

~ CHAPTER ~ 2

Five years later.....

The road was a black ribbon of pavement that twisted and turned through the tall trees bordering its edges. What a beautiful spring day in New England. The sun sparkled off patches of white snow along the highway. Amber O'Donnell was thrilled her editor had even considered her request to work outside of the city. She desperately needed to get away to peace and quiet and to clear her head after the breakup of her rocky marriage. Frankly she didn't even think Mr. Peter Hastings would even consider her suggestion. Somehow she had convinced him she could fax over her articles for "Not Just Frills" magazine and he had accepted that. Of course she knew she would have to make her appearance in the office every couple of weeks but somehow she could manage that. He had been understanding about her situation but she knew even he had his limits. She just hoped she could find a suitable house before he changed his mind. Once settled she was sure it would all be okay as long as she kept the articles coming, which she fully intended to do. It was just going to be good to be living in the country out of the hustle and bustle. She felt lucky to have spotted the ad in the Times and to her surprise the place was still available.

It was a three-hour drive from New York City, depending on the traffic, and Amber used it to reflect back on her ten-year marriage to Carl. They had met in high school. He played on the football team and she was a cheerleader. How innocent they were back then. They had been a couple of crazy teenagers living for the big game. They enjoyed meeting with the gang after for burgers, fries and cokes. She wondered how things could have gone so wrong. Amber daydreamed about those days in high school as the car swept along the highway carrying her further and further away from New York.

All her friends had thought she was so lucky to have snagged Carl O'Donnell. He was big and brawny and blonde with blue eyes like endless still pools that danced and twinkled very mischievously when he was up to something. He was so nice in those days opening doors for her and leaning over to whisper crazy things in her ear. His warm breath tickled as it blew against her neck making her giggle. They had so many good times in the beginning. They even kept in touch all through college and saw each other every chance they got in those days. When they tied the knot everyone thought it was a marriage made in heaven and it was for awhile.

They both landed great jobs and spent the weekends exploring the city or going on short overnight trips. It was pure bliss when they were together whether it was sailing, hiking, sightseeing or sharing popcorn at the movies. Hours could be spent just talking and laughing and thoroughly enjoying each other whether they were out or just having a lazy day at home making love and sitting in the comfort of each other's arms. Amber just really didn't understand how things could have gone so wrong. She never really thought she would find herself leaving New York and looking for a place to get away from the life she had always loved.

They were only married a year when the twins came along but that only seemed to strengthen their relationship. Carl was a proud and doting father. After a hard day at the office, he would even bring little gifts home to the girls. They would spend weekends taking them to the park and the zoo and were the happy all American family.

When the twins were five or six things started to change. Maybe they just drifted apart as they matured. Amber thought a lot about this in those years and couldn't really find another reason. She found herself spending all her spare time with the girls and making excuses for Carl who had all but disappeared from their lives. He began staying late at the office and taking more business trips. He would forget dates they had set aside to do something with their daughters. He missed their school plays

and began to be the absentee father. Amber became very good at making excuses for him but she could tell the girls were clearly disappointed. When she confronted him about forgetting a play or recital or a family weekend outing he would sigh being overwhelmed with work at the office. "I'm sure you can handle everything until my job slows down." He would say. In the beginning he would apologize and promise to be at the next function but he never was.

Amber began to suspect he was having an affair and this fact was confirmed when she was in the mall shopping for the twins and caught sight of Carl in a jewelry store with his arm around the waist of a young attractive blonde. She was furious and hurt and hurriedly left the mall as her eyes stung with tears. She sat in the car a long time watching other shoppers come and go from the parking garage before she sped toward home knowing her baby sitter could only stay until four that afternoon. Of course Carl denied an affair later when she confronted him with what she saw. At first he tried to tell her it was a girl from the office and he was giving her his opinion on her purchase. When he could see she wasn't buying that, he got very angry and accused her of spying on him and not trusting him. Amber could almost see the sparks flying from his big blue eyes.

Things continued to go on unchanged over the next few months as she tried to work everything out in her head. She went through a period when she tried to tell herself maybe she was wrong and was just over reacting to something with a simple explanation but deep down she knew this wasn't true and she was only kidding herself.

As time went on Carl continued his bad behavior sometimes coming home in the wee hours smelling of perfume, stale cigarettes and booze. Their confrontations became more heated and angry and usually ended with Carl stomping across the floor, grabbing his coat and leaving her standing with her mouth open as the door banged shut behind him.

On one of the few nights he was home for dinner, Amber had told him she wanted a divorce after they got the girls to bed. “I just can’t put up with it anymore Carl.” It hurt her to finally break down and say it. He didn’t argue the fact that a divorce was probably the best solution. She had cried herself to sleep that night and he slept on the couch.

The next day Amber had gone to see an attorney recommended by her boss. After the bitter custody battle in the courts she was awarded custody of the twins with father visitation rights on holidays. They had sold the big house and she had rented a small apartment in New York City near the magazine office where she worked. Carl pounded on her door almost every week insisting he be allowed to see his children. This happened more than she would have liked and it wasn’t that she was totally against the idea of him seeing his daughters but she felt he was probably a bad influence. He had his ‘girlfriend of the week’ with him many times when he came to call for them. One day Amber decided it was time to make a total break and get out of the city. She still had her job there but it didn’t mean she had to live there too. Carl seeing the twins on holidays and part of summer vacations wouldn’t really be that much of a problem. She could take them back and forth and would be going in to her office occasionally anyway.

So here she was taking the step to beginning a new life by driving through New England looking for a house on a beautiful spring day. It was scary but exciting and she was determined not to fail so she knew they would make it. Of course having Gary along was a big help. Amber had met him when he was doing a photo shoot for the magazine. They had hit it off and had seen each other a few times socially since but she wasn’t in any hurry to rush into anything. She had learned what seems so good might not necessarily be that way in the end and she had no intentions of repeating any mistakes. Amber was grateful Gary was there to lend a helping hand but she had the twins and herself to look after first.

She shook her head, snapping back to the present. She had been watching the ribbon of road between her thoughts. “Better pay attention.” Murmuring to herself she pushed her unruly auburn hair out of her face. “That’s enough thinking for now. Time to put all that behind me and start out fresh.” Craning her neck, she mumbled to herself as she looked around and into the rearview mirror. The city was far behind her now and only blacktop and tall trees stretched out for miles.

~ CHAPTER ~ 3

The black Mercedes swept along the pavement easing itself around the turns as the driver searched for the house called Haversham Hill. Ms. Abrams, the real estate agent, said to look for a gravel road to the right after the “Entering New England National Forest” sign. All this was past the little town of Bretsworth, which was hardly more than a spot in the road. As far as she could see it was only home to a small general grocery and supply store, hardware store, gas station, diner and maybe a couple of other shops. Everything seemed mini size to a girl from New York City. No skyscrapers and miles of concrete here. Country roads spiraled through the tall trees as far as she could see. They disappeared around curves to the right and then the left only disturbed by a fork in the path or the occasional house or small village.

Amber began to slow the car so she wouldn't miss the turnoff. Both hands gripped the wheel as she leaned forward straining to see through the old stately trees that threw shadows on the road and blocked out most of the afternoon sun. She spotted a faded for sale sign standing partially obscured by shrubbery. *'This must be it.'* Thinking to herself, she maneuvered the car onto the narrow gravel road. Clumps of grass grew in the middle and the bushes on each side almost scraped her car as they grew in an attempt to cover the road and meet each other on the other side. After making a couple of turns she came to a stand of trees that canopied the roadway. Here the sun was completely obscured and it was like driving through a leafy tunnel. She saw the house as she emerged from under the canopy of new green leaves.

It loomed like a castle out of the wilderness. The big white structure sat three stories high with lots of windows and a turret on one end. A massive porch was held up by carved columns and there was scalloped trim around the window casings, doors, top of the porch and the roofline. Gargoyles were worked into the trim at intervals all along the house. They sat there staring down at her like a dozen sentinels watching over

some great treasure. Her mouth dropped open at the sight of them and she felt a shiver run up her spine. The big house was ominous and yet majestic all alone in the wilderness. She wondered how long it had stood here. All was quiet except for the north wind that rustled the many trees that surrounded the place. The lonesome caw of a raven could be heard somewhere in the distance. Patchy snow dotted the grounds and water dripped from the roof.

She brought the car to a stop on the gravel drive in front of the house. Her gaze took in the view before her. Serene and peaceful. So beautiful. The lush green of the trees reminded her of a wonderland but the utter quiet was almost unnerving. The sound of her own breathing and the wind battering the car brought her out of her wondering thoughts and back to the present. A few curled leaves blew by as she got out of the car; glad she had worn her walking shoes with the tan slacks. The wind pulled at her long auburn hair and she held it out of her eyes with one hand as she began to walk up to the old house, her shoes crunching on the gravel. The air was chilly and smelled like tree sap.

Ms. Abrams said the house had belonged to an old family from the area named Haversham, hence the name, but she couldn't believe it was for sale. It looked like quite a house in its day and seemed to be perfect for what she was looking for although she wouldn't argue it was probably way too big. *'All it needs is a coat of paint and a few flowers planted in the yard.'* She mused to herself, as the heels of her shoes clicked up the wide wood steps of the old porch. It was quite large and had a very sturdy feel about it. She could see herself sitting out here having tea as she watched nature. Standing at the railing, she watched a squirrel scampering through the deep leaf mold and climbing up a tree disappearing in the branches over head. What a beautiful old house but it gave her an eerie feeling too. It was so quiet she thought she could probably hear a pin drop if she had a pin. The wind continued to howl around the eaves rustling the leaves in the forest as well as the ones closer by. She could

hear shrill calls and stirring from the animals in the underbrush. Probably more squirrels looking for a meal.

'It's nonsense to feel afraid.' She told herself. *'It is just very quiet here and the house is vacant. Better get used to it. You're the one who wanted peace and quiet and to work out of the city, remember? You're just used to all the noises of a city that never sleeps.'* She chided herself and turned her attention back to the porch. Maybe they could even take some meals out here. It was certainly big enough for a table along with some chairs. *'Lots of time to think out here and it would be good for the girls to live closer to nature.'* She tilted her head to listen to the lone cawing that seemed to be getting closer.

Amber made her way across the brown wood planks, taking care not to slip on the last bits of melting snow. The boards were scuffed but solid. The front door was tall and massive. It reminded her of a castle door with the bits of metal strapping in places. The brown carved wood depicted a hunting scene. A large pewter doorknocker completed the picture. It sported a gargoyle's head. You had to grab hold of the mouth to use it. She recoiled from the image and stepped back. After a brief pause she moved along the porch. Putting her face and hands to the window, she tried to peer inside by going from window to window along the planking closest to the house but all was dark. The windows were shrouded in heavy curtains. Leaving the refuge of the porch she walked around back, the roaring wind pulling at her hair and silk blouse as she stepped from the shelter of the roof. Ducking her head down, she made her way over the rocky grounds to the right side. Shivering as the wind lashed around her, she cursed herself for not thinking to bring along a jacket. The wind blocked out all other noise as it echoed in her ears. Shadows played across the ground in a wild dance as the tree branches swung about in complete abandonment.

In the backyard a smaller white building stood covered in moss and ivy. Large double doors covered the front of the structure. These were locked with a heavy padlock. *'Probably a*

garage. She thought. *'But obviously not used for some time judging by the amount of wild grasses and underbrush grown up around it.'* The driveway was hardly noticeable under the new spring grass creeping through the remnants of snow. Turning around she saw a back door with an ornate screen and a smaller porch with the same wide steps at the back of the house. A black cat sat in a sunspot on the porch lazily bathing itself. It yawned and then hissed when it saw her and ran into the forest.

The backyard was spacious. Old rose bushes, overgrown with grass, flanked the house. Another overgrown flowerbed held irises, their purple blooms a stark contrast to the white clapboard walls of the house. She guessed it was only the rainwater and melting snow that kept the flowers alive for there were blooms budding on the roses too. A flagstone path of gray and brown led from the bottom of the back porch steps, across the lawn, where it joined an old narrow footpath that wound through the thick forest in back of the house. Amber walked up to the back porch, copper strands in her auburn hair glistening in a ray of stray sunshine that escaped the trees overhead. *'All this house needs is a little loving care.'* She was deep in thought and wondered if the owners would accept an offer lower than the sales price. She really knew very little about real estate. As she started up the back steps to pier in through a rear window, a glistening sunray caught her eye. The sun was bouncing off some metal object on the ground. Cautiously she moved closer to investigate. In the old rose garden and set into the ground next to the porch was a tarnished old metal plate. She bent over and read:

Here lies Abigail Hayes
and her wicked ways
She lives here still
at Haversham Hill
10 July 1718

A shiver ran down her spine as she contemplated what that could mean and who could have put it there. She looked over her shoulder at the forest with a sense she was being watched but saw no one. Animal prints were the only ones she

saw dotting the snow that still blanketed part of the yard. The north wind howled through the trees and whipped around the corner of the house bringing stray leaves and powdered snow with it. *'Stop being jumpy and so silly.'* She admonished herself as she made her way around the other side of the house, past the turret and back to the front fighting to stay upright in the wind gusts. A sense of panic was overtaking her. She ran to her car, got in and locked the doors. A chill ran the length of her whole body as she smoothed her hair and clothing from the wind and settled herself into the seat.

“There is nothing to be afraid of.” She was talking aloud now in a low voice. “Good grief! Straighten up. This house is perfect. Besides the coat of paint, replacing a few boards on the shutters and some gardening it would make a lovely home. It’s just the loneliness of it and the wind. That’s all.” She started the engine, turned on the heater, and headed back to the main road. The wind had chilled her to the bone.

