

## *Prologue*

The girls raced through the backyard, holding hands and giggling, oblivious to any danger. They kept running, faster and faster, until they reached the far end of the property. It was a solid two hundred feet from the house. Too far for anyone inside to see them.

Anger burned, intense enough to light sparks of pain along his nerve endings. If he wasn't here, anything could happen to them.

He hunkered deeper in his dugout in a clump of huge, blooming lilac bushes, drew a deep breath of South Carolina's humid summer air and waited. Watched.

He'd been watching for weeks, so he knew exactly how much time he had before they'd be called inside for dinner.

It was the little blonde girl's yard. Cassie. He'd noticed her first, the bouncing ringlets, eyes the color of the sky on a perfect summer day. She was too innocent, too trusting. Cassie had no clue what the world had in store for her.

He never wanted her to have to find out. He'd picked her before he'd seen her friend.

Cassie's friend was different. Small for twelve, skin the shade of coffee with a generous helping of cream and moss-green eyes that were way too perceptive, way too wary. Evelyn.

Evelyn wasn't the kind of girl he'd been searching for, but considering how everyone treated her, she'd be better off with him. Which was why he was watching them both, why he was still trying to decide which one to save. They both needed him. But which one *could* he save? Which one?

Pain punched up his back, vertebra by vertebra, until it ricocheted around in his head. Another migraine. Probably the stress of having to choose.

He didn't want to leave either one behind. But he had no choice. He was already taking a big risk by doing this in Rose Bay. He'd never dared to scout so close to home before.

Cassie laughed, the sound loud and ringing. The vibrations seemed to skim along his skin, even though she was twenty feet away.

"Let's play hide-and-seek," Cassie said, closing her eyes and counting.

Evelyn pivoted too fast and let out a yelp as she almost pitched herself onto the dirt. He thought she was going to dash past him, but she stopped, running tiny hands over the purple flowers, as though testing whether she could crawl inside and hide there.

*You can*, he wanted to whisper.

She leaned closer, peering through the branches, and he hunched lower in his hiding spot. She tilted her head and he tensed, ready to grab her if she spotted him.

"Girls!" Cassie's mother called. "Lemonade's ready!"

Evelyn turned away from him, waiting for Cassie to race over before the two of them hurried back to the house, hand in hand.

Once they were out of sight, he left the bushes, the scent of lilac clinging. He wove through the hundred-year-old live oaks at the back of the property and out to the street behind, where his van waited. The migraine receded as peace swelled inside him. He'd made his decision.

He'd take this same route late tonight, when the whole town was sleeping, careless with their children, ignorant of what could happen in one unguarded moment. After tonight, none of them would be so neglectful again.

Because tonight, everything was going to change. Maybe he only needed one of them, but he couldn't leave either behind. Tonight, they were both coming with him.

# One

*Eighteen years later*

Evelyn Baine knew how to think like a killer.

In fact, she was damn good at it. Serial killers, arsonists, bomb-makers, child abductors, terrorists—she'd crawled around in all of their twisted minds. She'd learned their fantasies, figured out their next moves and chased them down.

But no matter how many she found, there were always more.

Even before she stepped inside the unmarked building in Aquia, Virginia, where the FBI hid its Behavioral Analysis Unit, Evelyn knew the requests for profiles on her desk had grown overnight. It was inevitable.

She strode through the entrance and a blast of air-conditioning chased away the mid-June heat, raising goose bumps on her arms. As she headed toward the drab gray bull pen packed with cubicles, the scent of old coffee filled her nostrils. The whiteboard near the front of the bull pen was covered in her boss's distinctive scrawl—notes on a case. They hadn't been there when she'd left last night.

The handful of criminal investigative analysts who'd arrived before her—or hadn't gone home—gazed at her with bloodshot eyes and quizzical expressions. But it had been a full two weeks since she'd been cleared to come back to work. A full two weeks for them to get used to her *not* being the first agent through the door in the morning and the last to leave at night.

A full two weeks for her to get used to it, too. But it still felt unnatural.

Slipping into the comfort of her cubicle, she set her briefcase on the floor, hung her suit jacket over the back of her chair and slid her SIG Sauer P228 off her hip and into a drawer. Then she looked at the case files stacked on her desk. Yep, the pile had definitely grown. And the message light on her phone blinked frantically.

Guilt swirled through her, rising up like a sandstorm. If she'd stayed an extra few hours yesterday evening, an extra few hours the evening before, she might've gotten through another couple of files. But she knew from a year of ten-hour days, seven days a week, that cloistering herself in her cubicle wouldn't stop the cases from coming.

It would only stop her from having a life outside the office. And after she'd almost been killed by the serial killer she'd been profiling a month ago, that had become important.

So, she shoved the guilt back, dropped into her chair and dialed her voice mail. There were three requests for follow-up on cases she'd profiled, a pretty typical way to start her morning. She jotted them down and kept going.

The next call was from the FBI's Employee Assistance Program, reminding her that the Bureau had psychologists she could talk to about the case that had nearly killed her, and had claimed another agent's life. Evelyn ground her teeth and deleted it. She had her own psychology degree, and her professional opinion was that she was doing just fine. She was about to hang up when she realized there was one more message.

"I'm looking for Evelyn Baine." The voice was vaguely familiar and every word vibrated with tension. "The Evelyn Baine from Rose Bay. This is Julie Byers. Cassie's mom."

Whatever she said next was drowned out under a sudden ringing in Evelyn's ears, under a bittersweet flood of memories. Cassie, the little girl next door who'd come over the day Evelyn had moved in with her grandparents and announced they were going to be best friends. The girl who hadn't given a damn that Evelyn was the only person in town—including Evelyn's grandparents—who wasn't white, at least not entirely white. And eighteen years ago, in Rose Bay, that had mattered.

Cassie had been Evelyn's first real friend, a symbol of everything that was supposed to change in her life when she came to stay with her grandparents.

For two years, she and Cassie had been inseparable. And then one night, Cassie had disappeared from her bed. In her place, her abductor had left his calling card, a macabre nursery rhyme.

Cassie had never come home. Julie Byers calling now, eighteen years later, could only mean one thing. They'd found her.

Pressure tightened around her heart. Evelyn had worked enough child abduction cases in her year at BAU to know the statistics. After eighteen years, Cassie wasn't going to be found alive. But she didn't want to snuff out the flicker of hope that just wouldn't die.

With unsteady hands, Evelyn called her voice mail again and skipped through to the last message, to hear what she knew Julie Byers was going to say. Cassie was dead.

She clutched her hands tightly together as the message replayed. "I'm looking for Evelyn Baine. The Evelyn Baine from Rose Bay. This is Julie Byers. Cassie's mom."

In the pause that followed, tears clouded her vision. Her whole body tensed as she waited for Julie Byers to destroy the dream she'd had for eighteen years. The dream of one day seeing Cassie again.

"Please call me, Evelyn."

Her body deflated and she dropped her head to the desk.

"Evelyn?"

Willing her pain not to show on her face, she turned around. "Greg," she croaked.

Greg Ibsen was the closest thing she had to a partner at BAU. Even if she'd sounded normal, he was the only one in the office who might have seen through it. As he stepped into her cubicle, worry brimmed in his soft brown eyes.

"What happened? Are you okay?"

She stared up at him, trying to get control of herself. But her eyes kept losing focus, and her heart still tripped erratically.

"Come on." Greg set his briefcase next to hers and took her arm, pulling her out of her seat.

"Hang on," she croaked, jotting down the number from her voice mail.

She spun back, her eyes on the loud plaid tie someone—probably his daughter, Lucy—had paired with his somber blue suit. Then Greg was propelling her into an empty interagency coordination room.

He guided her into a chair, then shut the door and leaned against it. "What's wrong?"

Everything was wrong. She'd joined the FBI, joined BAU, to find Cassie, but she'd never told anyone at the Bureau about her past. Except Kyle McKenzie.

Kyle was an operator with the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team. Since HRT and BAU worked closely together, she'd met him the day she joined BAU. And for a whole year, she'd managed to resist his incessant flirting, assuming it was all a joke. Until last month.

Last month, she'd acted on the attraction. And everything between them had changed. Despite the fact that he'd been called away on a case too soon for them to figure out where their relationship was going, she wished he was here. Wished she could lean into his strong arms while she called Cassie's mom.

But Kyle wasn't here. He was somewhere not far from where she'd grown up, on a mission she didn't "need to know" anything about. And the nature of his job meant she had no idea when he'd be back.

Greg had trained her and he'd become a good friend. Hell, he was her emergency contact, because she didn't have any real family left except her grandma, and these days, Evelyn took care of her.

A month ago, Evelyn would have pretended to be fine. She would have brushed off Greg's concern and gone back to work. But she was trying to make a change in her life. So, she told him, "When I was twelve, my best friend, Cassie, disappeared. She was never found." It had been the driving force in her life for eighteen years, the one thing she'd been willing to sacrifice everything else for. "And now..."

She squeezed her eyes shut. She'd always wanted closure, always needed to know what had happened. But if Cassie was dead, she suddenly, desperately, wanted to stay ignorant.

Greg's hand rested on her arm, and when she opened her eyes he was kneeling next to her, his gaze steady and compassionate. The gaze of someone who'd sat beside too many victims and always known the right thing to say.

And maybe, more than anyone, he'd know what she should do now. He was practiced at comforting survivors—his son, Josh, had watched his birth father kill his mother before Josh had been adopted by Greg and his wife.

“Cassie’s mom wants me to call her.” The next words didn’t want to come, but she forced them out. “It must be because they finally found her body.” Saying it out loud felt like ripping a bandage from a wound it had covered so long it had grown into the skin.

Sorrow folded into the creases beside Greg’s fawn-colored eyes. “I’m so sorry, Evelyn.” He squeezed her hand, those gentle eyes searching hers. “Eighteen years is a long time. Too long for there to be any good outcome.”

He was right, of course. If Cassie *had* still been alive, what hell might she have endured for the past eighteen years?

A rush of images stampeded through her head from a child abduction case she’d profiled in her first month at BAU. She’d gone to the scene to advise HRT when they went into the suspect’s house. She’d watched Kyle kick the door in. She could still smell the cordite from the flash-bang, still feel the tension, the restrained hope that maybe, just maybe, they’d find the boy alive.

She’d waited and waited until finally they’d come out. First, two HRT agents leading the suspect, naked, handcuffed and swearing. Then Kyle carrying the boy, miraculously still breathing. Someone had wrapped an FBI jacket around his violated body, but the anguish in his eyes—seven hundred days past terror—had burrowed deep into her soul and she’d known. He hadn’t really come out alive.

Greg’s voice brought her back to the present. “You were too young to have saved Cassie, Evelyn. But she brought you to us. And to all the victims you *did* bring home.”

“I don’t want to hear there’s no more hope,” she admitted.

“I know.”

Greg didn’t let go of her hand as she pulled out her phone and stared at it, not wanting to dial.

“You need to get it over with. It’s not going to get any easier, and waiting won’t change anything. You can do this.”

Evelyn nodded, tried to prepare herself. She dialed the number fast, before she could change her mind. Some cowardly part of her hoped Julie wouldn’t pick up, but before the first ring ended, she did.

“Mrs. Byers? It’s Evelyn Baine.” Her voice sounded strange, too high-pitched and winded, as if she’d just run the Marine training course over at Quantico.

“Evelyn.” Julie’s voice betrayed that she’d been crying.

Dread intensified, and slivers of ice raced along Evelyn’s spine.

“I’m so glad I found you.” Julie’s voice evened out. “I heard you joined the FBI.”

She had? Evelyn had left Rose Bay at seventeen, after her grandma had gotten sick and her mom had suddenly shown up again. She’d never gone back and she hadn’t talked to anyone from Rose Bay in more than a decade.

“Yes,” Evelyn managed. *Get on with it*, she wanted to say. *Just tell me Cassie’s dead.*

A sob welled up in her throat and Evelyn clamped her jaw tight, holding it back.

“You probably figured after all this time I’d only be calling... Well, it’s about Cassie.”

Evelyn’s fingers started to tingle and she realized she’d squeezed Greg’s hand so tight both of their knuckles had gone bloodless. But she couldn’t seem to loosen her grip.

“You found her?”

“No. But the person who took Cassie is back.”