank. Like Nonna, my visions had also vanished. The day of my Nonna's passing brought a deafening silence on my gift of sight. I longed for the comfort the visions brought, the complete escape they provided, however brief they might be.

Most of all, I missed *him* and those onyx eyes that burned into my soul. Though he had been in my visions for as far back as I could remember, I didn't know his name, nor was I able to focus on that small but important detail. I grew so used to his visits, there in the hypothetical realm, that I felt the fates would cut short my lifeline without him. A bit dramatic I knew, but couldn't deny my true feelings.

Without realizing it, my hand pressed against my heart. There lived a deep yearning for this stranger, unlike anything I'd ever felt for another man. In truth, I could love no other while he held me captive in my mind.

Mercilessly though, my visions were lost and I received no visits from the familiar stranger and his hypnotic black eyes. I needed him now more than ever.

I ran an unsteady hand through my long wavy hair, contemplating what might have stifled my gift of sight. I could only blame my broken heart for blocking him from me. Whatever the case, the added silence played cruel and unrelenting on my misery.

Not surprising, my thoughts shifted to the creepy voice I heard outside, demanding I get in the house. I'd like to dismiss it as part of a vision, but knew better. There were none of the usual signs to announce the onset, nor had I had any visions for weeks now. Far too sad and tired, I had no desire to tackle the oddity at present and tried to look at the quirk in a positive light; maybe it was a blip indicating my visions were trying to return.

Forcing another breath into my constrained lungs, I turned from the gardening gloves and wiped a tear away. No, my Nonna was no longer going to comfort and protect me. She'd no longer be humming as

she cooked in the kitchen; would no longer radiate the joy that once filled this house, the house my Grandpa built just for her. How he adored and loved her, through and through.

This house was home to me. I never knew my parents. They died in a car accident when I was just an infant and my grandparents raised me. This house had always been joyful, and filled to the brim with love. All that was bad and corrupt in this world seemed unable to penetrate these walls.

Dropping my purse on one of the chairs that capped the ends of the console, I braved a look down the large hall to the back door and my throat tightened. My thoughts whispered, *not yet*, as the hurt had me dodging the door, and instead, eyeing one of the remarkable oil paintings hanging on the wall opposite me—a painting my Nonna had done.

Being in this house again awoke something in me. Aside from the harsh reminder that I was completely alone in this world, there lingered the undeniable traces of *him* in the air. I had only spent three years away during college, having graduated early, and it was here that we connected the most. Admittedly, some of my visions were disturbing beyond words, but I would gladly tolerate them in the off chance of seeing him. His visits made the strange visions worth suffering through.

In comparison to the stifling heat outside the front door, the empty house seemed frigid, and with a shiver, I tucked my fingertips into my jeans pockets. I screamed internally for him, my dark-eyed vision, and my thoughts implored; *please ... I need you!*

The mother of mercy took pity and a welcome pull tugged at me. A slight pressure filled my head as a quick silvery-white flash blinded me to announce the oncoming vision.

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*** His sonorous voice rose from behind, heating my blood. “Why do you distrust me? Do you not know by now that I am with you always?” He moved with stealth-like silence. Only when I felt his touch did I realize where he was. I leaned back into him, letting him easily support my weight.

Tears clung to my lashes and I tried to blink them away. “Can you not stay with me forever?” I pleaded, turning so I could press my face to his chest. I couldn’t bear another separation from him.

He leaned down, touching his face to mine, and with fixed confidence stated, “I can.” The vision began to fade—*no, not yet*, I thought, *stay with me*. He grinned, seeming to know my innermost thoughts. The idea of him reading my mind made my shoulders tense, and his grin stretched into a smile. As the manifestation vanished, and a single flash marked the completion of the vision, I heard the fading traces of his rich voice, “I will.” ***

The image was gone, but my heart raced. Lost in amazement I stood perfectly still, not wanting to lose the essence of the vision that lingered. Illusion or not, he was so real. I wondered if I would finally get to meet the mysterious man that delightfully haunted my waking visions in such a splendid way.

Archos

I watched her as I had done for two decades. Peering through the sun-lit drapes, I studied my neighbor. Her hesitation was apparent and I found myself empathizing with her. It had to be hard, what she was going through. I traced over her familiar lines until it appeared our eyes locked.

I quickly straightened, causing the drapes to fall and sway back into place. Fool. Whether she saw me or not made no difference now, the movement of the drapes was sure to catch her attention. Unwilling to look at the source of my error, I focused on the floor and released a grunt. Snippets of grass lay scattered around my boots. I was finishing the lawn out back and had hurried to the front window to catch a glimpse when she arrived.

A basket of plump, ripe apples sat near my soiled feet. I looked back at the settled drapes and contemplated; I could give the apples to her. Decidedly, that would be pushing my luck, yet here I was, reaching to peer through the confounded drapes again.

Two decades. As I watched her, everything in my body constricted, warning me, but I could not help myself; I had to get a closer look. Stepping onto the porch, I assured myself it was harmless; I was just checking the mail.

In keeping with the “innocence” of my presence, I did a casual stretch. A foreign scent raided my nose and yanked my attention to the forest behind the houses across the street. With heightened senses, I crossed the yard, glancing routinely at my neighbor until I reached the mailbox. This time, I was in no danger of her noticing me; her emotions had taken too strong a hold to care much about anything going on around her.

Opening my mailbox, I waited with practiced patience, and whispered under my breath, “Come on, Lina ... get inside.” As soon as she entered her house, I sprinted across the street and plunged into part of the thicket between two of the houses. The scent of moist earth and foliage filled the air along with the musky stench that had assaulted my nose. Scanning the dense, twisted forest, I found the source.

A gnarled, hairy man stood watching Lina. He had overly large brown irises, streaked with blood-red veins that reached out past the coloring into the yellowed whites of his eyes. Torment creased his sweaty features as ravenous hunger oozed from his salivating mouth.

I moved forward, ready to rid any threat, but stopped when a nonchalant sigh cut through the stillness around us. Our attention shifted from our own corresponding points of interest to a sleek

newcomer, dressed all in black, who did little more than tread lightly to conceal his approach. Given his careless lack of concern, he might as well have approached while singing Figaro. I ducked further into the brush to stay out of sight from either of the men.

With an arrogant calm, the huge, hairy man turned to the newcomer, clearly amused by the irritation accompanying his black eyes. “Lost?” he snarled.

“I am always precisely where I need to be, unlike you,” retorted the man in black with derision.

The hairy man snorted curtly, turning his attention back to Lina’s house. Still more than several feet away, it was evident the man in black posed no real threat to the hairy peeping tom. Without looking at the intruder he instructed, “You should work on your approach; I could hear you breathin’ before I smelt your purdy perfume, and that’s sayin’ somethin’.”

From a distance, he replied, “I wasn’t worried about my approach.” The voice that had been several feet away was now right behind the hairy man, “I don’t need to breathe.”

“Immortal filth!”

A dagger plunged deep into the knots of the hairy man’s back and he shrieked. Coughing with gurgled astonishment, he crumpled to his knees, clawing at the air around him.

Following him to the ground, the man in black leaned down and croaked, “And what does that make you?” With repugnance, he wrenched the blade from his back, spattering blood as he shoved the hairy man face down to the ground. Standing over his kill, the darkly dressed man stared at the house across the street as warm blood trickled off the edge of his pure silver dagger.

My jaw ached from clenching my teeth, twenty years of quiet ... now this.