***Nobody Deserves To Die Alone***

***WARNING: This story contains some confronting content. It is partially based on a true story.***

The room is filled with the scent of fear. One part tears, two parts perspiration. I crinkle my nose at the panicked woman huddling in the corner. "Please don't hurt me," she whimpers.  
The whites of her eyes are completely red now, sharpening their blue color. Her slightly too long nose drips snot. Altogether she paints a pretty pitiful picture. I don't tell her that it isn't up to me whether she lives or dies. The only one who can make that decision is Special Agent Anna Lee Gerrard. She is the only one who can stop this. Stop me.

I bang the palm of my hand in to my head repeatedly. Why isn't she here already? I gave her so many clues. Does she not care about the woman I've stolen? Does she not care about the family I've left behind in pieces? Literally pieces. Scattered in bursts of beautiful red across their cozy little house. The child, of course, was the first clue. I let him live. Had they found him yet, stuffed in the hallway closet, all wrapped up like a Christmas present? And the way I'd decorated the living room with the father's blood... Truly a masterpiece.  
I had taken the mother because I didn't want to hurt her - I never want to hurt them, but I have to. I have to because she doesn't come for them. She doesn't come for me. Each time I take one of them, each time I kill, I wait for my Anna to find me. But she fails me - and them - every time. "Please," the woman pleads again, "Just let me go. Let me go to my baby." I don't want to feel the way I do when they beg. I want no part of the surge of satisfaction I get when they cry.  
Anna, where are you?   
"Please, just let me go. I won’t tell anyone who you are, I won’t say anything, just let me go to my son!" My brain hammers against my skull and blood pulses at my temple. My hand twitches for the knife in my pocket, and she shuts her mouth when she sees the action. I see that she's chewed her lips to the point of bleeding, and I have the almost overwhelming urge to fix her a glass of warm milk and comfort her. Only the combating urge to watch the blood run down her skin keeps me from going near her. The mobile phone on the bedside table rings sharply, and I smile when I see the contact on the screen. A photo of my Anna blazes across the screen. I had taken that one at a press conference she'd held after my third family. She looked lovely and put together and confident. I've watched every one of her press conferences since then. I love to watch the hope leave those clear brown eyes, even as I pray that this will be the last one. Catch me, Annie, I pray. Save me. I step into the small hotel bathroom and answer the call. "Annie." The sound of her voice when she answers sends a shiver of calm through my body. "Yes," she says carefully. "That's my name. Do you feel like telling me yours? Because there are a whole lot of people who are just dying to know." I feel her wince through the phone at her choice of phrasing and laugh quietly.

"Oh, Annie. You know I can't tell you that. That would be too easy."

"Alright, you don't have to tell me," she soothes. "I just wanted to say thank you. For the boy, I mean. Thank you for not hurting him."

My heart flutters like an excited little bird in my chest. She knows I leave the children for her. It's a compromise. I need her to save me, so I leave her the children. She loves children, I know. I know this because I've been watching her for a long time. The children are for her. The mothers are for me. As for the fathers, they were for me too. And they died. Always. They need to die. They all need to die.  
 "Just remember our deal."  
"I know, honey. I'm looking for you, but you hide too well. Could you tell me where you are? Could you just give me a hint? You know I want to help you, but I can't do anything until I find you. Sighing, I lean my forehead against the cool cement wall. "Annie, there's a woman here in this hotel room counting on you finding me."  
I hang up the phone and toss it onto the counter. "There's your hint, Annie." She should have realized by now that I don't go too far from the scene of the crime. Sometimes I like to go back and admire my handiwork, and I don't like to take the mothers too far away from their children. As soon as I give her the clue, I'm filled with the urge to move. This thing inside me, this disease I have, doesn't want me to tell her. It doesn't want her to find me and fix me.  
I glance at my reflection in the mirror and hold my own gaze. My eyes are the eyes of a wild man. My heart beats like a war drum, and you can see every beat on the temple of my scarred face. The scars are what catch and hold my attention. They always do. Half of me blames myself for their existence. The other half wants blood. Thoughts of my father and his punishments bombard me. When the memories become too much, I fill the bathtub with steaming hot water and climb in without taking my clothes off. The water will remove the taint of that other me, the disease, from my soul.  
It'll wash it all away and then I'll wake up and mama will have pancakes waiting for me, and bacon and eggs smiley faces, and the scars all over my body will be gone and everything will be perfect again.

I slip away for a while, but when I come to, there's a pathetic whimpering coming from the bedroom. I had forgotten about my mother for a while. I climb out of the bathtub in my soaked clothes and rush into mother's room. She's hunched over in the corner and she's crying again. Daddy put her in the box again. "Mama, what's wrong?" I ask. I've never been able to stand her tears. "Why are you crying?"  
"You know what's wrong," she snarls, narrowing her dark eyes that look just like mine. "You did this to me, you monster!" I reach for her hand, but she pulls it away, giving me a disgusted, horrified look. "Mama, don't be like that! I'm sorry I didn't stop him! Don't be mad at me, mama, please!" She closes her eyes for a long moment and thinks, and when she opens them she smiles at me and I know she loves me again. "I'm not mad at you, baby," she croons. She even takes my hand and rubs her thumb across my knuckles. "You're so cold, mama. Let me get you a blanket," I say, but when I try to stand up, she pulls me back down.  
"Don't worry about me, baby," she says, smiling her magic fix-all smile. "Why don't you let mama out, honey?"

"I can't, mama," I whisper, looking around. He could be anywhere, he could be listening. "You know daddy doesn't like it when I open the door. He'll hurt me again!" I touch my face as I say it, rubbing the scars there. Mama's magic smile goes away. "Come on, sweetheart, can't you do this one thing for mama? I just want to hold my sweet boy."  
I frown. More than anything, I want to open the door to her box, but Daddy has the key. And he'll hurt me. I remind Mama of this. She closes her eyes tight like she has a bad headache and then smiles again. "No, honey, don't you remember? Daddy gave you the key. It's in your pocket right there." I dig around in the pocket of my jeans and find the key and my Swiss army knife. How did that get in there? "Why don't you give me that knife just in case? I won’t let Daddy hurt you anymore." I nod and hand it to her through the bars.  
My shaky hands slide the key in to the lock, and I turn it carefully, afraid of the consequences.   
For a second after I open the door, mama looks like she doesn't believe it really happened. Like it might have happened in her head. And then she climbs out of her cage and into my arms. I hold on tight to my mother, rocking her back and forth until the sound of a phone ringing snaps me out of my daydream and the dull blade of the Swiss Army knife sinks painfully in to my back.

The stab isn't enough to kill me yet, but it hurts a lot, and if the bleeding isn't stopped soon, I'll die. As I begin to feel light headed I smile at the woman that is not my mother, who is staring in horrified fascination. "Do you know why she gave me this knife?" I'm pretty sure that, having been part of my own delusion just moments before she could hazard a guess.  
She nods with a sharp jerk of her head. "I couldn't use it on him. Didn't have that killer instinct." I laugh at the irony. "I'm sure she'd be glad to know that the useless hunk of metal finally did what she intended it to." I shut my eyes against the pain and fall back on to the bloodstained white carpet. I'm starting to feel light headed, and now the water from my clothes was causing me to freeze.  
My eyes shoot open as a tentative hand strokes my hair. The woman who is not my mother is trying to comfort me as I bleed out from the wound that she inflicted. I don't understand it, but her touch warms me. All of the things I've done to her, how can she stand to be so close to me? How can she stand the ugliness inside and outside of me?

"How can you stand to touch me, after what I've done?" Her answer isn't the one that I really want, because I know that I am a creature so far beyond loving. "Nobody deserves to die alone," she says, unable to look in to my eyes.  
I close my eyes again as a single tear escapes me. "Thank you." Just as the room is about to go dark, I see the door banged open, and there's my angel, the one who was supposed to save me, standing in the doorway. She's too late. There's not enough of me left to save.

"Male, twenty-eight, appears to have stab wound in lower back area," she calls in to the agent on her phone. She steps towards me with her hands held out in surrender. "It's okay, John, I'm here to help you. Remember me? Annie?" How could I forget my savior? Her soothing voice is the last thing I hear before I slip over the edge.

"Stay with me, Johnny. Stay with me. Remember our deal? Remember what you said? I found you, now you have to let me help you."  
But the time for saving had passed, and with the last of my strength I opened my eyes to look up at my childhood friend. She had known me all along, without realising it. And like she had done at my mother's funeral, she held me and she wept with me until I was gone.