



THE ERIN
DELANEY MYSTERIES
BOOK TWO

DARK DESIGN

NANCY
MEHL

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For Clari Dees, who left us too soon.

When You Left

We looked for you, but you had gone.
Your voice we could not hear.
You'd slipped into the world beyond,
We could not pull you near.
We know you dance before the King,
But we still miss you so.
The love and joy you used to bring,
Was more than you could know.
For now, we'll keep you in our hearts,
'Till we walk through heaven's door.
And then we'll never be apart,
For death will be no more.

Nancy Mehl

ONE

I was only nine years old when I knew I was destined to be a serial killer. My best friend and I watched a show on TV that talked about them. I'd never felt more excited about anything in my entire life. When I was ten, I almost changed my mind. I went to my friend's church, and the pastor talked about Jesus. I wondered if there was another way for me to go, but when the pastor told us that Jesus wanted us to love everyone, I knew I could never live that way. Hate filled my heart and my mind so strongly that there wasn't room for anything else. The only thing I truly loved was my hate, and I had no desire to let it go. Not even my parents could steer me away from the path I knew was mine.

Now that I'm older, I'm ready to fulfill my destiny.

And I know just where to start.

At the beginning.

MONDAY MORNING IN APRIL

It was a cold and rainy night. Alex Caine stared at himself in the mirror. He looked as tired as he felt. His hazel eyes

narrowed as he gazed at his chiseled features. His dark hair was beginning to gray and needed to be cut.

Erin Delaney stared at the words on her first page and laughed quietly. “Never open with weather,” she said under her breath. “Never describe a character by having him look in a mirror.” She sighed loudly. “How many other writerly taboos can I break?” She deleted what she’d written out of frustration. She’d finished the book but left the opening in just for fun. She was ready to edit now—something she hated a lot more than writing. But it had to be done. It was amazing how many times she could repeat scenes without realizing it. Or change someone’s name. Or use the same name for different characters. She had a feeling that she had two women called Laura in the story. It was probably because she loved the old movie with the same name.

She got up from the couch and headed into the kitchen for another cup of coffee. Chester, her border collie, jumped down from his place next to her and followed behind her, his nails clicking on the wooden floor. Wherever she went, he was right beside her. Since she’d moved from St. Louis, she’d noticed that he’d become a little clingy. He’d been with her almost five months now, but he still had trust issues. Just like she did. They really were a perfect match. In St. Louis, he’d watched her carefully whenever she had to leave him in the apartment, his large brown eyes echoing the fear that someone else had caused by abandoning him. Eventually, he’d begun to relax a bit, but they obviously had a ways to go until the shadows of the past no longer held him in their grasp. Now that they’d left St. Louis for good and arrived back in Sanctuary, Erin hoped he would finally believe he was loved and that he would never be left behind again. She wasn’t certain

what she would have done without him over the past several months. He was her best friend and her constant companion. Together, they were facing the ghosts of their former lives.

“It’s okay, boy,” she said, looking down at the anxious face staring up at her. “You’re family, and you’re home for good. You don’t have to ever worry about that again.” She walked over to his treat jar and took out a dried banana chip, which he eagerly accepted.

Finishing this new book had really stressed her out. She’d waited almost two months after signing the contract to start writing, which almost caused her agent a stroke. “I’ve had to double my heart medication since I signed you,” she’d said. “Working with you isn’t worth my health.” Finally, she’d passed Erin off to a different agent. “Brandon will take good care of you.” Brandon West was a well-known agent and a lot more patient with her. Erin was much happier with him. He really seemed to understand her.

Her phone rang, and she picked it up. How odd. She was just thinking about Brandon and here he was, calling her.

She answered the phone and heard his deep, soothing voice respond to her greeting.

“How are things going with the new place?” he asked. “You completely settled now?”

“Getting there,” she said. “But I doubt you called to ask me about that. What’s going on?”

When he paused, she felt her stomach tighten. What now? Another podcast? Was he going to ask her if she was going to make her deadline?

“Look, I don’t want you to worry about this, but I felt I needed to tell you that someone has claimed that she’s the real author of *Dark Matters*. That you stole it from her.”

Erin was so shocked she couldn't seem to find her voice. "Wh . . . what?" she said, finally.

"Don't panic. This happens more than you'd believe," he said. "Either an author supposedly copied passages from another book, or as in this case, someone accuses a writer of stealing an entire book from them."

"How could they prove something like that if it isn't true?" Erin asked.

"They can't. Unfortunately, sometimes publishers will pay out money just to keep people like this quiet. Scammers have learned this and will throw out threats in hopes of getting free money. Believe it or not, it will happen again. Probably several times."

"That's ridiculous," Erin said. "I certainly wouldn't want my publisher to give anyone money toward a scam like that. It will just encourage others to do the same thing because they think they can get away with it."

Brandon chuckled. "I truly don't believe you have anything to worry about. You just write good books. I'll take care of the rest."

"What did you tell this woman?"

"I asked her for proof. Haven't heard back. Probably won't. Like I said, don't concern yourself with it. Everything will be fine. I expect this will just disappear. If for any reason it doesn't, I'll call you. I just thought you should know."

Erin thanked him and hung up. Although he was reassuring and encouraging, unlike her previous agent, she still wasn't certain just how far she could push him. The proposed plot for this new book had been her idea, but as she wrote, she ended up going in another direction. She was afraid to tell him. Seems agents and publishers weren't fans

of unannounced changes in a book under contract. She sighed. It wasn't that she didn't want to write, she did. But she was aggravated. When she wrote *Dark Matters*, she was in charge. Now she had Brandon as well as editors she had to please. Add threats from some nut who claimed she had stolen their work? What next? She was also reluctant to face other things that came with being a writer. The biggest thorn in her side was the promotion aspect that went with every release. Erin was a private person, and she had no intention of running around the country on a book tour or sitting down with interviewers on podcasts. She'd reluctantly done a few of those and actually enjoyed a couple of them—but only because she liked the interviewers. The rest were awful to get through. During one interminable interview in particular, she'd toyed with the idea of pretending her laptop was acting up and logging off.

She got up and went to the pantry where she grabbed a new box of Mallomars. She'd hoped keeping them out of sight would stop her from eating too many. They were an obsession. She tried to limit herself to one a day before bed, but when she was stressed, like now, she found herself drawn to them. Graham cracker crust, marshmallow center, and chocolate on the outside. What was there not to love? She was embarrassed by the number of boxes in her pantry, but they were only available from March through September. She wasn't sure why, but it seemed rather cruel to those who were addicted to them.

She took out a package, went back into the kitchen, opened it, and took out one of the delicious treats. She pulled the cellophane wrapping apart and was soon savoring the sweet indulgence. She felt herself becoming calmer. Every

time she ate one, she thought about the mother she'd lost when she was young. She used to come home from the store, put her bags on the kitchen counter, and take out a box of Mallomars for Erin and a package of Oreos for her sister. The memories of her family seemed harder and harder to recall. Her parents had died long ago, and her sister . . . who knew where she was? Erin pushed thoughts of the past away and leaned against the counter while she swallowed the last delicious bite. Chester whined, wanting a piece, but she never gave him anything with chocolate in it.

"Sorry, dude," she said. "But these aren't good for doggies."

She brushed off the crumbs that had fallen on her sweatshirt and grabbed another banana chip. He took it willingly but gave her a sideways glance to let her know he wasn't the least bit fooled by her attempted subterfuge. Was he getting tired of the chips? She used them when training him. So far, he'd learned to sit and lie down on command. He was a work in progress, but he was smart and loved to learn almost as much as he enjoyed cuddling with her on the couch or at night in bed.

"How about a walk?" she asked him. She knew she should head back to her laptop, but it was even harder to work since spring had come to Sanctuary. Although winter was still her favorite season, she had to admit that watching nature spring back to life in the Smoky Mountains was enchanting. She and Chester had started taking daily treks through the woods near the cabin. She'd been warned that wild animals, especially bears, roamed the woods, but she hadn't seen any. People in town had assured her that unless mother bears feared for their young, they pretty much left

people alone. Most of them were used to human beings living in the area.

All in all, the move from St. Louis hadn't been too difficult. Erin had gotten rid of all her furniture and most of her personal belongings, not wanting any reminders of her life there. The former owner of the cabin where she lived now, Steve Tremont, had sold her all the furniture, appliances, and decor. Some of it she liked, some of it wasn't her taste, but little by little she'd update it. Right now, she was just enjoying her new surroundings, grateful for the chance to start over. A year ago, she wasn't certain she even wanted to go on. She'd been afraid to even touch her gun, fearful that if she picked it up . . . She shook her head. She didn't want to think about that. Thankfully, things had changed. After meeting Kaely, she finally had hope. And then, of course, there was Chester. Every morning when she woke up, she'd reach over and pet him. She didn't feel alone anymore. It didn't matter that he was a dog. He loved her, and he needed her. And she needed to be needed. Life was slowly getting better. Hopefully, she would continue to get stronger. For the first time in years, she was actually looking forward to the future.

TWO

Erin was just about to retrieve Chester's leash when someone knocked on her door. She grabbed her phone so she could check the doorbell camera she'd had installed. After dealing with a ruthless killer several months ago, she felt much safer being able to tell who was outside. She clicked on the camera's icon. *Adrian*. She got up and hurried to the door, self-consciously straightening her hair and pulling it down on one side to hide the scar on the side of her face. Adrian knew about the wound she'd received from a vicious gang member's knife in St. Louis when she was a cop, but she was still sensitive about it. Thankfully, she'd put on her makeup this morning. She used a concealer that worked pretty well. It was difficult to see her scar unless you were looking for it. She wished there were some kind of concealer that worked on the wounds inside people.

"Hey," she said when she swung the door open.

"Hi. Just checking on you." He smiled, his hazel eyes crinkling at the corners. "Are you all moved in?"

"Yeah, finally," she said. "I've got some coffee on. Would you like a cup?"

"Sounds good. Jake's in the car. Okay if he comes in?"

Erin laughed. "If I don't say yes, Chester will pout the rest of the day. Please get him. I have some of those special treats he likes."

"Okay, but I can't guarantee his manners. He gets pretty excited when he's around his new friend."

"I know," Erin said. "It's fine. I love his enthusiasm. You know, I planned to take Chester for a walk this morning. After our coffee, are you up for it?"

They'd actually gone on several walks. It was becoming a habit that Erin really enjoyed.

"Sure," he said with a smile. "It's a beautiful morning."

"Great," she said. "I'll get your coffee while you get Jake."

"Sounds good."

Erin went into the kitchen and got a cup out of the cupboard. One thing she hadn't gotten rid of was her coffee cup collection. She had way too many, but she enjoyed collecting them. She grabbed one that had *Cup of Happy* written on its side and poured some coffee into it. She didn't add anything to it. Adrian liked his coffee black, just the way she did.

Adrian came into the kitchen, but Jake, his golden retriever, had stayed in the living room with Chester. Since the kitchen and living room weren't divided by walls, Erin could see the dogs smile at each other as their wagging tails signaled their pleasure at being together again. Erin handed Adrian his cup.

"Thanks," he said. "I'm used to drinking my coffee as quickly as possible. It's a skill I've had to learn as a police chief. I'm usually just trying to get a fast jolt of caffeine. Seems like there's always something that needs to be done immediately. I think I've lost the ability to linger over a hot

cup of coffee.” He looked at his watch. “Hopefully, we’ll have plenty of time for our walk. I keep waiting for my phone to ring.”

“And you can’t turn it off since you’re the chief and have to be reachable at all times, right?”

Adrian nodded. “Yep. Thankfully, most emergencies in Sanctuary are usually lost pets or tracking down guests who’ve stolen towels from the resort.”

Erin laughed and glanced over at their dogs. They both knew what the word *walk* meant. Their impatient expressions were truly comical.

“We’ll go in just a minute,” she said soothingly to them. She looked at Adrian. “Do you think they understand me?”

“I’m pretty sure they get the idea. I have to ask Jake to wait quite a bit. He’s used to it, but he certainly doesn’t like it.”

Adrian sat down at the counter that separated the kitchen from the living room. Erin loved the way the rooms were constructed. It made it easy to talk to guests while preparing food or drinks for them. She almost laughed out loud as she admitted to herself that she didn’t actually have many guests. Kaely Quinn-Hunter, her friend and research partner for her books, and Adrian. That was it so far. She still wasn’t ready to reach out to the people who lived in Sanctuary. She liked some of them, especially the cops who worked with Adrian. Maybe someday she’d make more friends, but for now, she was content just spending time with Chester . . . and Adrian. She really did miss Kaely and wished she were closer. The drive was a little over seven hours from Sanctuary to Fredericksburg, Virginia, where Kaely and her husband, Noah, lived. Faster by air, but Erin wasn’t keen on flying. Ever since the night that changed her life, she’d been plagued

by claustrophobia. Spending time in a metal cylinder, unable to escape, frightened her beyond words. At least the agoraphobia that had crippled her for so long had lessened some. She was now able to go into town for groceries and other things. There'd been one episode when she'd had a panic attack, but she'd been able to pay for her groceries and leave before it got too bad. Not being able to breathe was the worst part. She was actually terrified she might pass out in front of people. She'd kept an image of the cabin in her mind, assuring herself that she had a safe place to go. A place where she could lock the door and be secure. It had helped immensely.

Chester was also a big help. Except for places where dogs weren't allowed, he stayed by her side whenever she left the cabin. She was convinced that somehow, he understood how she felt and was determined to protect her. Anytime she began to feel panicked, he'd move closer to her, even leaning up against her to let her know he was there. Kaely was the one who'd initially given her the courage to face her fears, but Chester had taken up the mantle when Kaely went home. Erin was a little worried about what she'd do when it got hot. She wouldn't be able to leave Chester in her car. At one time, she'd reasoned that if she left the air-conditioning running, he would be okay. But then she read an article about a police dog in St. Louis that was left in a car while the officer went inside somewhere. He'd left the air on, but without his knowledge, it had turned off. The dog had died. Erin could never take a chance like that with Chester. Of course, she was usually only gone from her car no more than ten minutes, wherever they went. Still, she was concerned. The few times she'd left him alone in the

cabin for a short time had caused them both distress. Now, she tried to avoid it.

“How’s your coffee?” Erin asked.

“Perfect,” Adrian said, taking a sip. “Your coffee is so much better than mine. What brand is it?”

“I special order it,” Erin said, telling him the brand name. “I know it’s probably silly, but my coffee is important to me. I can skimp on almost anything but that.”

Adrian laughed. “The generic stuff I get from the store doesn’t hold a candle to this.” He took another sip and sighed. “You really do get what you pay for.” He grinned at her. “I may have to stop by more often. For coffee, I mean.”

Erin shrugged. Her heart beat a little faster as she said, “Any time. I never go anywhere—except when I walk Chester or go to the market.”

Adrian appeared to study her for a moment before saying, “Maybe I’ll take you up on that offer.”

Erin picked up her cup of cold coffee so she’d have something to hold onto. She’d promised herself that after losing Scott, she would never get involved with another man. She had no desire to ever be that vulnerable again. But police chief Adrian Nightengale was making that vow a little tough to hold onto.