

Sherri Hayes

Truth

Finding Anna, Book 3

The Writer's Coffee Shop 
Publishing House

Also by Sherri Hayes

Hidden Threat

A Christmas Proposal (a Hidden Threat short story)

Slave (Finding Anna, Book 1)

Need (Finding Anna, Book 2)

Behind Closed Doors (Daniels Brothers, Book 1)

Red Zone (Daniels Brothers, Book 2)

First published by The Writer's Coffee Shop, 2013

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Print ISBN-13: 978-1-61213-161-0

E-book ISBN-13: 978-1-61213-162-7

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the US Congress Library.

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Cover design by: Jennifer McGuire

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Chapter 1

Brianna

“I’m so glad I found you. You have no idea what it took for me to find you, baby girl.”

His words echoed in my ears as I stood there staring. He was here. He was really here. I was frozen, unable to move. I needed to get away. Away from him. Away from here.

Red! screamed in my head but refused to come out of my mouth. It was as if I’d suddenly swallowed a mouthful of cotton. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t speak. Fear took over. My chest tightened, making it harder to breathe.

I stumbled backward, still trying to speak, but nothing would come out. I had to get away. Stephan. I needed Stephan.

As I moved farther into the living room, he followed me. He was like a giant, filling the space. I’d always thought Stephan’s place was large, but now it felt very small as John stalked toward me. The panic continued to rise, but I fought it. *Breathe. Remember to breathe. Stephan. Think about Stephan.*

Oxygen tore through my lungs with every intake of air. I was breathing, but it wasn’t doing its job. It wasn’t calming me. My father had come for me.

Every step I took, he matched and then some. I couldn’t get away. He was bigger, stronger. Why? Why was he here? What did he want with me?

Turning my back on him for the first time, I ran toward the phone. I stumbled over the coffee table on my way and righted myself. I knew he was close, but I had to try. I had to try to call Stephan.

My hands trembled as I picked up the phone. I didn't get any further than that. Before my fingers could touch the keys, he snatched the phone out of my hands, tossing it to the floor behind him. He was too close.

I stepped back again, trying to get away. He said something, but I couldn't understand it. His words echoed through my head like the rumble of cars through a tunnel.

He reached out, his fingers grazing my arm as I moved. Again he spoke, and again I couldn't make out his words. I cringed at his touch, taking another step away from him and bumping into the couch. The collision jarred me from my stupor, and I tried again to utter my safeword.

“R-red. Red!”

Instead of stepping back, leaving, he continued to approach me, his brow furrowed in confusion. I wanted him to leave. Why wouldn't he just *leave?*

“Anna, honey. It's okay. It's me, your father.”

Shaking my head, I did the only thing I could think to do. I ran toward my bedroom. He was blocking my path to the front door, so my bedroom was my only hope. If I could get inside, shut the door behind me, and lock it—I would be safe.

Unfortunately, a split second after I started running, so did he. I heard his footsteps behind me, gaining. John reached the door almost at the same time I did, and I was trapped. I knew in that moment I wouldn't be able to get away from him. That the happiness I'd experienced with Stephan was over. John was going to take it away from me, and I was powerless to stop it.

John called my name again, and I whipped my head around to stare at him. Something tugged at my neck, and I reached up to feel Stephan's collar. I couldn't give up. I couldn't. He wouldn't want that.

Closing my eyes for a moment, I decided to give it one last try and took off toward my bathroom. It was a feeble attempt at best. He'd already proven he could catch me, but I couldn't give up. Not when there was still a chance.

Once again, he was there almost before I was. His hand lay flat against the door, and I was unable to close it behind me. I ran to the far corner of the room, pressing myself against the wall. He stood there staring at me for a minute before he came closer. Every step he took was measured, as if gauging my reaction.

I wanted to close my eyes, but I didn't. Instead, I tried yelling my safeword again as loud as I could. He didn't listen. He didn't stop his approach.

My cell phone vibrated in my pocket, drawing my attention away from him. I glanced down, taking in a deep breath, hope swelling in my chest. *Stephan?*

Reaching into my pocket, I struggled to remove the phone. It was my last chance.

I finally wrestled it free of my jeans, but as soon as John realized what I had in my hand, he knocked it away. Tears welled up in my eyes as I heard the clatter of my phone hitting the tile floor on the other side of the room. I was on my own. No one was going to save me this time.

I slid to the floor, and huddled into a ball, accepting my fate. I had begun to hope. I'd begun to be happy. Now it was going to end. John would take me away. He would take me away from Stephan, from my life. Would he take me back to Ian, or would it be someone else this time, someone worse? I reached up and touched my collar. *Stephan.*

"Anna? Anna, honey, can you hear me? Do you know who I am? I came to get you. I'm sorry it took so long, but I couldn't find you. I looked everywhere for you, baby. You have no idea how I looked."

Did I know who he was? Of course, I knew. I also knew what he'd done to me. He'd let Ian have me, and he'd left me there. For ten months. He let that man do things to me. Horrible, horrible things. I didn't understand why he'd been looking for me. Was it because he'd learned Ian had sold me

to Stephan and he didn't want Stephan to have me? How did he know? Did Ian tell him? Were they friends? The thought sent a shiver down my spine, and I clasped my arms tighter around my legs.

I didn't want to go back to the life I'd had before with Ian. As a slave, I was nothing. Here it was different. Stephan was different. He was nice to me, made me feel things—good things. I wanted to stay with Stephan. I felt warm and safe and happy here. I didn't want to go.

My father lowered himself to the floor and began inching toward me. I repeated my safeword over and over again. He continued to ignore it.

The walls began to close in on me as the panic started to take over once more. I was shaking, and I couldn't get enough air in my lungs. This couldn't be happening. It couldn't.



Stephan

I picked up my cell again, punching the speed dial for what felt like the hundredth time, hoping she'd answer, as I weaved through traffic toward our home. Instead, the sound of my voice on the answering machine greeted me. I tried both the home number and her cell again. She wasn't answering either.

With more force than necessary, I threw the phone against the passenger seat. She wasn't answering, and I knew why.

Tom's haunting words echoed in my ears. "*Mr. Coleman, we have a problem.*"

My stomach churned as the conversation replayed in my mind. He'd only been gone for five minutes, leaving one of the security guards to watch over the lobby. When he returned, the guard was out cold on the floor behind the desk with two Taser wires still attached to his chest, the Taser lying discarded on the floor several feet away. After checking the other man was still breathing, Tom had immediately checked the security monitors. He'd been just in time to see a strange man step off the elevator at the top floor and

walk toward the door to my condo. Given the current situation, I knew it had to have been Jonathan Reeves, Brianna's father.

Just thinking about it sent a shot of fear through my chest and caused me to press my foot harder on the gas pedal. There were too many unanswered questions when it came to Brianna's father. The one thing that was certain, however, was that she was terrified of him. If he got inside, got to her, I had no idea how she'd react. I'd promised to protect her. To keep her safe. She needed me. I had to get to her.

All other thoughts were pushed to the back of my mind as I weaved through downtown traffic. I'd always been a fairly patient driver until Brianna came into my life. I wouldn't have it any other way, though. Just thinking about her not being there every day when I came home from work brought that pain back to my chest.

I felt a sense of déjà vu when I pulled up in front of my building, jumped out of the car, and ran inside. Jesse, one of the security guards, was sitting behind the desk looking a little paler than normal. He must have been the one Reeves used the Taser on.

As soon as he saw me, he stood. "Tom's upstairs waiting on you, Mr. Coleman."

I nodded, increasing my pace as I hurried across the lobby.

The elevator ride seemed to take forever, but I knew it was quicker than taking the stairs. I was in good shape, but racing to the top floor would be pushing it, even for me.

When the doors opened and I saw Tom standing there, I breathed a small sigh of relief. If he was there, Brianna was still inside.

As soon as he saw me, he was moving. "The door's locked, sir. I checked. As far as I can tell, he's inside, but I haven't been able to hear much from out here."

Tom had been ready to call the police when I'd talked to him on the phone earlier, but I'd stopped him. I understood his thinking, but it was the last thing I wanted. The police would only complicate things at this point.

They would barrage Brianna with questions, demanding answers. Her father was in law enforcement. Even if he wasn't local, I had little doubt the police would believe whatever lies he spun. I wouldn't let him take her.

That was the only thing I knew for sure, and the point I drove home to Tom. He was to make sure Jonathan Reeves didn't leave the building with Brianna. I would take care of the rest.

Barely acknowledging Tom's words, I moved to the door to listen. He was right—I couldn't hear anything from out here. Then again, if they were far enough away from the door, I wouldn't. Given my lifestyle, and what I liked, I'd invested in extra insulation to cut down on noise. At the moment, I was cursing that decision.

Using my keys, I opened the door slowly. I had no idea what I'd find once I stepped into the condo. Everything inside me screamed to barge inside, but the last thing I wanted to do was give him the advantage. So even though it nearly killed me, I quietly slipped inside.

To my surprise, the main room was empty. I stepped farther inside, aware that Tom was right behind me. Something had definitely happened. The table beside the couch was turned over, and several things that had been lying on various surfaces were on the floor. The pattern of debris guided my steps.

Halfway to her bedroom, I heard what sounded like muffled sobs and whispering. I picked up my pace. Tom followed me step for step.

The sounds took me to her bathroom, where I got my first glimpse of Brianna huddled against the far wall, knees to her chest, trying desperately to get away from her father. He hovered over her, even though he was on his hands and knees, hand outstretched and attempting to coax her into coming with him. Brianna's only response was to push herself harder against the wall.

Seeing so much fear in her eyes reminded me again of those first few days, and I reacted without thought or care for myself. She was the only thing that was important. I gripped his shoulders and pulled with enough force to throw us both off balance. Concentrating too much on Brianna, he hadn't seen me coming, which worked in my favor. He wasn't passive for long,

however. I was barely up on my feet before his arm collided with the back of my knees, sending me sprawling again. The side of my head knocked into the cabinet, but it didn't seem to cause much damage.

As I shook my head to clear it, I saw Tom reach around Reeves's torso, trying to subdue him. Reeves's response was to elbow Tom in the gut before twisting around and landing a solid punch to Tom's jaw. Tom released his hold on Reeves, and the man took full advantage, kicking Tom in the stomach and sending him flying backward into Brianna's room.

Confident he was safe from Tom for the time being, Reeves turned his attention back to me. Noticing I was once again on my feet, he pulled his arm back, ready to strike. I'd take a million hits for Brianna if it meant she was safe, but giving Reeves a free shot wasn't on my to-do list. Shifting my weight, I lunged at his lower body, landing us both on the floor again.

He must have hit his head against the wall, because he was slow getting up. It gave me just enough time to land a solid punch to the side of his face. And then another. Finally, his body sagged, and I released him. He fell back, his head bouncing off the side of the bathtub before he landed limp on the floor. My knuckles were sore, my hands bloody, but none of that mattered.

Tom stood, massaging his jaw. He followed my gaze down to where Reeves lay unconscious on the bathroom floor. Tom walked over in front of Reeves. I'd known Tom for two years. He wasn't a small man, and he was in great shape for his age. By Tom's response, Reeves must have put quite a lot behind that punch.

Twisting around, I crawled across the floor to Brianna. She was wide-eyed and staring at her father. The moment I tried to touch her, she jerked.

"Brianna. Look at me," I demanded. Her eyes snapped to mine. "Good girl." This time when I reached out to caress her face, she didn't flinch. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head.

"You and I are going to go into my bedroom and get something while Tom stays here and watches your father. Can you walk?"

She nodded. Without another word, I helped her stand.

Once on our feet, Brianna clung to me as if her life depended on it, her fingers digging into my skin. There would probably be marks there later, but it was the least of my worries. I needed to get to my room quickly, but there was no way I was leaving her here in the same room with her father, Tom or no Tom.

Inch by inch, we walked to the door leading to her bedroom. I was careful to keep my body between Brianna and her father. She stayed with me step for step until we reached his head, which was lying about a foot from the opening. She stopped moving, and a shiver ran through her body. A sob ripped from her throat, and she buried her face in my chest. With a firm, hopefully comforting squeeze, I placed a gentle kiss on the top of her head before bending and lifting her into my arms.

It was a little tight getting out of the bathroom carrying her, but I could tell by her immediate response that it was the right decision. I was here for her. I'd promised to protect her, and I would.

When we made it to my bedroom, I carried her over to the bed and set her down. Her arms locked around my shoulders, not wanting to let go. Wrapping my fingers around her wrists, I urged her to release me.

"I need you to let go, Brianna, just for a minute, so I can get something. I need to tie your father up, so he can't hurt you or anyone else, okay?" I said, holding her gaze.

I saw the battle taking place inside her—it was written all over her face. She didn't want to loosen her hold on me.

Reluctantly, her grip slackened, and I brought her hands up to my lips and kissed the backs of them. "Good girl. Thank you."

Turning to my left side, I opened the bottom drawer of my nightstand. The cotton ropes I always kept there lay in the back, just as I'd left them more than six months ago. Grabbing two of them, I faced Brianna again. "I need to go back in there. Do you want to stay here or come with me?"

"I want . . . I want to stay with you," she whispered.

One thing I knew for sure—he was not leaving here without giving me some answers. I wanted to know how he could turn his daughter over to a monster like Ian Pierce. Once I found that out, I'd make a decision on what to do with him.

Chapter 2

Brianna

I was scared. More scared than I'd been in weeks. The only thing that made it better was that Stephan was there. He would take care of me. He would keep me safe. I trusted him.

Stephan held tight to my hand as we walked back into my room. I had to consciously put one foot in front of the other, forcing myself to take the next step, and then the next, because all I wanted to do was run the other way.

The closer we came, the heavier my legs felt and the more effort it took to continue moving. I stepped closer to Stephan, wrapping my hand around his upper arm. He glanced down at me, and I held tighter.

"I'm right here, Brianna. You're fine now." His fingers brushed against my cheek, dragging the rope with it. It felt soft yet strange, and the thought of what he was going to do with it sent a shiver up my spine.

We took the final steps through my bedroom and into the bathroom. John was still unconscious but was now propped up against the wall, his head hanging to one side. I stopped, and tugged on Stephan's arm. I didn't want to go any closer. I didn't want him going any closer.

Instead of remaining by my side, as I wanted him to, Stephan placed a soft kiss on my forehead before releasing my hand. “Stand right here, Brianna. Don’t move until I tell you.”

I tried to do what he said. The desire to run was still there, and I had to force myself to do as he’d instructed. I’d already made one mistake.

Tom stood over John with a menacing look on his face, his arms crossed over his chest. He looked scary. I’d never been frightened of Tom until that moment. I took a step back.

“Brianna.”

Stephan’s voice brought my attention back to him. He wasn’t looking at me, but I knew he must have heard me move. Disappointment mixed with my fear as I realized I’d messed up yet again. I vowed to do better.

He knelt down in front of John, dropping one of the ropes to the floor. With the remaining rope still in his grasp, he looped it around itself until there were two distinct holes. Then, with Tom’s help, Stephan brought John’s hands behind his body and slipped the two holes he’d made with the rope over John’s hands and up to his wrists. With a quick pull, the ropes tightened, effectively creating handcuffs.

Seeing my father bound helped calm my fears a little more. He could no longer reach out and grab me or take me away. Although I knew Stephan would never willingly allow him to remove me, seeing him restrained was comforting.

Stephan picked up a second length of rope and repeated the same process around John’s ankles. Once the ropes were secure, Tom helped Stephan move John into the main room. Stephan instructed me to follow them but not get too close. I made sure I stayed back far enough that John would have no hope of reaching me even if his hands weren’t tied, but close enough that I could always see Stephan. It was a careful balance, made easier once we were out in the main room.

John didn’t move as they carried him, Stephan at his head, Tom at his feet. I watched carefully, looking for any signs that he’d woken up, but there

was nothing. They sat him in one of the dining room chairs and tied him to it with the ends of the ropes.

Once Stephan appeared satisfied that John wasn't going anywhere, he walked to where I'd stopped by the end of the couch, and stood in front of me. His arms wrapped around me, hugging me close. I could feel his lips brushing against my hair. For the first time since I'd seen my father standing in the doorway, I felt as if I could breathe.

"Did you want me to stay, sir?" Tom asked.

Stephan turned to face him but didn't release his hold on me. "No. I think we'll be fine for now. Thank you, Tom."

There was a rough edge to Stephan's voice. I looked up into his face and could see the anger boiling beneath the surface, the vein in his neck pulsing vigorously.

Even though I knew he'd be leaving, when Tom moved toward the door, I jumped. Stephan rubbed his hand up and down my side. I closed my eyes and tried to take a deep breath.

If I hadn't opened the door, none of this would be happening. Why had I opened the door?

"Deep breaths, Brianna."

He looked down at me, concern on his face.

He brought his hands up to cup my cheeks, and I instantly missed his arms around me. I wanted to sit in his chair with him, lay my head on his shoulder, and forget everything outside the two of us existed. Closing my eyes, I leaned into his hands, taking what he was willing to give me.

John groaned, grabbing both of our attentions. I cringed back, but Stephan refused to release me.

He tilted my chin up, making me look at him. "Your father and I are going to talk. Do you wish to stay or go into the other room?"

"I want to stay with you," I whispered.

He smiled and brushed his lips against mine in the softest of kisses. “I want you to sit in my chair. You can watch and listen, but if he tries to speak to you, I don’t want you to answer. Not yet anyway. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Sir.” I nodded.

“Good girl.” He rewarded me with another gentle kiss before releasing me.

I did what he’d asked, taking a seat in his chair. It was a good fifteen feet away from where he and John were in the dining room, but I could still see everything. Stephan stood, towering over John as he began to stir. It didn’t take him long to realize his hands were tied, and I saw him pull on the ropes sharply to test their strength. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw the look of frustration cross his face. He wasn’t going anywhere.

John lifted his head. He first looked at Stephan, frowned, and then turned his head. I knew he was looking for me, and I burrowed further into the chair, pulling my legs up onto the cushion. Once he located me across the room, his expression changed. It softened for just a moment before going hard again.

“Welcome back,” Stephan said, his voice anything but welcoming.

My father tore his gaze away from me and glared at Stephan. “I underestimated you.”

Stephan ignored his comment.

“What are you doing here?”

John spit out blood from where Stephan had busted his lip in their fight. I glanced up at Stephan and realized that he’d been injured as well. Moisture pooled in my eyes. He’d been hurt trying to protect me, and I hadn’t even noticed. A sob ripped from my throat. I couldn’t stop it.

They both heard me. Stephan left my father and walked over to me, kneeling in front of where I was sitting in his chair. He rested his hands on my bare legs.

“What’s wrong?” he whispered so that only I could hear.

I reached out, my fingers grazing over his wounds. “You’re hurt.”

He smiled and kissed my fingers. “I’m fine.”

“How’d you do it?” John’s voice cut through the room, interrupting. We both turned our heads toward him, my hands falling back into my lap as Stephan stood. I missed his touch instantly.

“I don’t believe you’re in any position to ask questions,” Stephan said, stalking back toward John.

John laughed, but it wasn’t a happy sound. “I knew rich boys like you got your kicks in strange ways, but I didn’t think you’d be into kidnapping, what with you being such an upstanding citizen and all. I’ve done my research on you, Mr. Coleman. I wonder what all those rich people who throw their money at you and your foundation would think if they found out you like to take young girls.”



Stephan

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. The man was unbelievable. He broke into my house, scared Brianna, and then had the nerve to threaten me?

“I think you should choose your words wisely. As for Brianna . . . she isn’t your concern anymore. You gave up that right when you sold her.”

His eyes went wide. Shock?

He looked at me, then at Brianna.

“Eyes over here.” He returned his gaze to mine. “Good. Now. Where were we? Oh yes, you were going to explain to me how a father can justify selling his one and only daughter.”

He turned his head again to look at Brianna.

“I said eyes on me,” I snapped. I stalked toward him, and was pleased to see that I had his full attention. “You will keep your focus on me, or I will restrain you in a way to force you to. Your choice.”

He furrowed his brow in concentration. I had no doubt he was gauging how serious I was. If he decided to push back, he’d find out exactly how serious I could be. I had a posture collar upstairs that would solve his wandering eye problem perfectly. It wasn’t something I used often. Actually, I’d gotten it specifically for Tami. She got off on being restrained. The more restrained the better. I may never use it again, but in this situation, it might come in handy.

After a rather lengthy staring contest, Jonathan Reeves slumped back in his seat and said, “I didn’t sell her.”

I looked at him in disbelief. He was honestly going to try to feed me a story. Did he think I was stupid?

“Let me bring you up to speed about what I do know,” I said, allowing him to hear my repulsion. “I know that you had a gambling problem. I also know that you borrowed money from Jean Dumas to pay off your debts. Now my question is what exactly did you promised Dumas in return?”

Reeves pressed his lips tightly together, much like his daughter did when she was nervous. It was the only outward sign of his discomfort. Thankfully I’d learned Brianna’s tells well, and they were useful tools when dealing with her father.

“Cat got your tongue?” I wanted to beat the man to a bloody pulp for what he did to Brianna. Unfortunately, with Brianna in the room, I had to restrain myself. I didn’t think she would react well to such a display of violence.

“You don’t understand.”

His voice was almost pleading, as if begging for sympathy. That wasn’t something he was likely to get from me, not after everything I’d learned from Brianna. Not after seeing her deal with debilitating panic attacks over and over again. There were many people who were responsible, and Jonathan Reeves was one of them.

“Perhaps you’d care to explain it to me, then.”

He stared at me and then jerked, testing the restraints for a second time. His tenacity made me smile. Reeves could test his bindings all he wanted. They would hold. I wasn’t a Shibari expert by any means, but I was proficient in the basics. He wouldn’t be getting free until I allowed it.

“You could loosen these, you know. They’re a little tight.”

“The ropes are fine, and I’m waiting.”

The man was stubborn, I’d give him that. He continued to assess me, trying to look for a way out of the situation he currently found himself in, a weakness. He wouldn’t find one. Jonathan Reeves wasn’t leaving here until he started talking.

Another five minutes passed before he finally slumped back in his chair, resigning himself to the situation. I didn’t say anything, just waited for him to start speaking. He met my gaze, and I could see the disgust in his eyes. I was sure he saw a similar reflection in mine.

“I messed up,” he muttered. I thought the fact that he messed up was a given, but apparently he felt the need to preface whatever he was about to say with that fact.

He paused.

I waited.

“When . . . when I found out Anna’s mom, Carrie, was sick—dying—I sank into some sort of depression.” He closed his eyes and shook his head. “I should never have gone with Chad, but I did. It was only supposed to be something to take my mind off of things, a distraction.” His voice drifted off, and I knew from experience with Brianna that he was falling into a past memory. Like father like daughter, I supposed.

“He took you gambling.”

Reeves opened his eyes and met my stare. “Yes.” He swallowed. “I couldn’t stop.”

“I know this part,” I said, getting agitated. “What I want to know is at what point did you think it was a good idea to sell your daughter?” My voice rose giving way to my irritation.

“I didn’t!”

I lifted my eyebrows, showing him my doubt at his declaration.

“I didn’t,” he insisted.

Again, his eyes pleaded with me to believe him. I didn’t. I’d done my research on him, too. The man was a cop, yet there was no missing person’s report on Brianna. If he were not to blame for her ten months of hell, why didn’t he do everything within his power to find her?

Eventually, when I didn’t soften my stance, Reeves continued. “I had no idea what Dumas had planned to do. Until that day, I didn’t even know he was aware of Anna.”

“You called her. You told her to get into that car.”

“Yes.” He nodded, seeming stunned that I knew what had transpired that day. “Yes. I called her. He said he wanted her to join us for dinner. That if I didn’t call her, he would make sure he met her on his own. I didn’t have a choice. Anna didn’t know anything about what I’d done. I’d tried to keep her out of it. Tried to keep her safe.”

At that point, I walked away from him. I had to. The man was trying to convince himself, and me, that he was a good father who had been coerced into allowing Brianna to fall into the hands of that sadistic bastard.

I walked across the room to Brianna. She was huddled into a ball in my chair. Bending over, I scooped her up into my arms and sat down. She wrapped her arms around my neck and laid her head on my shoulder. I started to calm down, if only a little. Ignoring the man sitting across the room for the time being, I closed my eyes and breathed in the coconut scent of her hair. Jonathan Reeves still had some explaining to do, but at that moment I needed the love and comfort only Brianna could provide. Reeves wasn’t going anywhere.