

Nature Kranderson bolted upright from her resting position. She looked around, bewildered. It took her a minute to get her bearings and to realize she was not in a wooded area, but in her own study. Four people sat in the room with her. Two were the people who hired her, one was her secretary and trusted friend, the last was the local sheriff. The sheriff did not look pleased.

"How long was I out?"

Sheriff Westerly retorted, "Six hours."

"Did you see anything?"

The woman asking the questions was in her mid forties. Gray streaks ran through her brunette hair. She was beautiful. The man next to her remained silent. He must have been a body builder at one time. His upper half still rippled but his waist rolled over his pants, probably from too much beer on football nights with the boys.

"Liz—give her a minute. She just came around."

"Our daughter may not have a minute!"

"It's been almost four weeks."

"What difference does that make? She could still be alive. I know she is—I can feel it." She stared at her husband, holding the front of his shirt tight in her clenched fists. "I can feel it!"

"Calm down, baby. Getting all upset doesn't make the situation any better."

Nature watched as Mark Mosby, her client, pulled his wife close. He looked at her with pleading eyes. Nature kept her expression blank. She knew what had happened to their daughter. She had seen it in her vision, her gift, her nightmare. She was psychic.

She did not want to be the one to tell them but knew she must. They needed closure. She gripped the teddy bear tighter against her body. It had been the daughter's favorite toy. Even at eighteen, she still slept with it.

Someone moved toward her. A cup came into sight. A dark brown liquid filled it. The smell of tea wafted to her nose. She looked up to see her secretary standing there.

"Thought you might need this after such a long session."

Nature took the cup, wrapped her stiff fingers around it, and sipped at the contents. It helped warm the cold emptiness she felt inside.

"You always know how to take care of me, don't you."

"I have to. You don't seem to know how to do it by yourself. You need my help."

She tipped the cup at the young woman, "Help appreciated."

Sandy Nemoy was in her late twenties. She could have been a super model in New York, with her long slender legs, dynamite body, and flowing mane of blonde hair, but chose to be a secretary instead. Nature had asked her about it once. Sandy only laughed. She said she did not want to be stereotypical. Besides, she liked being a secretary, especially to Nature. It was exciting.

Sandy returned to her chair, crossed one leg over the other, and waited. Nature saw Sheriff Westerly eye those legs with appreciation. He noticed Nature looking at him and looked away, blushing. He may be in his fifties, but he was still a man after all.

The Mosbys shifted on the couch, bringing her attention back to the current situation. They were waiting for some word on their lost daughter. She had not come home from school and a missing person report was filed with the local police. Search parties combed the neighborhood and surrounding areas. They found nothing. After just over two weeks without any leads, the police moved on to other more pressing cases. Cases involving murder, shootings, and death. Unwilling to follow their example, they hounded the officers, friends, neighbors, and anyone they met, without results. That was why they were here now. Nature was their last option, their last hope.

Sandy had taken the desperate call on Wednesday. By Friday, they had the money for the fee and the airfare to come to Montana. They were staying in the guest cottage on her property. It was the only building Nature refused to enter. The feelings emanating from it were too much for her to handle. Too much sadness, too much anger, too much loss.

"Mrs. Kranderson...?" Mark Mosby said.

Nature drew in a deep breath. She held it only a second before releasing it, the built up tension eased somewhat by it. This was going to be rough. She set the cup of tea on the end table.

"Mr. Mosby...Mrs. Mosby..." She nodded her head to each. "I'm afraid your daughter is dead."

"What?" Mrs. Mosby said, her face covered with disbelief, "That can't be right. I can feel her...she's alive....she's alive I tell you."

Mr. Mosby stared at Nature. He asked in a voice barely above a whisper, "Are you sure?"

"Yes." Nature looked at the wife, "She was late and didn't want you to get mad at her. She was taken from a shortcut through the woods behind the school."

Mrs. Mosby's mouth hung open, her hands clenched into fists before it, hiding it.

"Did you see who took her? Did she know who the person was?" Mr. Mosby asked all the questions. His wife was too stunned to speak.

"I couldn't see him. I could only feel the evil within. And your daughter didn't know him."

"Do you know where she is?"

"She's close to some mountains, somewhere not frequented by many, somewhere in a forest. I don't know which ones. But I do sense they are toward the east."

Mrs. Mosby bolted from her seat. She ran to Nature before anyone could stop her and grabbed her exposed hand. She pleaded, "You're wrong! You're wrong! Rew can't be dead, she can't be!"

Nature jerked her hand back, trying to free it. Liz wrapped her other hand around the wrist. Desperation and despair made the woman's grip strong, too strong to break free. She felt the woman's sorrow, her grief. She experienced her pain as if a knife had been plunged into her back. Her breath came in ragged gasps. Her heart felt like it was going to rip out of her chest. Her world disappeared into a shroud of blackness. She started to scream.

"Liz! Let go, NOW!"

Suddenly, the hands holding her were gone, but the feeling from them remained. Nature heard Mr. Mosby shouting. She heard Sheriff Westerly, Web, shouting. She heard Mrs. Mosby crying. She kept her eyes closed tight. She was trying to work the horrible feelings out. Her body had had too much and wanted to withdraw. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, she was able to bring herself under control.

"Don't ever do that again," Westerly growled.

"She couldn't help it. Rew is our only child; the news hit her hard. How would you feel if you just found out your daughter was dead."

Nature opened her eyes and surveyed the situation. Sheriff Westerly stood in front of the couple, hands resting on his gun belt, legs shoulder-width apart, a cold look locked onto his face. The Mosby's were seated again. Mr. Mosby had his wife wrapped in his arms, rocking her back and forth. Sandy had remained in her chair. She knew the man with the gun could handle things. She had witnessed this kind of outburst before.

"I'm so sorry," Nature started, "You can stay in the cottage as long as you need." She rose to her feet, wobbled a bit, then grabbed onto the furniture as she made her way to the double doors that led to the rest of the house.

Sandy rose to her feet but did not help. Nature would not want it. She was very independent and would be insulted by the gesture. Westerly remained in front of the Mosby's, preventing them from following. The rest of the house was off-limits to outsiders.

Nature made it to the hall, shut the doors behind her, and leaned back against them. She closed her eyes, fighting back the tears. Every nerve was raw. She needed a scalding hot shower. She turned and stumbled her way up the stairs to the second floor.

Her house was located in a remote section of Montana. She had it specially built then sterilized before moving in. It could be considered a mansion to some, but she considered it home. She owned 375 acres, allowing her to be away from the crowds and the unwanted feelings associated with them. Her property skirted the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge.

At the top of the stairs, a hall went right and left. To the right were the bedrooms. There were two in use at present. One was hers; Sandy used the other. Sandy was the only other person allowed on this level. The woman had great control over her emotions. Moreover, she touched as little as possible. To the left were more rooms, including her office. She loved her office. It was full of soft oversized chairs and a huge mahogany desk littered with her papers.

She turned right. Upon entering her room, she locked the door. She did not want company right now. Peeling off her clothes as she walked, she made her way to the large bathroom. A modern walk-in shower stood in one corner, an old-fashioned porcelain tub next to it. She slid the door open to the shower, reached in, and turned the hot water knob several times. The water rushed out. Gradually she mixed the cold water in, but only enough to keep from scalding her when she entered.

She moved to the built-in radio/CD player located on the wall near the doorway. Pushing play, the blaring sounds of *Nightwish* echoed throughout the room. She turned up the volume and returned to the shower. The infectious beat of an electric guitar caused her to dance into the hot water. It hit her skin, turning it beet red. Losing herself to the words about wishing to have an angel, she opened her arms wide and leaned back under the spray. She began to spin slowly. The hot water helped wash away the feelings of the girl, her mother, the tension.

Classical instruments blended with the sounds of heavy metal. She could feel the bass vibrate through the floor, the wall, her soul. As the music intensified, so did her dancing. She threw her mid length brown hair forward then back, like a major rocker during a concert. When the music changed to a melancholy one about a trail of tears, her own tears followed suit. The feelings washed away rushed back with a vengeance. She slid down the wet wall and curled into a small ball. The water pounded her. It hit and hit and hit, just like the rod. She threw her head back and screamed.

Downstairs, Sandy sat in her chair. She watched as the Sheriff and the Mosby's left through the side door. She heard the music start afterward. She felt the bass as it vibrated through the house. Now, sipping her coffee, she sat quietly as she listened to the screams.

The first time had scared the shit out of her. She remembered running up the stairs and pounding on the locked bedroom door. The screams continued. Sandy yelled to be let in. Nothing happened. The sound of running water continued. Just when she was about to smash the doorknob off with a hammer she had found in the garage, the door opened.

Nature stood in the entranceway, a towel wrapped around her medium sized body, wet hair in her face, dripping on the hardwood floor. Sandy had rushed forward to comfort her, but the other woman backed away. She remembered being asked to wait downstairs in the study. She remembered going down and waiting for what seemed like hours. When Nature appeared, she was calm. Her hair was still wet, but it lay neatly across her shoulders and back. The redness from crying was gone.

They talked far into the night about what was expected and how Sandy could help. Seven years and many sessions later, Sandy continued to do what was expected and help the woman who was not only her boss, but her friend as well.

Sandy decided to have a bite to eat. She had not eaten since before the session with the Mosbys and her stomach was growling at her. She left the study, making her way to the kitchen. All the fixings for a ham and cheese sandwich littered the counter when Nature finally joined her.

"Feeling better?" Sandy asked as she continued to spread the mayonnaise across

the slice of whole wheat bread.

"Some."

"That was a bad one, wasn't it?"

A moments silence filled the room.

"Yes."

The word was barely above a whisper. Sandy paused, the knife hovering above the bread. She looked at her boss. Nature's head leaned forward, preventing the secretary from seeing her face. She knew this case was different. She also knew Nature would talk about it when she was ready. The knife resumed its back and forth motion. Upon completion, she handed the sandwich to Nature.

"I'm not hungry."

"If you don't eat, I'll have to shove a garden hose down your nose and feed you that way—you want that?"

Nature smiled. It was the only smile so far today. "Sandy, you are a blessing in disguise."

She took the offered sandwich and bit into it. The savory taste of smoked ham and yellow American cheese teased her palate. It was wonderful. It was the first thing she had eaten all day. Sandy plopped an open bag of Lays potato chips on the counter between them, pulled one out, and tossed it into her mouth.

"Why does something that's supposed to be so bad for you have to taste so heavenly?"

"It's only bad if you eat too much." Nature grabbed a chip and tossed it in with her partially chewed bite of sandwich. She smiled and her cheeks puffed out like a chipmunk.

Sandy couldn't help it, she did the same thing. Both women enjoyed playing with their food. It helped pass the time and made sure one was fed, regardless of whether she wanted to eat or not. When the sandwiches were gone, Sandy hooked her arm in Nature's, making sure not to touch any exposed skin, and led her into the other study.

This room had a fireplace, a set of comfortable easy chairs with high backs, and shelves loaded with books. Sandy led her boss to the chair on the right side of the warm fire before taking up residence in the left one. An oval shaped table sat between the chairs. A warmer with a pot of hot water sat in the middle. Nature grabbed the pot and poured each a cup of tea. She sipped at the liquid, dreading the next step—the debriefment of the session.

Sandy picked up a notepad and pen. She waited for Nature to start. Finally, after a few sips and a deep breath, Nature replayed what she had experienced.

"The man who took Rew is a mystery. For some reason—he stays cloaked."

Sandy raised an eyebrow. This was something never experienced before. The person was always able to be identified.

"Even when he stood naked, his face remained shrouded." Nature's shoulder shook. "The things he did to that girl... I wouldn't wish those horrors on my worst enemy."

Her secretary remained silent. She scribbled what Nature said, making a log for the police, and for themselves. Nature did not seem to notice the action beside her. She was lost in the world of her vision.

"He drove a brown van. It was plain, nothing written on it, no bumper stickers, nothing that would help to identify it. The license plate was just as shrouded. It was as if he could block the important parts." Nature stared at the fire. "He enjoyed hurting her; in fact, he took great pleasure in it. He kept her naked, ready for use whenever his need filled him. And, he didn't just hurt her physically, he beat her down mentally too. When he became bored with her, when she no longer fought back, he took her to meet the others."

Those words caused the pen in Sandy's hand to hover above the paper. She looked at Nature, wanting to ask questions. She held back. She knew the answer would

come soon enough.

"He's done this before. He's killed other young girls after becoming bored with them, after using them in unspeakable ways. Rew was the eighth one. Seven other graves were close to her. Seven..."

Nature looked at her secretary, "Oh Sandy...this man is a mass murderer...and he enjoys it. It makes him horny. He likes to turn young girls into his sex slaves." She leaned forward in her chair. "We have to tell Web. Can you call him and tell him to come back? Please?"

Sandy placed the pad on the table and rose to her feet. She moved quickly to the phone, picked up the handset, and dialed the sheriff's number. She did not need to look it up; she knew it by heart. They had worked together many times, on many cases. As she looked back toward Nature, she could see the cup in her hands shake, almost spilling its contents. She knew then that this was going to be like no other case they had dealt with before.

Sandy opened the door after the second knock. Sheriff Westerly stood there. He was an imposing sight with his broad shoulders, cowboy hat, muscular features, and blonde hair. She understood why Nature liked him; he presented himself well. Being sheriff had made him confident without being cocky.

"Good to see you again Web. What's it been...a few hours?"

"Funny."

"You coming in or just going to decorate the entrance."

Sandy moved to one side, allowing Web to enter. She led him to the same study where the session was held earlier that day. Nature sat on the couch, her legs pulled up. She looked worried.

"You have something." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes."

"Is it bad?"

"I think you had better sit."

Web moved to the chair across from her. He put his hat on the table next to it and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. Sandy sat on the loveseat located next to the couch. She had the notepad in her hand.

"Web, this man that killed the Mosby girl...," Nature paused. "He's killed before. She wasn't his first."

"Are you positive?" Web knew it was a stupid question. He felt like he had to ask it though.

"I saw the place where he buried her. He talked about others." Nature got to her feet and started pacing. She stopped in front of him and said, "He's an evil one. He enjoys humiliating these girls then destroying them when he gets bored with them."

Web leaned back and blew out a breath. "This is bad. Wonder why nothing about this has come up?"

"I don't know. Maybe he takes them from different areas. Maybe no one has made the connection. There are so many missing persons." Nature sat down again.

"Were you able to see his face? Can you ID the killer?"

"No. It was shrouded. It never came in." Her shoulders sagged in defeat.

"I'll start researching and get back with you." Sheriff Westerly rose to his feet and moved to the exit. "Let me know if you get anything else." He left the room. The women heard the front door close.

Sandy glanced at Nature. "Glad he's with us. Remember how hard it was in the beginning?"

"It was rough trying to get law enforcement to listen. That big case involving the kidnapped son of a Senator made them stop and think." Nature snickered at the memory. "That was the first time we met Web."

"Yup. He's wonderful now. It wasn't always like that, though. I remember when he was a complete ass." Sandy made a face. "He thought he was god's gift to law enforcement. I guess mixing with us has brought him back to earth."

"We helped him solve a lot of cases and made him look good. He appreciates that."

"I think he appreciates you. I see the way he looks at you."

"Sandy!"

"Don't Sandy me...you like him too. Admit it. Why don't you just ask him out?"

Nature's mouth hung open in surprise. She snapped it shut. "Because we work with him. Going out would only complicate things."

"Only in your mind." Sandy rose to her feet. "I'm going to bed. I'll see you in the morning." She faced Nature before leaving, she added, "Brad's been gone for 14 years. It's time for you to live again."

Nature watched as her friend left. She remained on the couch, thinking. Maybe she was right, maybe it would do her good to go out again. But, should she ask Web? She wasn't sure about that. He was a working partner. To her mind that was more important than dating him. Besides, if something went wrong, she'd have to find another source for law enforcement. No, dating Web was out of the question.

Her thoughts wandered to the last night she and her husband Brad were together. They had made love on the couch, like teenagers, even though they were in their early thirties. Afterwards, Brad decided to drive to the local hamburger joint. Before he could reach it, a man driving an eighteen-wheeler was cut off. He lost control of the rig and it rolled onto their car, killing Brad instantly. When the police arrived and gave her the news, Nature fell into a deep state of shock.

Her post cognitive ability had developed after puberty but it had not always worked properly. The sudden death of her husband caused her ability to peak. She felt the feelings of each person who touched her. Their suffering, their happiness, their boredom...everything. She did not mind it at first. It was interesting to see how others lived their lives. After a while, being touched became a torture. The news people learned about her after she helped with the Senator's kidnapping case. They hounded her. They made her life a bigger hell than the psychic ability did.

The police started coming to her for help, something that grated on the nerves of some, like Web. They brought items of the victims for her to touch, to find them. She was successful each time. Some were alive, able to be reunited with their families. Others were too late. Her reputation grew and families started contacting her on their own. She hired Sandy when she could no longer deal with the calls, with the people, and retain her sanity. She needed downtime.

Her husband's life insurance was substantial due to good planning. It allowed her to buy the land, build her house, and have plenty of money left over to live on. The most sophisticated security system guarded the surrounding area, helping to keep the news people away. They left her alone now.

Nature stretched out on the couch. She did not want to go upstairs. She was tired. Pulling the throw off the back, she covered herself. She fluffed one of the pillows and curled onto her side. That night she dreamed of her late husband...and of Sheriff Westerly.