**Still**

Angela Ford

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Chapter One

On a warm dark summer night Brianna stood, motionless, in the park where the murder had taken place. There wasn’t a single visible star in that pitch-black sky above her. Brianna veered off the lighted pathway and waited in the still of the night. The darkened shadows of trees surrounded her. Not a single consideration of fear crossed her mind. In fact, she felt nothing since Lisa’s death. The murder she had become obsessed to solve. She held her breath as she heard the sound of nearby footsteps. *Was it him?*

At twenty-eight, Constable Brianna Wilson was part of the Special Victims Unit. She had been with the police force for over five years. Her inspector told her she had let her sister’s death become personal. He advised her to take the time she needed to grieve her loss and let the homicide department do their job. She couldn’t let it go. She was determined to find Lisa’s killer. She owed it to her sister. She owed it to their mother.

 She hadn’t talked to Pete since the night Lisa was murdered. She wished she stayed home with her sister that night. If she had, she would have stopped Lisa from going to meet a man she had only spoken to online. Brianna had talked to Lisa several times about Internet predators and the dangers of chatting online with strangers. She dealt with these issues daily on her job. *Why did my sister take the risk of meeting him face-to-face?* So many questions raced through Brianna’s mind as she waited.

Footsteps echoed in the dark. She knew it wasn’t the sound of an animal. Sadly, she hoped it was him. Despite the darkness and how unsafe it was to be there, she waited with her Smith & Weston .40 caliber pistol in her hand. Her finger rested on the trigger. She knew protocol was to have backup. She had let it become personal. Homicide hadn’t been able to track the so-called predator Brianna found on her sister’s tablet. Brianna lured him using herself as bait.

Brianna swallowed hard as the sound of footsteps came inches away from her. She’d been waiting twenty minutes or so. He was late. Her eyes had adjusted to the night’s darkness enough to determine shadowed figures. She felt his presence, so close she smelled whiskey from his breath. Slowly she moved one foot to balance her stance. Before she grounded her foot, she felt a sharp point at her back and heard his rough voice whisper.

“It’s your turn.”

The coldness in his tone should have sent a shiver up her spine. It didn’t. In one quick sudden movement, her elbow jabbed him and dug in between his ribs. Her reaction had stunned him long enough for her to turn and point her pistol at him. Brianna could see his shadowed position but not his face clearly.

 “Brianna?” The tone in his voice was no longer cold, no longer confident. It startled her that he knew her name. She tried hard to focus on his face, but the shadow before her turned away. Before she could say anything, he ripped a branch off the tree and tossed it between them. Then he was gone. She only heard footsteps move faster.

“How do you know my name?” she yelled, but there was no reply. “Shit!” She cursed when she stumbled. She freed herself from the branch and headed in the direction she’d heard his footsteps. By the time she made it to the lighted pathway, there was no sign of him.

Chapter Two

“Don’t worry, Mom. I’ll stay with her. Go and have a great time. You deserve it.” Brianna tossed the last pile of clothes into her mother’s suitcase.

Audrey Wilson sighed. “You’re right. I need the break. I haven’t seen my sister in so long.”

Brianna promised to move into her mom’s house for the weekend. Not to babysit, but to have a sisters’ weekend, or so she had tried to explain it to her sister. At seventeen, Lisa didn’t require a babysitter. Audrey had Lisa in her mid-forties after finally finding true love—Steve Wilson. He proposed the day she discovered she was pregnant with Lisa. Brittany was ten when her mother married Steve. She loved him as if he had always been her dad. Brianna never knew her father. Her mother had only told her it was a one-night stand, and she didn’t know his name or how to get in touch with him. Steve gave the signed adoption papers to Audrey on the day of their wedding. He told her they would be a complete family. Unfortunately, he was taken from her when Lisa was only two years old. A sudden heart attack had left Audrey devastated and lost. She threw herself into her career and became an Honorable Judge before she turned sixty. It was the only part of Audrey’s life that meant something besides being a mom. Brittany was ten years senior to Lisa and more like another mother. Lisa was well loved and protected. The three women were very close.

Brianna had only moved out in the past year. She bought a condo close to work but spent any free time with the women in her life. They were shocked when Brianna hacked into Lisa’s tablet and discovered the chat group in which she’d been talking to men. Neither Brianna nor her mom believed Lisa just went for a walk in the park that night. Brianna knew there had to be a reason. She brought that information to the homicide constable she knew from the training academy. He promised to look into it. Anxious to find her sister’s murderer, she began to investigate the chat group on her own. The man Lisa chatted with had been clever to hide his IP address. Brianna figured he used a proxy server to make indirect network connections to the Internet to hide the IP address.

 After Lisa’s funeral, Brianna plunked herself down on Lisa’s bed and cried. She held tightly onto the teddy bear on Lisa’s bed. Brianna had given it to her the day she was born. Angrily, Brianna tossed the bear off the bed and then felt bad for doing so. She reached down to pick up the bear and felt something underneath Lisa’s bed. Curious, she leaned over to grab it. It was Lisa’s tablet. Brianna had forgotten about the device she’d given her sister for Christmas. She already searched her laptop and found nothing in there. She turned it on, only to discover it was password protected. Brianna looked around the room and wondered what her sister would have used. She looked at the teddy bear and smiled. *That would be Lisa.*

 Brianna was stunned with what she discovered. “Mom, come here!” Brianna shouted as she read her sister’s tablet in horror.

 Audrey entered Lisa’s room, “What’s the matter?” Brianna looked up at her mother and motioned for her to sit on the bed.

 She waved the tablet in one hand. “I found this under Lisa’s bed. Mom, she’d been on a chat line. I’ve warned her so many times. She chatted with a man she didn’t know. And the last entry is dated three nights ago. She went to meet him in the park.” Brianna cried, “Oh, Mom, it’s my fault. I should have stayed home with her.” Her mother’s eyes filled with tears.

 “Oh, sweetie, there’s only one person to blame; the man who did this to her.”

Audrey Wilson held her daughter and cried with her. Brianna swore to her mother, between gasps of air, that she would find the man responsible.

 Brianna’s promise became an obsession, which forced her inspector to release her from her duties. It wasn’t a suspension without pay but more of a leave for her to take the time to grieve her loss and let homicide do their job. She didn’t listen. Homicide didn’t work fast enough for Brianna. She knew their workload and the little information they had to work with. She was determined to solve this crime on her own. She even kept it from her mother. Brianna began to chat in the same group Lisa had. She hoped to flag his interest. A couple of weeks later it happened. She received a message from the same name that had appeared in her sister’s chats. Brianna smiled. She was ready to lure him in.

Chapter Three

 “What the hell happened to you?”

Audrey opened the front door. Brianna stood before her with dirt and scratches on her face and hands. Brianna took a deep breath. “I was in the park.”

 “At this time of the night?” Her mother looked terrified and didn’t wait for Brianna to respond. “It’s dark and late. Do you remember what happened to your sister? I know you’re a police officer and carry a weapon, but what the heck were you thinking? I’ve already lost one daughter.” Audrey furiously rambled on as Brianna entered the house and closed the door.

 “Mom, I’m okay, and yes I carry a weapon. I found him. Well, at least I found him but he ran away. But the creepiest part is that he knew me. He called me by name.”

Brianna kept walking toward the kitchen as she explained what happened. She headed straight for the coffee pot. She knew her workaholic mother always had a pot of coffee on in her house.

 “You’re not making sense, Bri. Who are you talking about?” Audrey stood in the kitchen in confusion.

 “Lisa’s killer, I lured him out myself.” Brianna turned to her mother and took a sip of her coffee.

 Audrey plumped herself down in the chair at the kitchen table. “Are you sure? How did you find him? And how does he know you? Who is he?” One question came after another. She didn’t give her daughter time to answer in between. Brianna joined her mom at the kitchen table and set her cup down. She reached over and placed her hand on top of her mom’s.

“I’ve no idea who he is. It was dark. I only saw a shadowed figure for a few minutes before he ran. He came up behind me and I felt a sharp point in my back. I smelled whiskey on his breath when he whispered in my ear, ‘*It’s your turn*.’ But I startled him with an elbow hit to the ribs. When I turned, he said my name. Then he ran off like a coward.”

 Audrey gasped and raised her hand to her mouth. The fear in her eyes scared Brianna. “Are you okay, Mom?” Audrey shook her head *no* and tears filled her eyes. Her hands were shaky and Brianna tried to comfort her. “Mom, talk to me.”

 Audrey inhaled quickly and wiped the tears from her eyes, “I’m just worried you’re in danger. We’ve just lost your sister. I don’t want to lose you, too. Promise me you won’t go out on your own again. Promise me.” Audrey pleaded with her daughter. Brianna nodded in agreement to reassure her mother. Something didn’t sit well with her. She knew there was something her mother wasn’t telling her.

 Brianna’s phone rang.

 “Who would be calling you at this hour?” Audrey questioned her daughter.

 Brianna looked at her phone and then at her mother. “It’s Peter Collins. I messaged him on my way here. I need his help.” She answered by the third ring, “Hi, Pete. Sorry to bother you at this hour but I need your help.” Brianna excused herself and walked toward the family room to finish the call in private. She didn’t want her mother to hear the happenings of her night all over again. It appeared to have shaken her up a bit. Brianna told Pete what had happened in the park because of the information she’d found on Lisa’s tablet.

“What the hell were you thinking, Bri? You know better than to go in without backup.” His tone struck her as more worried than upset. For a moment she wondered if he really cared about her. It had been five years and she’d only met up with him again the night Lisa was murdered.

She confided she’d been put on a leave from work. “My inspector thinks I’ve let my sister’s murder get personal,” Brianna laughed.

“This isn’t funny, Bri. I think he’s right. Maybe some grieving time is what you need. Let the police deal with the murder. Give this new information to them.” Peter’s tone was authoritative yet caring.

“I am a cop. I need to find my sister’s killer. I tracked the murderer down. Then I lost him. I need your help in tracking him again.” Brianna’s voice was dead serious.

“What can I do to help?”

“Your expertise, you’re the computer genius. Help me track this hidden IP address, because I know for sure he won’t answer on the chat group again.” Brianna pleaded for his help. There was only one thing on her mind and that was to find her sister’s killer.

“Thanks for the coffee, Mom. And the listening ear. Don’t worry. I’m armed.”

Brianna’s tone was nonchalant. She kissed her mom’s cheek and grabbed her backpack.

“Why don’t you stay here tonight? I’d feel better knowing you were safe under my roof.” Audrey reached for her daughter’s arm. Brianna paused for a moment.

“Sorry, Mom, I’m meeting Pete in ten minutes.” She kissed her mom’s cheek once more. Before Audrey could say another word, she left.

Brianna walked with confidence down the dim lit sidewalk, toward the Tim Hortons she’d met Pete at that fateful night, determined to find her sister’s killer again. Her thoughts wandered as she walked. *Who the hell was the man in the park? He seemed too cocky to be an amateur. He must have killed before.*  She unlocked the passenger side and reached for the tablet before going in. Brianna left her car parked at Tim Hortons before she entered the park across the street earlier. Inside, she grabbed a table in the back corner and waited for Pete.

“Brianna”

She looked up into hazel eyes. The same eyes that had pleased her attention back in college. His blond curls had darkened a bit over five years and were now trimmed. In college they were longer and messed up in a sexy way. He still had that look to make any woman look twice. She smiled, “Pete.” The way he looked at her made her think of her earlier thoughts of him.

“Are you sure you’re okay? Sounds like you had a dangerous night. Maybe you see a doctor.”

The concern in his voice touched her heart. Still sweet, she remembered. He’d been her best friend in college. Not like the idiot she thought she was in love with.

“I’m fine, just a few scratches. Thanks for meeting me so late, Pete. I need your help.” She stood up and hugged him. It felt the same. His arms embraced her and gave her that same feeling of comfort she felt after her boyfriend dumped her. She’d forgotten how great he smelled. A mixture of his cologne and manly scent played with her senses. She released from the hug and wiped those thoughts from her mind. She had a killer to find. “Can I buy you a coffee?”

He smiled. “Allow me. French Vanilla, still?” Brianna nodded. She bit her lip as she watched him walk to the counter. *Stay focused, Brianna.*

Pete returned with coffees in hand and joined her at the table. He opened his laptop.

“I found the man in a chat group on Lisa’s tablet that she last spoke with. It appears he’s used a hidden IP,” Brianna informed him and took a sip of her coffee.

Pete worked for IBM as a technical analyst. A genius when it came to computers, he accepted his first job on the West Coast after graduation. Brianna had been accepted into the police academy at the same time. Their one steamy night together had been the night before he left. They kept in touch, for a little while, but both were enthralled in their careers. The miles in between hadn’t helped. His recent transfer brought him back home and into her heart.

Pete copied the IP into his program and began to work his magic. If there was one person who could track this IP, Brianna believed it was Pete. She watched him work. His fingers flew across the keyboard. His eyes swayed back and forth. They were dreamy eyes. He was amazingly sexy. *Quit it, Brianna. Not now. Stay focused.* She let him work and took another sip.

“Got it!” His sudden words made her jump. It had been quiet for the past fifteen minutes. There wasn’t another soul in the shop besides them and the staff. He looked up and smiled. He moved his laptop around for her to see his results. Brianna grabbed her phone and typed in the address.

“I don’t know if you’ll find him there, but this is the address where that last conversation took place,” Pete confidently assured her.

“It’s only a couple of blocks from here.” Brianna put her phone in her pocket and reached out to touch his hand. “Thanks, Pete. I knew you could find it.”

“You’re not going alone?”

“I’m on suspension or leave for grief—however you want to look at it.”

“Then I’m going with you.”

“You’re not a cop. I can’t let you.”

“I’m not losing you again, Bri.”

Chapter Four

 “Inspector”

Audrey hated to call at this hour, but she was worried about her daughter’s safety. She couldn’t get those words out of her mind.

 “Yes, who is this?” A sleepy voice confirmed she woke him.

 “It’s Judge Wilson. Audrey. I believe Brianna is in danger. Can you come over?”

Audrey got right to the point, as always. She was a driven powerful woman, who usually got what she wanted but she was well respected.

 Audrey paced the hallway between the kitchen and the front door. She chewed on her nails, an old habit she had in college. The doorbell startled her. She was a bundle of nerves ever since her daughter repeated the words, ‘it’s your turn.’ Audrey opened the door to Inspector Paul Matthews, Brianna’s boss and a dear friend and colleague of Audrey’s for many years now. They had worked on many cases over the years, but there was only one that the two of them never discussed, not for twenty-eight years now. Audrey knew Paul since her days in the Crown’s office.

 “What is it Audrey? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Paul hugged his dear friend.

 “Derek MacLean.” Audrey only needed to say his name to grab Paul’s attention.

 “What about him? He’s in prison. I thought you said this was about Brianna.” Paul threw her a completely confused look.

 “Are you certain? I think he’s the man responsible for Lisa’s death. And I think Brianna is in danger.”

 Audrey handed him a coffee. “What?” Paul shook his head.

 “Brianna lured Lisa’s killer from that chat group. She met him at the park tonight. He came up behind her, and she felt a sharp point in her back. Then he whispered in her ear, ‘it’s your turn’.”

 Paul paused from the sip of coffee he’d been about to take. His jaw dropped. Audrey knew he remembered the MO of Derek MacLean. MacLean whispered those same words in Audrey’s ear: right before he raped her.

 “I need to make a call.” Paul set his cup down on the counter and reached for his phone. Audrey waited patiently while he made that call. She had to know if MacLean was still in prison. She listened to Paul’s side of the conversation in horror.

“What do you mean paroled after twenty-eight years? He was sentenced to two life terms consecutively not one.” Paul brushed his hand across the stubble on his face.

 “I knew it. He’s out.” Audrey reached into her pocket and pulled out an envelope. She handed it to Paul, “You need to read this. This will confirm he suspects who Brianna is.”

Paul opened the envelope and began to read the hand-written scribble.

 “Does Brianna know?”

 “No. I’ve kept it secret her whole life. I almost told her after she told me what the man in the park said to her, but I couldn’t.” Tears formed in Audrey’s eyes.

 She began to shake. Paul took her in his arms and promised, “I’ll find the bastard.” He released from their hug. “Where’s Brianna?”

 “She left over a half-hour ago. She went to meet her friend, Pete, who’s a computer whiz. She figures he’ll track that hidden IP address and locate Lisa’s killer.” Paul dialed Brianna’s cell number.

 “Inspector? Everything okay,” Brianna answered after the first ring.

 “Where are you?”

 “Out with a friend. Why?”

 “I know what you’re doing. Where exactly are you? I know who the killer is. You’re in danger.” Paul was not only her boss but a close friend of the family. He and his wife were Brianna’s godparents.

 “Who?”

 “I’ll tell you in person, once I get your location.” Paul wasn’t the man to argue with and Brianna never tried him. She gave him the address.

 “Your mother and I will be there in ten minutes.” Paul disconnected the call and turned to Audrey, “Are you strong enough for this?” She nodded. She would do anything for her daughter, even if it meant she put her own life in danger.

Chapter Five

 “My mother?” Brianna disconnected her call and then turned to Pete. “Why the hell is he bringing my mother?”

Brianna pulled her Smith & Weston from its holster. Pete looked horrified. “Thought you were supposed to wait for your inspector?”

 Brittany kept her eyes focused across the street, on the man she noticed. “Can’t, there he is.”

She opened the car door and turned to Pete, “Stay here.”

 “You’re crazy, Bri. It’s not safe to go in by yourself. Don’t be so damn stubborn.”

Pete pleaded with her. He was unsuccessful. She closed the door and walked across the street to an older home. She figured he was middle class, even to afford to rent the place in this neighborhood. She crept up the walkway and kept against the bushes as she scouted her surroundings. She took notice to dim lighting. He wasn’t in the front room. She looked up and noticed a light turned on upstairs. She made her way to the front door. She turned the knob slowly and discovered it unlocked. She opened it and entered with her gun drawn. She felt a presence behind her and turned quickly. Her gun pointed directly at Pete. He put his hands up and whispered, “You’re not doing this alone.” She motioned for him to leave and he shook his head. She wasn’t about to argue with him and make her presence known to the man upstairs. With one hand on her gun she stretched her arm back to keep Pete safely behind her and moved to the bottom of the staircase.

 “Put your hands where I can see them,” Brianna ordered when the man appeared at the top of the stairs.

 “Come on, Brianna. You can’t shoot your old man now.” He began to walk down the stairs. He appeared confident again, in a creepy way.

 “Stop where you are and put your hands where I can see them,” she demanded.

 “Listen, sweetie, I’m sorry about tonight. I didn’t expect to find you in the park. I was just looking for a little fun. I’d never hurt you, only your sister and your mother. You’re my flesh and blood.” He continued down, one step at a time, slowly, like he was taunting her. Startled by his words she wondered what the hell he meant. Then she heard her mother’s voice.

 “Come any closer to her, Derek and I’ll shoot you myself.” Audrey Wilson’s words shocked Brianna. She heard Paul’s voice tell Audrey to stay behind him.

 “Well, if it isn’t Officer Matthews. What a reunion we have here.” Brianna heard the man’s sarcasm in his laughter that filled the room.

“Back-off, MacLean, I have no trouble pulling the trigger on a bastard like you.”

Paul’s disgust for the man was easily read.

 “What the hell is going on here? Mom?” Brianna yelled out to her mother, without taking her eye off the man on the staircase, her gun still pointed at him. Before Audrey could speak, Derek MacLean took the spotlight.

 “Guess your mother hasn’t told you. I knew your mother twenty-nine years ago. She kept us apart all these years. I’m your father.” Brianna wasn’t sure if she was more horrified with his words or the cold-blooded tone of his voice when he spoke.

 “You raped me twenty-nine years ago. You don’t deserve to be a part of her life. You deserve to be behind bars,” Audrey’s voice echoed in the dark. Her tone scared Brianna. She tried to piece all of this together.

 “That’s not what you wanted back then. Our night was special. It was the night we conceived our daughter. I was never arrested or convicted for what you accuse me of.”

Derek made it sound as though Brianna was made out of love not crime. She trusted her mother. She knew she couldn’t be lying. She didn’t know this man to trust him.

Paul spoke up before Derek MacLean could continue, “It sickens me to listen to this. We made the best choice. The charges against the young girl you killed were dropped only to a mistrial of missing evidence. We could have charged you with rape and sent you to a Canadian jail for a few years, tops. The FBI wanted you for two murders in the States. They said they’d put you away for two consecutive life sentences. That was the best choice. Get you out of the country and behind bars for the rest of your life.”

 “Don’t listen to them, Brianna. They’re only trying to keep us apart. I’m your dad. Trust me.” Derek’s evil tone ripped through Brianna, not in fear but in disgust. She trusted her mother, not a stranger.

 “Any man can be a father. It takes a special man to be a dad. You definitely don’t fit that category,” Brianna quickly answered him. He took a step. He was midway down the staircase. It was still too dark to see his hands.

 “I said stop where you are and put your hands where I can see them,” Brianna commanded. He took another step. The partial light from upstairs only lit half of the staircase. Brianna could now see his hand slowly rise. He was armed.

 “Stop or I’ll shoot,” she yelled.

 “You won’t shoot me. I’m still your father.” He took another step with his gun pointed at the front door. Brianna knew her mother was behind her. Her gut told her he was going to shoot her mother.

 “Now, it’s your turn,” Brianna whispered, as the sound of the bullet left her pistol and took him down. Paul reached over and took Brianna’s weapon. He felt for a pulse on Derek and shook his head. Then reached for Derek’s weapon and called the shooting in.

 Brianna ran to her mom, tears flowed upon her cheeks. Her mother’s hug gave her comfort. “I’m sorry, Brianna. I should have told you. I just wanted to protect you.”

 “I know, Mom. I know.” Brianna released from their hug and smiled. Her mother wiped away her tears. She then realized Pete was standing there. “Oh, Pete, I’m sorry to have dragged you into this.”

 “I told you earlier, there’s nothing that can keep us apart again.” Pete smiled and then took her in his arms. It was exactly where she wanted to be.

Thank you for reading ‘*Still’*. Visit my website to view all my books at angelafordauthor.com

**** **Angela Ford** originates from Nova Scotia…Canada’s Ocean Playground!

Her love of the ocean and sunsets are always in her heart and give her inspiration. Her love for words keeps her turning the page. She is never without a book, whether she’s reading or writing. Now residing in Ontario, Angela works in Finance – *numbers by day* – *words by night*. Her dedication to volunteer and involvement with cyber safety seminars gave her an Award of Distinction and sparked the idea for her first book *Closure* - Best Selling Action/Adventure/Crime/Suspense. Ms. Ford continued her FBI series with *Forbidden* and *Obsessed.* In between mysteries, Ms. Ford writes short contemporary romance...sometimes with a dash of suspense!

Being a mom, her home is always filled with young adults and rather interesting stories; but it is the furry family members who rule the house – a Puggle, a Chug puppy and two loveable cats. Every possible quiet moment she finds, she treasures and just writes about the moments to come. Angela is an avid reader of romance, a member of the RWA, KOD (Kiss of Death – Suspense Chapter) and Mississauga Writers Group. Visit her website Romantic Escapes at <http://www.angelafordauthor.com> to connect with her on social media. She loves to hear from her readers – they keep her smiling!