HARPER
ALLEN

PROTECTOR WITH A PAST

INTRIGUE ...

Harper Allen

Protector With A Past

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No words could terrify Julia Stewart more.After two years of hiding, of dreaming about darkly sensual police detective Cord Hunter and the life she'd left behind, Cord had found her. And he'd brought their orphaned goddaughter - a child in danger…. Julia's career as a child protection officer had ended after a near tragedy.But she couldn't turn away from the little girl she'd sworn to protect, even though it meant working side by side with the man she still loved with furious passion. Even though it meant exposing the secrets she'd driven Cord away to keep…

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“I know you never wanted to see me again. But what either of us wants doesn’t matter a damn right now.”

Gently Cord shifted the tiny figure in his arms.

“Whose—whose child is she?” Julia forced the question out from between lips that felt as if they’d been frozen.

“She’s mine.”

Above her, his low voice delivered the information she hadn’t wanted to hear. Julia felt as if the ground beneath her was slipping away, letting her slide back into the void she’d so recently escaped.

She raised her head and looked at Cord. “Where’s her mother?”

One corner of Cord’s mouth hitched up in that wry half smile she’d never quite forgotten, but his obsidian eyes held no hint of humor. “I said she was my child, Julia.” He tightened his grip on the girl clasped to his chest. “I should have said she’s ours.”

Dear Reader,

Welcome to another month of hot—in every sense of the word—reading, books just made to match the weather. I hardly even have to mention Suzanne Brockmann and her TALL, DARK & DANGEROUS miniseries, because you all know that this author and these books are utterly irresistible. Taylor’s Temptation features the latest of her to-die-for Navy SEALs, so rush right down to your bookstore and pick up your own copy, because this book is going to be flying off shelves everywhere.

To add to the excitement this month, we’re introducing a new six-book continuity called FIRSTBORN SONS. Award-winning writer Paula Detmer Riggs kicks things off with Born a Hero. Learn how these six heroes share a legacy of protecting the weak and standing up for what’s right—and watch as all six find women who belong in their arms and their lives.

Don’t miss the rest of our wonderful books, either: The Seduction of Goody Two-Shoes, by award-winning Kathleen Creighton; Out of Nowhere, by one of our launch authors, Beverly Bird; Protector with a Past, by Harper Allen; and Twice Upon a Time, by Jennifer Wagner.

Finally, check out the back pages for information on our “Silhouette Makes You A Star” contest. Someone’s going to win—why not you?

Enjoy!

Leslie J. Wainger
Executive Senior Editor

Protector with a Past

To David Brennan, the big brother I never really got to know.

HARPER ALLEN

lives in the country in the middle of a hundred acres of maple trees with her husband, Wayne, six cats, four dogs—and a very nervous cockatiel at the bottom of the food chain. For excitement she and Wayne drive to the nearest village and buy jumbo bags of pet food. She believes in love at first sight because it happened to her.

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Chapter 1

Julia's scream echoed in her ears as she jerked bolt upright in the dark, her eyes wide open, her heart crashing painfully against her ribs and the last shreds of the nightmare still fogging her mind.

Dear God—the child! Save the child!

She snapped the small bedside lamp on with an automatic gesture and her frozen gaze rested uncomprehendingly on the familiar room around her. Then she felt a cold nose nudging worriedly against her tightly clenched fist and she came back to reality with shuddering abruptness. King whined and nudged her again, his eyes fixed on her.

"Same old, same old, boy," she said shakily. Her voice sounded raspy and hoarse and she realized that she was speaking too loudly. She lowered her tone, feeling foolish. "Both of us should be used to this by now."

Reassured by the sound of her words, the German shepherd beat his tail briefly against the wide pine planks of the floor and stood up expectantly. She smiled tiredly at him. "Yeah, you know the routine—hot milk for me, a dog biscuit for you. Let me get my slippers on."

The sheets, wet with sweat and tangled around her legs like a hasty shroud, bore mute witness to her recent terror but Julia resolutely shut her mind to it. Like she'd said, she should be used to it by now, she thought grimly, peeling the sheets from her legs with distaste and reaching for the old chenille robe draped over a nearby chair. She shoved her feet impatiently into a pair of scuffs that, like the robe, had seen better days. She'd been having the nightmare for almost two years now, ever since—

She stood up and yanked the belt of the robe tightly around her waist. Pushing the damp tendrils of hair from her forehead with a trembling hand, she took a deep breath and deliberately let her gaze dwell on the comforting and homely objects around her. The dog stood beside her quietly, recognizing this as part of the ritual they always went through.

The desk where she'd written her most private girlhood diary entries stood against the wall. A single round stone sat on one corner of the varnished maple surface, and almost unconsciously she reached over and picked it up, holding it tightly in her hand. It felt as silky and cool as lake water against her palm as she looked around the rest of the room, her breathing slowing to a steadier rate.

Earlier in the day she'd crammed a handful of yellow and purple pansies into a jelly glass, and now the warm pool of light from the lamp cast a velvety glow on them. On the wall just above the bedside table was an antique framed lithograph of two children walking hand in hand across a rickety bridge over a chasm; behind them an angel with flowing golden hair watched out for their safety. It had hung there for as long as she could remember. The photograph beside it had been there for years, too. It showed a skinny little boy in swimming trunks, standing on a dock and proudly holding up a trout as big as his arm.

She swayed slightly. King leaned his body solidly against her leg, his attention focused on her.

The overstuffed chair by the bed was covered in a faded maroon fabric, and there was a lump in the back where a spring had worked its way loose, but she'd read Gone With the Wind for the first time sitting in that chair. Besides, if she replaced it she'd have to throw out the small, drum-shaped maroon leather hassock that went with it so well, and she knew she'd never be able to do that.

She'd taken that hassock out of Davey's room soon after it had happened, tugging it down the hallway with all her five-year-old might, just to have something of him close by in that frightening and confusing time. It still had the tiny rip in it from when one of his fishhooks had torn through the leather and he'd made her promise not to tell on him.

The stone was pressing into the bones of her hand, and she relaxed her grip on it slightly. The small bookcase by the easy chair, the dark green braided rug by the bed that King slept on, the leaf-

patterned curtains at the window—everything was comfortingly familiar. They hadn't changed since she was a child, and their very shabbiness was part of what she'd come back here for, two years ago.

Time stood still in this forgotten corner of upstate New York. If she got in her Jeep and drove down the rutted dirt road to town, if she took the turning just past Mason's Corners that led to the highway, she knew that she'd find the rest of the world was spinning as erratically and as violently as she remembered. But she wasn't going to take that drive, Julia thought with bleak determination. The outside world had come close to crushing her once, and only this sanctuary had kept her from self-destructing completely.

She was safe here. She wouldn't allow anything to upset the fragile equilibrium she'd finally achieved. And if the nightmares were the price she had to pay, then she'd just have to deal with them one night at a time.

She slipped the stone into her robe pocket and dropped her hand onto King's head. "No television, no newspapers, no phone. Just you and me and the lake and the woods, buddy. And that's the way we're going to keep it." She absently ruffled the spot at the back of his ear that he never could quite reach himself, and he heaved a sigh of pure contentment. As she left the room he padded like a silent bodyguard behind her.

The electric clock on the kitchen wall showed almost three-thirty. In another hour she could walk down to the dock and wait for the sun to rise. Instead of reaching for a saucepan to heat milk in, Julia filled the battered tin percolator with cold water from the kitchen tap and spooned coffee grounds into the metal basket that sat inside. She switched on the stove burner and almost fell over King as she turned to sit down at the kitchen table. The brown eyes looking up at her held a hint of reproach.

"Oh—right." She no longer worried that she sounded crazy, talking to him as if he could understand every word she said—if anything, having him as a companion had probably helped her stay sane. Besides, she wasn't absolutely sure he didn't understand English. "One late-night snack, coming up." She opened the cupboard over the counter and pulled down the bag of Milk-Bones, and as she did her glance fell on the tall, square-sided bottle pushed to the back, half-hidden behind the bags of rice and macaroni. For a moment its contents caught the light and shone liquidly gold.

"Like a gentleman," she said, holding out the biscuit. King obliged, taking the treat from her with almost ludicrous daintiness and then settling down in the corner by the door to the screened-in back porch to crunch it enthusiastically with his strong white teeth. She folded the bag closed again, put it back on the shelf and started to shut the cupboard door. Then she stopped.

She kept it there to prove to herself that she could leave it alone. Being afraid to even look at it gave it the very power over her that she was trying to deny. She raised herself on her tiptoes, reached past the bag of rice and grasped the bottle by its neck.

It was full. She'd bought it two winters ago, on one of her infrequent trips to town, and the owner of the liquor store had rung her purchase up quizzically, obviously expecting her to be back later in the week. At the time Julia was half-convinced that his cynical guess would turn out to be right. She'd unpacked her groceries when she'd gotten home, and after she'd put everything else away she'd sat down and pulled the bottle out of its brown paper bag. She'd set it in the middle of the kitchen table—for some reason, she remembered, it had been vitally important that it sat in the exact right spot—and she'd stared at it.

Later that afternoon it had begun to snow, and the wind had whistled off the frozen lake in steadily increasing gusts. King had dozed fitfully at her feet, whining uneasily in his sleep, and she had continued to sit there, staring at the bottle and knowing that all she had to do was reach out her hand, unscrew the cap and pour herself that first drink to blunt the razor-like memories that were crowding in.

Outside, the sun had put on a brief, bloody display before sinking below the horizon, and then the shadows had deepened and strengthened into night. With total darkness had come the ghosts, as

they always did, but this time she had been facing them alone. She'd been aware of them, just at the corner of her vision, grouped around her silently.

She'd known who they were and what they wanted. They wanted her to remember, but remembering would be fatal. Keeping her gaze fixed on the bottle in the exact middle of her kitchen table, she had fought two battles that night—one against a false ally and one against enemies who had never meant her any harm.

When morning had come, a thin gray light edging the far side of the lake, she'd still been sitting there but the bottle was unopened.

And all the ghosts except one had faded away.

He was with her now. He'd always be with her, she thought wearily. It had been his name that she'd screamed out in her nightmare, him that she'd been calling for, and it was his ghost that she'd never been strong enough to push away completely. Sometimes she thought that if she whirled around as fast as she could, she'd catch him standing behind her, that straight black hair falling into one dark eye the way it used to, that wryly devastating smile hitching up the corner of his mouth. Sometimes just before she fell asleep she was sure she could almost hear his voice—husky and incongruously soft for such a big man, as if he'd never found a need to raise it—calling her name.

Those nights were the worst.

The percolator began to rattle and looking over at the stove, Julia saw coffee splashing up like a miniature fountain inside the glass knob of the lid. She slid the pot off the element. He was gone. She had made sure of that herself, had left him no reason to stay with her. It had been deliberate on her part, and it had worked. He was gone, and she knew that after their last confrontation he would never come back. He was probably married by now, she thought, pouring coffee into an ironware mug. She closed her eyes and took a sip. He'd been the marrying kind. He'd wanted a family of his own.

The coffee that had been boiling only seconds ago flooded her mouth with scalding heat, and she put the mug down hastily, feeling the prickle of tears behind her eyelids in reaction. He'd be married, and his wife would be strong and uncomplicated, able to take whatever life threw at her without flinching. Julia wondered what she would look like. He'd moved to California the last she'd heard, and she imagined his wife to be tall and blond and lightly tanned, with smooth tennis player's muscles in her arms and the clear blue eyes of someone who'd grown up beside the Pacific. He wouldn't have chosen anyone who bore the slightest resemblance to the woman who'd ripped his world apart, so she definitely wouldn't be fragile-looking and brown-haired, with shadowed hazel eyes. Her mouth wouldn't look a little too wide for her face, and she'd probably be able to wear a low-cut dress without feeling like her collarbones were the most prominent feature exposed.

By the door King got slowly to his feet, his ears pricked forward alertly, but Julia was lost in thought.

They'd have children. It felt as if she'd taken a dull knife and twisted it in her heart, but she forced herself to go on. They'd have the children she'd vowed she'd never have herself, and whatever their mother looked like, the children would be smaller versions of him. Somewhere on the other side of the continent the Seneca heritage that had manifested itself so strongly in him would give his offspring high cheekbones and eyes so brown they almost looked black. His children would be beautiful.

They could have been hers.

She could hear the wind sifting through the topmost branches of the maples that surrounded the house, and somewhere in the woods an owl must have fallen from the blackness onto its prey, because the silence of the night was split with a faraway, high-pitched cry that was choked off abruptly. She flinched. Then she set her shoulders with fatigued determination. It was still well before dawn, but suddenly she knew she couldn't stay inside a moment longer. Tonight had been one of the bad ones. She was edging perilously close to the abyss, and it had taken her too long to climb out the last time to risk falling in again.

She picked up the bottle briskly and started to put it back in the cupboard. Behind her, King whined strangely, and his nails scrabbled at the screen door in excitement.

"In a minute, boy." She glanced over her shoulder and saw the figure standing on the other side of the screen.

It was just as she'd always thought—if she turned around fast enough he'd be there, watching her. But in her imagination he'd always been alone.

He was holding a small child to his chest. Tiny arms were twined around his neck in a desperate grip. He wasn't smiling and he looked as if he hadn't slept for days, and Julia knew with icy certainty that he wasn't a hallucination.

He was real. He'd come back. He'd brought a child with him.

The bottle fell from her nerveless fingers and smashed into pieces on the kitchen floor.

"What are you doing here?"

Her whisper was cracked and harsh. The sharp fumes of the whiskey overpowered the smell of coffee in the kitchen, but she hardly noticed. King pressed his nose against the screen and wagged his tail furiously.

"He remembers me. Let me in, Julia."

His words were spoken softly, and he made no move to un-latch the screen door and walk in uninvited. She didn't have to do it, she thought swiftly, meeting his gaze. If she told him to leave, he would. She knew that, because the two of them had lived through a scene similar to this before, and when Cord had realized that she'd meant what she said, he'd turned around and walked out of her life.

But this time he had a child with him. And even though he couldn't have known that was the worst thing he could do to her, after that first quick glance she couldn't bring herself to look at the tiny figure in his arms.

"I know you never wanted to see me again. But what either of us wants doesn't matter a damn right now."

Against all her expectations, he shifted the child gently and used his free hand to open the screen door. He stepped inside, and those strong brown fingers that she remembered so well dropped briefly to the top of King's head. The dog grinned up at him, his tail wagging with pleasure.

"Whose—whose child is she?"

She forced the question out from between lips that felt as if they'd been frozen. Without waiting for his answer she reached under the sink for the small dustpan and whisk broom she kept there for emergencies, and avoiding his eyes, she started sweeping the shards of glass up. The whiskey was an amber pool that spread halfway across the kitchen floor, and the smell was so pungent that she felt as if she was going to throw up.

"Get her out of here, Cord. There's nothing I can do for her, so just turn around and take her away. You never should have brought her here."

Her head bent over her task, her words came out in a wrenching undertone and her vision blurred suddenly. The next moment she felt a slicing pain and through the sheen of tears she saw the blood already welling up from the ball of her thumb.

"I can't do that. She's mine."

Above her, his low voice delivered the information that she hadn't wanted to hear, had never wanted to know, and suddenly the pain in her hand was nothing. Julia felt as though the ground underneath her was slipping away, letting her slide back into the void that she'd so recently escaped, but this time she knew she'd never be able to climb out again.

It was true, then. He'd made a child with someone else, started a family that belonged to him and some unknown woman. She'd wanted him to do that. She'd wanted to be part of his past, to be left alone by him, but his confirmation of what she'd previously only guessed at was too much to bear.

Oblivious to the slow crimson drops that were falling from her hand and turning to bright umber as they hit the spilled liquor, she raised her head and looked at him.

“Where’s her mother?”

One corner of Cord’s mouth hitched up in that wry half smile that she had never quite forgotten, but the obsidian eyes held no hint of humor. “I said she was my child, Julia.” He tightened his grasp on the silent little body. “I should have said she was ours.”

Chapter 2

"You're bleeding." His glance moved past her white, stricken face to the gash on her thumb, and his instant concern overrode whatever he'd been about to say. "Let me get her to a bed and I'll help you. Is Davey's—is the spare room made up?"

He took her silence for affirmation and strode down the hall, the child still motionless, her head tucked into the curve of his neck, a silky-fine swath of red hair mingling against the midnight-black of his. The heart-shaped little face was pale with what could have been exhaustion, but the blue eyes peering over Cord's shoulder were open wide and staring at nothing. It wasn't exhaustion, Julia thought suddenly. She'd seen that fixed, unfocused gaze often enough to recognize it, even after all this time. Something had happened to this child—something that had caused her to retreat temporarily to a secret place deep inside herself where no one could reach her.

She pushed the thought aside almost fearfully as she saw them disappear into Davey's bedroom. She was already letting herself get involved, and that could be disastrous. For the child's sake, she had to keep her distance.

Getting stiffly to her feet and moving to the sink, she heard him talking quietly in the bedroom, but if he was getting any answer from his small companion the child's voice was too soft to carry as far as the kitchen. King's ears pricked up with interest, and he trotted down the hall to the bedroom at the snicking sound that meant Cord had unlatched the window to get some air into the stuffy room. He knew this house as well as she did, she thought. He'd been in and out of here since they'd both been children themselves.

What the hell had he meant?

They'd never had children together—never would, now. She turned the cold tap on, holding her hand beneath the icy water and watching the crimson sluice away down the drain. When the bleeding slowed, she one-handedly reached for a clean dish towel and wrapped it around her thumb before bending again to pick up the dustpan.

"Let me finish that." He came into the kitchen, King at his heels. His movements were deft and economical, and within a minute all traces of the glass had been disposed of and the floor was almost dry. He stood at the sink, wringing out the rag he'd mopped the liquor up with, and Julia stood by silently, feeling the tension build inside her.

Whatever his reasons for coming here and whoever the little girl was, they couldn't stay. She had to make him see that. She had no idea why he'd said what he had about the child belonging to the two of them and she didn't even want to know. That part of her life was over.

Everything she'd once been had burned away in a single searing moment two years ago. Only through the grace of God had her self-destruction narrowly missed destroying an innocent victim.

She couldn't let him know that, but she wouldn't let them stay.

For a split second Julia saw again the heart-shaped little face with the blue, doll-like gaze. She thrust the image away from her.

"Whatever you want from me, the answer is no. I'm not responsible for that child, Cord, no matter what cryptic comments you choose to make. You'll have to go when she's had some rest."

She felt the shaking start and she turned away from him, willing her body not to betray her. The muscles in her arms tensed as she hugged herself tightly, the dish towel still wrapped around her hand. Slowly the tremors subsided.

"But she is your responsibility. She's our responsibility." The husky voice behind her held a thread of incredulity. "Dammit, Julia—don't you realize who she is?"

When she'd been a child she'd had a kaleidoscope. It had been the old-fashioned kind, with bits of colored glass that tumbled noisily every time she twisted the metal cylinder, and there had

always been a slight delay between the sound of the glass rattling into place and the jewel-like pattern bursting into existence in the dark tube in front of her eyes.

It was as if she heard Cord's words clicking into place inside her brain, but for a moment she couldn't see what they meant. Then everything suddenly made a terrible kind of sense. Julia whirled around to face him, her unhurt hand flying to her mouth as if to hold back the words that spilled from her lips.

"Dear God—she's Lizbet, isn't she?" She searched his expression apprehensively, and the pain she saw on his features sent a chill through her. "Paul and Sheila—are they all right? What happened, Cord? Were they in an accident?"

Her voice had risen steadily on each unanswered question, and with two strides he was in front of her, pulling her to his chest and holding her tightly. He smelled of the whiskey she'd spilled, she thought incongruously. Her mind skittered away from the terror it already sensed was about to envelop it and frantically tried to busy itself with irrelevancies.

He was wearing a blue chambray shirt that she was almost sure she remembered from before. Blue had always looked good against the coppery tan of his skin and the blue-black sheen of his hair. His jeans still rode low on his lean hips, and her head still came to the exact place on his chest where she could hear his heart beating. She felt his hand on her hair.

"It's as bad as it can be, Julia. Get ready for it." His breath was warm against her temple, and his voice shook slightly. She felt the icy dread coalesce into a stomach-clenching certainty, and she cut him off before he could continue.

"I didn't recognize her at first. She's grown so fast, Cord! She must be four—no, five now. Remember when we went to her third birthday party, and the clown tried to give her a balloon and she started crying? And you'd just gotten King for me, and she gave him cake under the table and Sheila and I put a party hat on him and took pictures of him and Lizbet, both with their hats on and both of them with icing smeared all over their faces?"

She was babbling into his chest, her words tumbling over one another. Her throat felt as if it was constricting, and she raced on, refusing to meet his eyes.

"Remember when she was baptised and she wore the same antique lace gown that Sheila had worn, and her mother and grandmother before her? And you said that you wanted to be around when it was brought out for Lizbet's firstborn, and Paul said he wasn't planning on letting her start dating until she was thirty? And we all started laughing, and then when the priest called us forward to make our vows as her godparents I started—I started crying and I couldn't—I couldn't—"

Her throat had closed up completely, and the torrent of words came to an enforced stop. Inside her an intolerable pressure was building, desperately seeking release, but at the same time it felt as if her rib cage was being squeezed tighter and tighter by some cruel, gigantic hand.

She raised her head from his chest, unaware of the tears streaming down her face. Her eyes slowly met his. Her pupils were enormously wide, as if they were attempting to find and collect a glimmer of light where there was none.

"They're dead, aren't they?" With the harshness of ripping silk, her hoarse whisper sliced through the silence.

She'd never seen him cry before but now his skin was wet, and even as she watched, the shimmer at the outer corners of his eyes spilled over into slow silvery tracks that gleamed against his tan. He held her gaze and didn't attempt to hide his tears or brush them away.

"I like your version better," he said. "I like thinking about them the way they were when we were all together. But yes. They're dead." His voice cracked and his grasp on her tightened painfully. "They were killed, Julia. Somebody killed them."

"No!" The cry burst from her before he'd finished speaking.

"All the way up here I was trying to think of a way to break it gently. There isn't any." His eyes were shadowed and the faint lines around his mouth that hadn't been there two years ago deepened,

but she was beyond noticing. She shook her head in refusal and tried to push herself away from him. He didn't release his hold on her.

"Cord, you—you're crazy! You show up here with some insane story about our best friends being killed and expect me to believe it? What the hell are you trying to do?"

In the corner by the door King looked up worriedly, aroused by her tone. "I won't accept it. It's all some crazy lie or you've got your information wrong or—or something! Paul and Sheila murdered? Things like that just don't happen!"

"Things like that do happen. Before you left the force you used to see it every working day of your life, Julia." His words were low and intense. "They're not supposed to but they do. I saw them myself, just minutes—" He stopped, and a muscle worked in his jaw. "Just minutes after," he continued bleakly. "I was just a few minutes too late."

She'd known from the first that it was true, but denying it was a way of keeping Paul and Sheila Durant alive for the space of another heartbeat or two. She hadn't seen them for years, Julia thought wrenchingly. She hadn't been able to see anyone. But in the back of her mind she'd always known that they were there—Sheila, with her glorious mass of red hair and her wicked sense of humor, and Paul, as far from the conventional conception of a cop as possible with his glasses continually slipping down his beaky nose, his gangling frame giving the impression of clumsiness and his wryly self-deprecating attitude never completely concealing the overwhelming pride he felt in his beautiful wife and the daughter he adored.

It had been enough to know that they were still a part of her universe, even if the probability of her picking up the thread of their old relationship was about as remote as the stars she stared at, sitting on the dock during those long nights when she was afraid to fall asleep.

And now they were gone—all Sheila's fire, all Paul's steady warmth, extinguished. Her world had suddenly become a colder, darker place.

This time when she drew away from his embrace Cord didn't attempt to stop her. She unwound the bulky dish towel from her hand and stared at the cut on her thumb as if she had nothing more important to occupy her mind and saw with dull surprise that it had stopped bleeding—which was strange, she thought hazily, since somewhere deep inside her she felt as if she was hemorrhaging.

As Cord walked over to the window and looked out into the night, his shoulders sagging with weariness and pain, she got a bandage out of the small first-aid kit she kept under the sink for emergencies and covered up the small wound. It was a clean cut. It would heal without a scar.

"Tell me what happened." She pressed the edges of the bandage down neatly, smoothing them carefully and methodically and keeping her attention focused on the trivial task. Her hand was trembling.

"The killer was after Lizbet, too." Fatigue made his voice grainy, but if he was surprised that her initial denial of what he'd told her had been replaced by an unwilling acceptance, he didn't show it. "Paul had been doing some renovating in the basement, and at the first shot from upstairs he put her in the crawl space behind the newly installed drywall and told her not to make a sound. Then he went upstairs and was killed himself. After that second shot Lizbet apparently heard the shooter going through the house room by room, calling her name, but she did what her father had told her and stayed silent. I'm not even sure if she knows exactly what happened to her parents, but she's one terrified little girl."

"Whoever did this knew them?"

She'd thought there was no new horror to come. It seemed she'd been wrong. Julia choked back the bile that rose in her throat and as Cord turned from the window to face her she saw that the same conclusion had already crossed his mind.

"Well enough to know they had a daughter and what her name was." He met her stunned gaze. "Paul phoned me yesterday and told me that he'd had the feeling someone had been following him the last few days. Added to that, Sheila had been getting weird calls on her cell phone and one of

the teachers at the summer day camp Lizbet was going to in the mornings had told them that all her artwork had been slashed—none of the other kids' work was touched. He was worried enough to ask me to fly out and stay with them for a while."

"But why not just alert the local authorities? For God's sake, Cord, when a police officer's family is threatened that's priority one with his co-workers! Why was his first impulse to call you in all the way from California?"

His eyes darkened. They glittered like black diamonds in the tan of his face, and all of a sudden she saw the hard-edged, implacably committed detective he'd been when they'd both worked together so long ago—the detective he still was.

"He knew he could trust me. He couldn't be sure about anyone else, since whoever was phoning Sheila had to have gotten her cell phone number from the precinct. You know why she carried that damn phone. Only his work had the number, and it was only ever to be used for one reason."

"I pray it never rings, Julia. But if anything happened to Paul and they couldn't get in touch with me I wouldn't be able to forgive myself for not being with him. I carry it all the time—just in case…"

It had been the only time Sheila had confessed the fear that lurked beneath her wholehearted support of her husband's career choice. She'd been haunted by the worst-case scenario that every cop's spouse tried not to dwell on—that one day the man she loved would go to work and never come home alive.

Instead, Paul had been killed in his own home. And Sheila had been taken down first. The thought that one of his fellow officers might have had something to do with it seemed the most monstrous betrayal of all.

"I caught the first flight available." His words came out with an effort. "As soon as I got to their house I knew something was wrong—the front door was open wide. I ran in with my gun drawn and the first thing I saw was Sheila's body in the hall. She'd been killed instantly."

"Thank God she didn't suffer, at least," Julia whispered brokenly. She held back the tears that were threatening again and bit her lip to keep the sobs from rising to her throat.

"Paul had been shot at the top of the basement stairs. I found him half in and half out of the doorway, but he'd been rolled over onto his back." Cord's mouth tightened grimly. "He'd been stabbed in the chest, as well."

And the hits just keep on coming. Julia swayed and felt behind her for the familiar solidity of the countertop.

"I don't want to know any more." Her voice was barely audible. A sliver of panicky urgency ran through it. "They're dead—isn't that enough? I hope whoever did this to them is caught and brought to justice, but even justice won't bring Paul and Sheila back. There's nothing we can do to make it right again, Cord—absolutely nothing—so what's the use of going over every terrible detail?"

He looked at her as if she was speaking a foreign language. "Those details, as you call them, are clues. How the hell are we supposed to track down the killer if you refuse to examine the details?"

His voice had a raw edge to it, and with a quick glance at the hallway where the bedrooms were he went on more quietly. "I know you were planning on quitting when I left—when you told me to get out of your life. You wanted to come back to the kind of life and the kind of people you'd grown up with—people who knew a Monet from a Manet, whose carefully rustic summer properties cost more than the homes of the ordinary working stiffs that you'd been forced to rub shoulders with for too long, people who hired men like my father to work for them. I accepted that, finally."

"That's right," she said through stiff lips. "So now I leave the detective work to the professionals—like you, Cord. It's not what I do anymore."

"I'm beginning to realize that." His glance took in the shabby robe she was wearing, the battered scuffs on her feet and the dark circles under her eyes. It rested finally on her bandaged hand. "But what I haven't figured out is what you have been doing for the past couple of years—aside from getting up in the middle of the night to reach for the bottle, that is."

"I haven't had a drink for nineteen months." Even as she snapped out the automatic reply she realized her mistake. Before she could gloss it over, he'd picked up on her slip. His eyes narrowed appraisingly on her.

"The only people who know exactly how long it's been since their last drink are the ones who found it damned hard to quit," he said slowly. "Just what in hell's been happening to you since you threw me out of your life? You're living here year-round, aren't you? You never returned to your old life at all—you just retreated from everything. For God's sake, Julia, have you been here by yourself for two whole years?"

For one dangerous moment she felt like pouring out everything. Then common sense reasserted itself. No matter how tempting it might be to reveal her demons to Cord, to respond to the note of wary compassion in his voice and finally tell him the truth that she'd successfully hidden from him so long, to do so would be fatal. He might tell himself that he understood her fears, Julia thought dully. He might even make an attempt to rebuild the relationship that had once existed between them —and at that thought, an irrational spark of hope flared within her. She quenched it immediately. In the end she'd have to send him away again, but this time it would be harder because he'd know why she was doing it. He'd insist on staying—out of pity, out of compassion, out of a sense of duty. But eventually the love would die.

He's the marrying kind. He wants a family of his own.

"My life isn't your concern anymore, Cord. Stop grilling me." She could feel her fragile self-control slipping away and she prayed she could hold onto it long enough to convince him. "Paul and Sheila were my best friends, too—but if you're determined to look into their deaths you're going to have to find someone else to work with. Investigation never was my field of expertise, anyway."

"No. You were a Child Protection Specialist—one of the best." He ground the words out, stepping in front of her and blocking her path. His eyes were as cold and as threatening as black ice. "And now you're willing to put a little girl in jeopardy just because you don't want to get involved? What about that vow you took with me, promising to take the place of her parents if the day ever came that she needed us? Didn't that mean anything to you? For God's sake, she's so petrified that she hasn't said a word since she told me what happened—and you're the only person who has the faintest chance of getting through to her before she retreats into herself for good!"

"I'll get her killed!" The words spilled from her like acid, tinged with the corrosive terror of a hundred sleepless nights and the soul-destroying guilt of memory-laden days. Her face was colorless except for the pale fire behind her hazel eyes, a fire that seemed to be consuming her. "God help me, Cord— I'm no good at keeping them safe anymore! I'm a liability! She's in jeopardy just by being here in my home!"

She felt a pressure on her knee, and at her feet King whined loudly. He nudged her again with his muzzle, but she ignored him.

"You have to take her away." Her voice had sunk to a whisper, sibilant with fear. She clutched his arm. "I'll do something or say something that'll put her in more danger than she's in already, Cord. Get her out of here before another child pays for my mistakes!"

The remoteness had vanished from his features, to be replaced with baffled concern. Impatiently he shoved the whining dog away from them and searched her tortured expression. "What the hell are you talking about? You brought more children back than anyone else ever had. You were a damned legend! Lost children, children held hostage, abused children—you were the avenging angel that came in and scooped them up to safety! How many kids out there owe their lives to you, Julia? A liability? For more kids than I can remember, you were their last hope—and you came through for them!"

"You don't get it, do you?" Her arms were crossed tightly just below her breasts, her fists clenched, and her slim frame was hunched slightly forward at the waist, as if she was trying to protect herself from a blow. Her voice was despairingly ragged, and her eyes were blind with tears. "I'm not

a damned legend, Cord—I'm a ghost story! The person you thought you knew is dead, and this is all that's left!"

She dragged in a shallow, shuddering breath, her lashes dipping briefly to her cheekbones. "I can't help you," she said dully. "I just can't help you."

He put a hand out to support her as she swayed. "What happened?" he asked harshly. His glance narrowed, searching her face intently. "What the hell happened during your last month at work? Sheila wrote and told me you'd resigned like you'd said you would, but she didn't go into any details. What in God's name went wrong, Julia?"

She'd never been able to tell him everything, not even when the bond between them had seemed unbreakable. She'd always held back, and now was no different.

"I don't want the responsibility anymore, that's all." It was almost too tempting to let herself lean against him, to let him take the full weight of her. She was so weary, Julia thought bleakly. She was so damned tired of being alone and fighting the demons single-handed. But it was her fight—hers and no one else's. She stood straighter, and his hand fell away.

"You should get some sleep yourself, Cord. You're going to need—"

Just then there was a sharp pain at her ankle, and she gave a startled little cry. Looking down in shock, she saw King, his tail tucked between his legs in abject apology but his stance defiant and stubborn. He barked once as he met her eyes, and then trotted a few steps in the direction of the hallway.

"He nipped me!" Everything else was temporarily forgotten in her shock at the shepherd's unprecedented behavior. "He's never done anything like that before!"

"Did he break the skin?" Cord bent down swiftly, and she felt his hand circle her ankle to inspect it. His touch should have felt impersonal, but instead it sent a shiver of sensation up her leg, as if instead of merely examining her ankle he'd taken it much farther…as if he'd stroked her calf, the back of her knee, her inner thigh, with those strong capable fingers that had once known every inch of her.

Hastily she put her foot down, her face faintly flushed. "He didn't hurt me. But that's not like him. He's usually the most gentle—"

King barked again, a sharp, urgent sound. Once again he trotted to the hallway and looked back at them, and suddenly Julia felt a terrible foreboding.

"Lizbet! My God—he's trying to tell us something's wrong with Lizbet!"

Her appalled gaze met Cord's, and the next moment she was running behind him down the hallway after King. The dog bounded ahead of them into the spare bedroom and then stood in the middle of the dark room, barking wildly. As they reached the doorway Cord felt for the light switch on the wall and snapped it on. Looking past him Julia realized that her worst nightmare had finally come true.

The bed was empty. The cushioned pad on the window seat that Davey had sat on for hours so long ago, enthralled with the collie stories of Albert Payson Terhune, had slipped onto the floor.

Lizbet was gone.

The corner of the screen at the low window had been pushed outward. It was small comfort, she thought numbly, but it was proof that the child hadn't been abducted by someone breaking into the room.

"She can't have gotten far. I'll check around the house and meet you down at the dock." His mouth was set in a grim line. "If she hasn't turned up by then we'll have to start searching the shoreline until sunrise, and then we'll take the boat out. While it's still dark we're going to have to try to locate her by sound, and I don't want a motor running until we can do a visual search."

"She heard me telling you she couldn't stay here." Julia's fist was knuckled against her mouth, her other hand splayed against the door frame behind her. "Why else would she have run away? I'm responsible for this, Cord." Her teeth started to chatter, and the shaking spread to the rest of her body

as her unfocused stare darted wildly around the empty room. “I told you I’d put her in danger, and I have. This is my fault. It’s my fault!” Her voice rose to a thin whimper that bordered on the edge of hysteria and then she felt strong hands on her shoulders, shaking her roughly.

“You’re the one who’s going to save her, dammit! You used to be able to get inside a child’s head with some kind of sixth sense that no one else had, Julia! Whatever you say, you still have that ability—it’s part of you. Use it, for God’s sake! Find her.”

She tried to avert her gaze from his, but those black eyes seemed to draw her in until she felt as if everything nonessential was being stripped away and only her spirit remained—battered, bleeding and worn almost past endurance.

But not completely defeated.

The trembling stopped. Slowly but powerfully, like a current changing direction far beneath the surface of a river, an almost-forgotten strength began to surge through her limbs, and Julia felt a moment’s fear as she let herself be swept into its flow. If she let it, it could take her over. There had always been that danger, and she was doubly vulnerable now. But she had no choice. Deliberately, she let the last instinctive shred of resistance fall from her, and almost immediately the night outside seemed to grow darker, the wind in the trees more threatening.

She pressed her lips together and nodded tightly, a restrained gesture totally at variance with the near hysteria she’d shown a few seconds ago.

“There’s a flashlight in the cupboard above the stove. Take King with you—I can’t let anything distract me right now.” She saw the hesitation on his face. “Go,” she said hoarsely, her posture rigid and tense. “You know how I work, Cord.”

He reached out and brushed his thumb lightly against the corner of her mouth. “I know,” he said. “I just never thought I’d see the miracle again.” He held her gaze for a single moment, and in that second their lives together raced through her mind as if she was drowning—a blur of frozen images, like a stack of photographs being shuffled swiftly before her eyes. Then he was gone, the dog a shadow behind him.

She was all alone. She was looking for a ghost to lead her to a child in danger.

Flicking the light switch off, Julia took a deep breath and closed her eyes, deliberately freeing her mind from everything around it and letting it reach out into the darkness.

The child—save the child…

Chapter 3

The lake had been bluer, the summers so much longer back then….

And Davey had been the center of her world—at nine years old, the big brother whose word was the final say on any question, the infinitely wiser and stronger being that a five-year-old little sister could only hero-worship and try to emulate.

Sometimes, if she was really lucky, she could tag along after him—like now.

Her job had been to sneak down to the boathouse after dinner the night before and hide the life jackets under the front seat of the little Sunfish so everything would be ready the next morning. She'd felt important that he'd trusted her with that. The life jackets were bright orange. Davey had told her that was so people could see you floating in the water if you had an accident and they were looking for you. He hadn't known why they smelled like wet dog, though, but they did, Julia had thought as she put them carefully in the little compartment under the boat seat.

They smelled the way King, Davey's old German shepherd who'd died last winter, had smelled after he'd been playing in the lake with them, before his fur had dried off in the hot sun.

Now it was the next morning and she was in the Sunfish, and pieces of fog that looked like rags were blowing off the top of the water as Davey cast off and jumped from the dock to the boat. Watching him, Julia shivered, but she was careful not to let him see. What if one day he was too late, and he didn't make it back into the boat in time? What if he untied the ropes and pushed off and then stood there on the dock while she floated out into the lake alone? It was too scary to think about. Besides, Davey would find a way to get to her. He wouldn't ever leave her.

They really weren't supposed to be out here by themselves at all, but it wasn't the first time Davey had taken the boat out in the early morning. He was a born sailor, Dad had told the other fathers at the yacht club that day he'd taken them there. He'd ruffled Davey's hair proudly and bought him a white sailing cap with the club's crest on it, but there hadn't been any small enough to fit Julia. She hadn't minded. It had been enough just to be out with them, away from her mother's sad silences.

And right now it was enough to be here on the lake with Davey, even though he was kind of mad at her. She was wearing the fat orange life belt that jammed up under her chin so high when she was sitting down that she had to keep tugging on it to keep it from touching her mouth. It tasted like wet dog, too. But Davey wasn't wearing anything over his striped T-shirt, and that was her fault. Julia felt the heavy orange canvas creeping up her chin to her mouth again and pulled it down. She was sure she'd put both life jackets under the seat last night, she thought miserably. But when they'd gotten out onto the lake and Davey had told her to take them out, she'd only found one.

One of the very best things about having him for a big brother was that he didn't stay mad long, though. He was already smiling at her again, pointing at a blue heron flying low across the lake. His best friend Cord knew all about the birds and the animals that lived around the lake because his ancestors had always been here, not like their family, who only came here for the summers and then went back to their big house on Long Island for the rest of the year.

Cord was just as good a sailor as Davey was, but when Julia had asked him if his father belonged to the yacht club he'd scowled. Then one corner of his mouth had gone up in a funny kind of a smile and he'd pulled at her pigtails and told her that his dad didn't have time to belong to clubs. Afterward Davey had told her not to ask dumb questions, and if she had to, to ask him first. But she'd known that Cord hadn't really been angry with her, because he'd found a perfectly round stone later that day, and he'd given it to her for good luck.

They were changing direction. Davey had told her it was called tacking, and Julia had thought at first he'd said attacking, because when it happened the boom came across the boat and if you weren't careful it could hit you. She looked out across the water to where their house was, big and white, with the lawn that Cord's dad had mowed yesterday looking like green velvet.

Just then the heron circled back, maybe to have another look at them. Davey glanced up as the wide-winged shadow passed over him.

And the boom attacked him.

It was like watching one of the movies that Dad had taken the year Davey learned to dive off the high board. Dad had sat in the dark in their living room, running the movie over and over again, backward and forward and slowing it down so he could show Davey all the things he was doing wrong. After that, Davey had practiced and practiced until the instructor at the swim club had told him he wanted to put him on the diving team. But when his dive was finally perfect and he'd shown Dad, he'd never gone back to the pool again.

It looked just like the movie when Dad slowed it down, Julia thought, sitting scrunched up on the hard wooden seat and watching Davey with her eyes opened so wide they hurt. The boom swung over like it was going through molasses and then it hit Davey's head with a solid thunk just as he started to duck. Slowly she saw his neck snap sideways. Slowly the rope he'd been holding fell from his fingers, but it didn't hit the deck right away. It seemed to hang in the air at the level of his waist, and then it was down by his knees, and then it was tangled around his feet.

But Davey's feet were moving, too, rising up into the air with the same kind of slow motion that everything around her seemed to have, the toes of his shoes touching each other in a V shape as he started to fall over the side of the boat. He looked like a seesaw, Julia thought. His hip was on the edge of the boat and his feet were still sliding up through the thick air in that weird and frightening way but his head was already touching the water.

Any second now the seesaw would come up again. Any second now the movie would start running backward and Davey would slowly tip back into the boat and his feet would go down on the deck and his eyes would open and everything would be the way it was supposed to be and she would laugh and tell him how funny he'd looked and he'd start laughing, too, and then they'd go home together and maybe this afternoon Cord's mom might take them to town for ice creams. Any second now all that would happen.

Except all of a sudden the movie started running really, really fast.

She saw Davey's striped T-shirt sliding under the water and then his legs and his white sneakers, still tangled up in the rope, and the rope started snaking over the side of the boat until it reached the end and it stretched tight from the cleat it was tied to.

It felt like there was something big sitting on her chest, not letting her breathe. Holding onto the edge of the boat, Julia slid off the seat onto her knees. She was too afraid to stand up because the deck was moving up and down, and instead of going in a straight line the Sunfish felt like it was going to tip over onto its side. She bit her lip and scrambled over to where the rope was rubbing the white-painted wood and she tried to pull on it, but it stayed tight and the thing that was sitting on her chest seemed to be getting heavier and heavier and she couldn't get any air into her at all.

Then the wind shifted again and the little Sunfish picked up speed and the rope rolled over her fingers and she started screaming and screaming and far off by the shore she could see Cord Hunter, Davey's very best friend, jumping into his dad's old motorboat and heading out towards her….

Nothing had been the same after that. Julia stood in the dark bedroom and felt the predawn breeze coming through the pushed-out screen and went deeper into the past.

She was only five, and she was frightened. Her mother always had a glass in her hand and fell asleep downstairs with the television all fuzzy late at night, and when her father looked at her it seemed like he couldn't even see her. Sometimes she was scared that if she held out her own hand to look at it she'd be able to see right through it herself.

She needed somewhere dark and safe to hide—somewhere even if she was invisible, it wouldn't matter anyway. Somewhere so dark that everything was invisible and she could just wrap her arms around her legs and sit without making a sound and no one would be able to find her….

She moved like a sleepwalker out of the bedroom and down the hall to the side door that opened onto the garden where her mother had sat and pretended to read all those years ago, and as she passed by the broken redwood chaise that she'd never bothered to remove since she'd come back here to live she thought she smelled Shalimar, her mother's favorite perfume.

She shivered. She kept moving.

Somewhere dark, somewhere that was darker than the night and darker than the woods behind the house. Somewhere a little girl would be able to hide for as long as she wanted. Somewhere small and safe. Somewhere no one would look except another little girl who'd once gone looking for a safe hiding place.

Her feet, still clad in the backless slippers, moved through the wet grass as surely and steadily as if they were following a path they'd worn down themselves. Her eyes were closed, and her breathing was shallow.

Find the child. Save the child. Be the child….

She went deeper still, losing herself in the child she'd once been, and then even deeper, searching out the fear and pain of the tiny redhead who'd stared at her with the still blue gaze of a doll. In the silence of her mind she could hear a small, frightened whisper, almost inaudible.

Be the child. She concentrated, and the whisper became clearer….

The boathouse.

Julia stood like a statue on the wet lawn, her mind still operating on two levels and with both levels possessing the knowledge she needed. Only by letting herself become the child she'd once been had she been able to think like the little girl she was searching for, and she was certain now she knew where to find Lizbet. But Lizbet didn't need the help of another child—she needed the adult Julia to protect her. It was time to set aside the fearful little ghost who'd entered her for the last few minutes, time to struggle free from the faded memories that this recent reliving had brought to life once more.

It felt like she was tearing her soul in two.

The past was powerful, and its ghosts were the most powerful of all, despite their pain and vulnerability. The child she'd once been always came to her freighted with guilt and loneliness, but when it was time to abandon her again she clung to the adult Julia with a strength born of fear, terrified to be cast into the shadows and forgotten until the next time.

And even though Julia knew that the frightened little personality was no ghost at all, but merely a long-ago echo of her own self, she felt as if she was turning her back on a real child—a child who had haunted her all her life for some purpose that she'd never been able to understand.

A convulsion ran through her body, and she felt the desperate presence receding into the furthermost corner of her mind with all the other memories that she never allowed herself to examine. She felt as if she'd just run ten miles, and her limbs were shaking with exertion.

"She's nowhere around the house and I checked the woods as far back as the fence line." Cord melted out of the grayness, King—the present King, not the long-gone one from her childhood, Julia thought with a moment of shaky confusion—at his heels. There was just enough light now to make out the tortured expression on his features and the straight, grim line of his mouth, and she put her hand lightly on his arm. Her fingers were still trembling, and her voice was unsteady.

"She's in the old boathouse."

The hope that flared in his eyes was instantly tempered with apprehension, and she forestalled his reply. "I know. She couldn't have picked a more dangerous place—I've been meaning to have it pulled down since I came back here. You're going to have to let me go in alone, Cord. I'm lighter than you are and those rotten floorboards might take my weight long enough for me to get her out of there."

"No. I'll go." His tone brooked no argument, and her hand tightened on his arm.

"She was running from me, Cord! If you bring her back she'll only try again. Don't you see—she has to know that I came for her. She has to know that I want her enough so that I'll never stop looking for her until I find her, and that just won't happen if you deliver her to me like a package.

She already trusts you—now I have to prove to her that she can trust me." She hesitated, and then added in an undertone, "Besides, I'm her guardian. She's my responsibility, too."

She was using his own words against him, but she felt no compunction. She couldn't wipe out the mistake that had ended her career—the mistake that no one knew about but herself and a dead man—but she could try to bridge the chasm she'd so unthinkingly created between herself and the child she'd vowed to protect.

She owed it to the best friends she'd ever had. Sheila and Paul had put their trust in her, and she'd let them down. She wanted the chance to make things right again, and her desperation must have shown in her eyes.

"I should know better than to try to talk you out of something you really want." Cord glanced at the dark shape of the old boathouse with resignation. "It didn't work when you were Lizbet's age, it didn't work when you were sixteen and wanted to ride my motorcycle, and it's not going to work now, is it? But be careful. I'll be standing right outside, so if you think the damned thing's going to go, call out to me."

He turned to the path that led to the boathouse and then paused. Swiftly he pulled her to him and kissed her hard on the mouth. Just as swiftly he released her, his expression unreadable. "Twenty-three months, four days and two hours," he said tersely. "You were my addiction."

He held her shocked gaze for the space of a heartbeat and then gave her an ironic half smile. "Walking out of your life was the one thing I never should have let you talk me into. I'm not going to let you do it a second time."

He lightly traced the corner of her mouth, still soft from his kiss. Then he turned and set off quickly down the path. After a startled moment she ran after him, her thoughts a chaotic whirl.

He hadn't changed at all, she thought in frustrated confusion as they hastened to the water's edge and the rickety building that ran alongside the dock. He'd always had more confidence in her than she'd had in herself, always seen her as strong and capable and supremely in control of any situation. Tonight had been the first time a crack had appeared in his golden-girl image of her, but already he seemed to have forgotten the messy vulnerability she'd displayed in front of him.

After she'd sent him away it had taken long enough for her to reach some kind of equilibrium in her emotional existence, as sterile and empty as that existence had been. How was she supposed to cope if he came back into her life again?

The door of the boathouse was slightly ajar, and Cord carefully pulled it open wide, wincing as it creaked on its rusted hinges. Shutting her mind to what had just happened between them with an effort, Julia narrowed her gaze and looked past him into the darkness, but it was almost impossible to see anything inside. She knew that the floor ran around the perimeter of the building and in the middle was the long-disused boat slip—in actual fact, a large square opening in the floor to the lake below. She could just make out the oily ripple of water where the floor abruptly ended, but there hadn't been boats kept there for years.

Lizbet was in there somewhere, behind the clutter of boxes and old tarpaulins and rusty motor parts. Despite any other doubts she might have, Julia knew she hadn't been wrong about that. The child was here and she was still in danger. As if to underline her apprehension, the wind from the lake outside freshened as it always did just before dawn, and the timbers creaked ominously. The structure was in worse repair than she'd realized, she thought in alarm.

As Cord held the whining King back and followed her with a worried gaze, Julia stepped nervously into the darkness and started edging her way toward the back of the boathouse.

With her first step she felt the sponginess of rot underfoot, the unexpected give where there should have been solidity. Through the flimsy soles of her scuffs she felt the pebble-like pressure of a nailhead that had risen higher than the floorboard it originally had been meant to secure. She gingerly put her full weight onto her leg and held her breath. The floor sagged, but didn't break.

There was a rustling sound by the far wall, on the other side of the dully gleaming rectangle in the middle of the boathouse, and then a muffled splash as something slipped into the water. Julia tried to control her shudder, but she couldn't prevent the unpleasant prickling sensation that lifted the skin at the back of her neck. Water rats. It was bad enough knowing that they were scurrying around her in the dark, but feeling something bump against her underwater would send her right over the edge of panic. She only hoped that Lizbet didn't know what those scuffling noises meant.

She was halfway to the pile of boxes now, and she paused. Keeping her voice low, she spoke into the darkness, praying that her presence wouldn't frighten the little girl into any sudden movement.

"It's me, Lizbet—your Aunt Julia. Uncle Cord's waiting outside for us."

She slid her foot carefully a few inches forward and felt the sickening emptiness of a missing section of floor. Sweat beaded like ice water on her forehead as she realized that Lizbet must have come this way herself only a short time before. That the child had made it safely to her dangerous refuge had been nothing short of a miracle, Julia thought shakily. She felt for a more secure footing and edged closer.

"I don't blame you for running away, and no one's going to make you come back if you're not ready to. But I've got something important to tell you. I want you to know I'm really, really sorry for making you feel sad back at the house."

She'd reached the pile of crates. Listening intently, she thought she could hear the soft sound of an indrawn breath behind one of them. The floor where she was standing felt more solid than the surrounding area, and she cautiously lowered herself to her knees. It was frightening enough here in the unfamiliar dark. The child whose trust she was trying to win didn't need a disembodied voice floating down at her from on high.

"Do you know what a good luck charm is, Lizbet? It's like a rabbit's foot or maybe a shiny penny that you keep in your pocket for luck." She saw a gleam of white sneaker edging from behind the crate, but she went on with careful casualness. "But there are bad luck charms, too—and that's what I thought I was for you. I thought if you stayed with me I would bring you bad luck, Lizbet. Thinking that that made me so afraid that I thought you'd be safer somewhere else."

Slowly a tiny, heart-shaped face peered out from the pile of boxes. In the gloom, Lizbet's eyes were wide and solemn. She looked ready to dart back into her makeshift sanctuary at any sudden movement.

"Except then I remembered something that I had when I was your age—a good luck charm so strong that I figure it can cancel out any bad luck that I might bring."

Slowly she reached into the pocket of the chenille robe and felt the smooth, perfect roundness of the stone that Cord had given her so long ago. Once it had been a talisman for a scared, confused little girl. It was time its protective magic was put back to use. Julia drew the stone out of her pocket and held it in her open palm.

"Take it. It's yours now."

A small hand reached out toward hers and touched the cool stone with minute fingertips. The next moment Lizbet's fingers closed around the rock and whisked it to the safety of her own jeans' pocket. Julia let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

"I'm kind of hungry—how about you? If you want, we can go up to the house and I bet I can get Uncle Cord to make us both some of his famous buttermilk pancakes. He's a way better cook than I am."

It was going to be a long time before she'd be able to coax a giggle out of that serious little mouth, Julia told herself. Right now it was enough to see the pinched, white look replaced for a split second by the tentative flicker of a smile. She held out her hand, feeling somehow as if she was facing the biggest and most important test of her whole life.

"It's pretty dark in here. I'm going to need you to hold on tight to keep me from falling into the lake."

Through the cracks in the boathouse walls came a thin shaft of dawn light, enough so that she could see the heart-shaped face looking at her doubtfully. Then the two silky wings of red hair swung forward as Lizbet nodded silently. The little hand was cold as it slipped into hers and gripped tightly.

"Your mom was my best friend, honey."

Julia's whisper was uneven. Somewhere deep inside her she felt a painfully sweet sensation, as if a patch of ground that had been parched for too long had suddenly been split by the slender green shoot of a seedling. Despite the tears that prickled behind her lashes, she kept her eyes on Lizbet's hesitant blue gaze, but when she spoke again her words were so soft she almost could have been talking to herself.

"I think she'd like it that we're finally getting to know each other."

Chapter 4

He'd gotten about as much sleep as she had, Julia thought distractedly the next morning—a couple of hours, maybe less—but at least she'd done her tossing and turning in her own bed. The obviously weary man in front of her had wrapped himself up in an old quilt, pulled one of the ancient overstuffed armchairs from the living room into the hall and had catnapped outside of Davey's room.

Despite the sun it was early in the season, and although by mid-June the earth itself would have absorbed enough warmth to dispel the last cold dampness of spring, right now the breeze blowing off the lake still held more than a hint of its northern origins, and the distinct green scent of the nearby pines sharpened the atmosphere like tiny slivers of ice. The trees on the property—the hickories, maples and the massive old oak that shaded the house in the summer—had leafed out, but their foliage hadn't thickened to the dense canopy that it would create in a few more weeks. Through the tangle of branches above, the sky looked like well-bleached denim. Julia stopped by a grove of tamaracks that had once provided an almost Oriental background to a long-vanished rock garden.

"What are we going to do about Lizbet?"

She flicked a quick glance over her shoulder at the house. The child was still sleeping, and King had been left on guard in her room in case she awoke. Earlier Cord had told her that he'd informed Sheila's mother last night that he had her granddaughter, and Betty Wilson, devastated by the news she'd just received, had been all too grateful that the child was with them. Betty had been battling cancer, Julia knew, and even if she hadn't been stricken with grief she was no longer able to care for her beloved Lizbet.

"I've thought about that. Since Dad moved some friends of mine have been living in our old place down the road. Dad said the place held too many memories of Mom for him to want to sell it." Cord's voice held affection. "Anyway, Mary and Frank Whitefield will take Lizbet in for as long as we need to keep her out of sight. I don't want her around while we're trying to track down her parents' killer."

He bent down and pulled a tuft of dried choke grass out of the garden, revealing a pale green spear pushing stubbornly through the dead weeds. "My father planted these for your mother one year," he said softly, clearing the earth around the shoot.

With a gentle thumb he touched the young plant, and then he straightened up and sighed, still not looking at her directly. "I didn't like it out in California. It wasn't home."

Julia knew what he meant without him spelling it out. He hadn't just grown up in New York state, he had his roots here, and they went back a lot farther than the Mayflower. Part of him had always seemed inexorably bound to a more elemental way of life, and in the past, coming back to this place where his family had lived for generations had seemed to be a necessary ritual of renewal for him. He would blend in anywhere, she thought, and if he had to he would find a way to survive in a desert. But his soul would always thirst for a sunrise over a still lake, the dark red blur of cardinals against a snowy bough in the dusk, the crumbly feel of lichen on granite underfoot.

"La-La Land too rich for your blood?" she asked negligently, not wanting him to know how closely attuned she still was to his thoughts. "All those California babes—didn't you have even the slightest urge to kick loose a little and enjoy yourself?"

As soon as the words left her lips she wished she could take them back. Indulging her almost desperate need to know what had happened to him over the last two years—whether he'd met anyone, if he'd fallen in love—was an area that had to be out of bounds if she had any hope of hanging onto her self-control while he was around. She couldn't let things get personal between them. She was no good at personal anymore.

"It's none of my business anyway," she added swiftly, but she was too late. Cord rubbed the dirt from his hand carelessly against the seam of his jeans.

"You've got to be crazy," he said. His tone was conversational and uninflected. "I only ever loved one woman, and that was you. Did you think that would change just because there was a continent between us? Did you really think I wouldn't be hearing your voice, seeing your face—for God's sake—smelling the scent of your skin every waking hour that I was away from you?"

He spoke as quietly as he always did and he made no move to touch her. He stood there, solid and big and about as flighty as the damned oak tree arching protectively over the house behind him, and she stared at him, unable to think of a single thing to say in reply.

"I met a man one night in a bar." His low voice overrode her thoughts. "He said his people could shape shift and that he himself had flown like an eagle across mountain peaks. He'd had too much to drink, and maybe I had, too. But while he was talking I believed him, and all I could think was that I wanted to shape shift, too, to take on the wings of some bird strong enough to fly day and night until I was back with you again. I thought I would land on your window ledge and look into your room and make sure you were sleeping and safe, and then I would rise into the moonlight again and fly away before you awoke."

One corner of his mouth lifted unexpectedly in a smile. Reaching out, he tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear and then let his palm linger gently on the shape of her skull. "Like I said, I was a little drunk. I remember waking up stiff and cold on a hill hours later and feeling sure that I really had become that eagle and had seen you, but I never could make it happen again. So I dreamed about you instead. I had you in my arms every night."

She didn't want to hear any more. "I don't believe in magic, Cord. And if you held anyone in your arms at night, she was a fantasy woman." Her eyes met his steadily. "Whatever there once was between us is over. I tried to tell you that two years ago. If you won't accept it I don't see how we can work together on finding out who killed Paul and Sheila."

"I could accept it if it was the truth. But you're lying to me. I still can't look at you without needing you so bad I'd crawl over ten miles of rough road on my hands and knees to get to you, and whether you admit it or not, you want me, too, Julia." His fingers slid under her hair to the nape of her neck. "But go ahead and prove me wrong if you think you can. Kiss me."

Her breath caught in her throat with a noise that sounded more like a startled gasp than the laugh she'd attempted. "Kiss you? What's that supposed to—"

"Kiss me like it means nothing." He drew her slightly closer to him, his fingertips warm against the fine bones at the back of her neck.

With heightened awareness, she could feel the coarser texture of the last few grains of soil still remaining on his hand. He was leaving his fingerprints on her, she thought foolishly, and as soon as the ridiculous notion entered her mind it was followed by a rush of desire so raw and unexpected that it felt as if the air around her had turned to warm water, immediately drenching the cotton sweater and the jeans she was wearing and soaking through to her skin. Cord's mouth was only inches from hers.

"All we've got is history, Cord," she said tightly. "Let's leave it at that." Her body was tense against his touch.

He exhaled softly, still holding her gaze. Shifting position slightly so that he was blocking the sun from her eyes, he shook his head and let the ghost of a smile cross his defeated features.

"My God, you're one mule-headed woman. Why couldn't you have held on to what we had just as stubbornly?"

He let his hand slide from the back of her neck and shrugged, that ironic smile still lifting one corner of his mouth. A crazy mixture of relief and disappointment swept through her, but she forced herself to concentrate on the former instead of the latter. He started to turn away, and suddenly her limbs felt like lead.

Then he stopped and turned back to face her. His eyes were unreadable.

"Hell, no. Not this time." With one fluid movement, he bridged the space between them, pulling her to him so swiftly that she had no chance to react. "Good God, I just have to have this," he muttered, his mouth coming down on hers.

She could taste salt on his top lip and the same sweat slicked her exposed skin where the vee neckline of her sweater dipped as he gathered her to his chest, his arm tightening around her. With his other hand he pushed her hair from her temple, his opened fingers sliding through it until they reached the back of her head, and then spreading wider. Individual sensations fell away, overwhelmed by the shock of sudden mindless need that tore through her.

She'd first kissed him when she'd been seventeen and he'd been twenty-two. Now it was ten years later, and if she'd had to guess a few seconds ago, she would have said that after all the years of intimacy between them there was nothing about Cord Hunter that was unfamiliar to her. She couldn't have been more wrong, Julia thought incoherently.

Never, not even in the last few months of their relationship when everything had been falling apart, had he ever seemed to forget the physical disparity between them, and his size and strength had always been downplayed when he'd been with her. But this kiss was different from anything she'd experienced with him in the past—harder and hotter, his mouth open against hers with an almost adolescent lack of finesse. Once he'd been able to maintain some semblance of control even at the height of their lovemaking. Now not only had he lost that control, but he seemed to have forgotten any subtlety he'd ever possessed. All that was left was urgency.

He wanted her. He wanted her now, and badly enough that he hadn't been able to ease into the moment or prolong the waiting. Despite the warning bells that were shrilling frantically in that part of her brain that was still functioning, there was no real choice left to her.

She kissed him back, opening herself fully to him, and he immediately took advantage of her lack of resistance and moved in even closer, his biceps tensing against her breasts. Liquid fire flashed through her. She could taste him, Julia thought disjointedly, and even that was different from the way she remembered it—he tasted ripe and dark, like cherries flamed in brandy, burning their way down her throat and exploding sweetly as they reached the pit of her stomach. Hardly knowing what she was doing, she felt her fingers fumbling at the buttons of his shirt, impatiently opening them. Her hands slid possessively against his skin, and she felt the faint ridge of scar tissue that followed the line of a bottom rib.

Another woman would have to ask him how he'd gotten that, Julia thought fiercely. Another woman could question him for years and still never know Cord the way she did. Once she'd lain in bed beside him, touching every mark on his body with gentle fingers and recalling the circumstances of each while he'd watched her, a faint smile playing on his lips as she went through the litany—falling from the oak tree when he was nine; getting a fishhook in his shoulder when he was teaching a tourist how to cast; being hit by a piece of flying debris when, as a member of the community's volunteer fire department, he'd arrived at the blaze that had leveled the old box factory in town just as an ancient propane tank had exploded.

She knew him—every inch of him, Julia thought. He was hers and no one else's, and not having him had been like existing in hell for two years. She arched her body to his and his grip around her tightened convulsively. His mouth moved to the corner of her lips, and she could feel his lashes flicking against the line of her cheekbone.

"Right about now I usually wake up," he whispered hoarsely, his breath warm on her upper lip. His words were muffled against her skin. "Every time I do it's like dying. Tell me it was the same for you."

The scar on his ribs was from a stray round he'd caught the year before they'd separated. He'd been instrumental in tracking down the Donner "family," a chillingly twisted group of serial killers who in the end had chosen to die in a violent confrontation with the authorities rather than surrender.

Her fingertips passed over it gently, like a blind woman touching her own features in a reaffirmation of something she'd always known.

"It was the same for—"

The words died in her throat. Past the scar on his ribs her searching fingers had found another—a raised weal that snaked down from the side of his torso to the top of his hip. It felt ugly. It felt unfamiliar. She had no idea how he'd gotten it or when it had happened. All she knew was that it had to be less than two years old.

It had to be less than two years old, because two years ago their life together had come to an abrupt end. Two years ago she'd sent him away, knowing that it was the last acceptable option she had.

He still loved her. He still wanted her. But he'd made some kind of a life for himself that didn't include her—the proof was right here, under her fingertips.

She still loved him. She would never love anyone the way she loved him. And the only thing of value she had left to give him—the last token of love she could place before him—was his freedom.

"I felt the same way, Cord." She drew slightly away from him, bringing her hand up to his mouth and tracing the line of his bottom lip. His gaze darkened with desire. "We were fabulous in bed together and you were right—there's no way I could kiss you without feeling anything. But…"

She hesitated, avoiding his eyes and imprinting every minuscule detail of his mouth on her memory. "I guess what I'm trying to tell you is that it wouldn't be fair for me to let you believe we could rebuild a relationship, based only on a childhood hero worship that I outgrew long ago and the fact that we both like fu—"

"Don't." Cord's hands fell from her to his sides. He took a step back, his eyes narrowed to black slits. "That was never what we did in bed together. We made love."

He rubbed the side of his jaw wearily, still watching her intently. "Honey, I was the boy from the wrong side of the tracks who taught you how to lie, remember? You got good at it, but not that good. It doesn't take a detective's badge to see that your life's fallen apart just as badly as mine has, and for the same reason. We belong together. And this time I'm not leaving until I find out why that terrifies you so much."

She only had to hold herself together for another minute or two, Julia told herself shakily. She met his gaze with her own, the sunlight turning the hazel in her eyes to a clear bronze, the rich chestnut glints in her hair contrasting with the lack of color in her face. "I'm not the stubborn one, Cord—you are. I'll work with you on this case, but that's all. We're temporary partners, and nothing more."

High in the sky above them a windblown cloud passed over the sun, and its shadow raced across the tops of the pines, the porch of the house, Cord's features. Something flickered behind his eyes for the briefest of instants.

"Sometimes you almost convince me," he said softly. "Maybe I'm not as stubborn as you think."

Then he turned, striding along the overgrown path toward the house. Julia deliberately didn't watch him go, but instead turned her face to the lake. She hugged her arms across her body, her hands so tightly clenched that her nails, short and blunt, pressed into her palms. The light cotton sweater was no protection against the breeze that came in off the lake, but the freshness soothed the hot, burning sensation behind her eyes.

She'd been wrong to feel even the slightest antagonism toward the woman she'd fantasized about over the last two years—that blue-eyed, blond, tennis-playing Californian that she'd feared would take her place in Cord's heart. Whoever he eventually made a life with, and whatever she looked like, Julia thought painfully, the woman who would one day make Cord forget he wasn't her enemy.

"I'll never know you, but one day you'll learn about me." Tears blurring her vision, she forced the nearly inaudible words past numb lips, her gaze fixed on the whitecaps near the middle of the lake where the water was choppier. "You'll wonder what kind of a woman could let him go. You'll think I couldn't have loved him—but you'll be wrong. You'll be so wrong…."

She'd missed her period, and she hadn't been able to tell him. She'd told herself it was because she wanted to be sure before giving him the news, but when the home pregnancy test showed positive she'd been glad that she'd waited until he was out of the apartment before taking it. Hunched over like an old woman, she'd sat down on the edge of the bathtub and started to shake.

It was what they wanted, she'd told herself, staring at the pink-tinted stick in front of her as if it was a snake about to strike. Wasn't it what they'd wanted—a family of their own someday? Two boys, two girls, and Cord had always joked that he'd teach the boys how to be as good a cook as their father if she'd show the girls how she caught five lake trout to everyone else's one.

He would be the perfect father-to-be, worrying about her health, indulging her quirks and cravings, attending Lamaze classes with her. Finally the day would arrive when he bundled her into the car, drove like crazy to the hospital, and she gave birth to their baby—a tiny, perfect, fragile human being that they would be responsible for.

And she wouldn't be up to the task, she'd thought with cold certainty. Of all people, she knew how swiftly tragedy could strike, how no amount of precaution could totally insure a child's safety. The world was a dangerous place, and more often than not its victims were the innocent, the defenseless—

The children that she hadn't been able to save.

She'd taken each failure personally—the instances of abuse that she had been informed of too late, the Have You Seen This Child? photos that eventually faded and curled on bulletin boards and telephone poles around the city, the confused bereavement of parents who berated themselves and each other with a barrage of if onlys—if only I hadn't let go of her hand, if only we hadn't let him sit in the front seat, if only we'd taken her with us, if only we'd kept him at home…if only we could have kept our child safe.

What it all came down to was if only they'd known, they would have done things differently, Julia had thought. But she did know. And, having that knowledge, what had she been thinking of by making a child with Cord—a child that would be born into such a capriciously violent world?

When she'd eventually learned that her pregnancy result had been an error, she'd felt as if she'd been given a second chance to avert a tragedy, and more than ever she'd been glad she hadn't told Cord anything yet. She'd left the doctor's office and had sat in a nearby park until afternoon grayed into dusk. When she'd finally risen from the park bench, her limbs stiff from the hours of frozen immobility, she'd known what she had to do. Her job was to save the children she could, and even at that there were dozens who slipped through the cracks. But she could ensure that no child of hers and Cord's would ever be lost through her inadequacy.

She would send him away. She would tell him any lie it took to make him leave her, but the one thing she would never tell him was the truth. If he ever knew her fear he would try to make things right for her, and because losing him would break her heart Julia was afraid she might weaken enough to listen to the lies she knew he would tell her. He would tell her that a life without children wouldn't devastate him, he would tell her that he wouldn't ache for the feel of a baby's fist holding his, he would tell her that he wouldn't envy the friends of his who were fathers themselves.

And he might even believe it himself for a while. But as the years passed the sense of loss would grow in him, because more than any man she knew, Cord wanted children of his own. And no matter how much he loved her, he would always know that but for her he could have had them….

"You'll never know me," Julia whispered. Back at the house King barked playfully on the porch, and a flock of mourning doves flew fussily into the trees. "But one day you might learn that there was a woman before you in his life. Don't let that worry you."

Their children would look like Cord. They would grow up beside the Pacific. They would be tennis players like their mother.

"I let him go because I love him so. I always have." Blinking the tears from her eyes, she started up the path toward the house. Then she turned and looked one last time at the blue lake, the far shore, the distant horizon. "I always will," she whispered to herself.

Chapter 5

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust…"

Her spine ramrod-straight, Julia stood beside Cord's immobile bulk and stared unseeingly ahead. The job of a police officer was no picnic. The hours were grueling, the respect often nonexistent and the danger ever-present, but when an officer was killed there was always a good turnout at the funeral. It was one of the few benefits of being a cop, she thought, her black-gloved fist clenched tightly around the shoulder strap of her purse. She'd known how Paul and Sheila had scraped along on his salary when he'd been a rookie, how for years they'd celebrated Christmas the day after or the day before because Paul had always been working on December the twenty-fifth, and how Sheila had lain awake nights when Paul had been working a case, wondering if this would be the night when her cell phone rang.

But now that he was dead and especially since the job had claimed Sheila, as well, his fellow officers, many of them in dress uniform, had gathered to show the world that however scant the material rewards of their career were, the profession and those who chose it were worthy of the highest honor. It was all about solidarity, Julia told herself tightly. The grim-faced men and women around her were there to bid farewell to one of their own, knowing full well that the next funeral could be theirs.

It had been a touchingly beautiful service. But here at the graveside under a cloudlessly perfect blue sky nothing could blunt the terribly symbolic sight of the token shovelful of earth falling onto the two polished mahogany coffins that were even now being lowered into the ground. Sheila's mother, Betty Wilson, was sobbing quietly a few feet away, her frail figure flanked by friends and relatives, and most of the other mourners' faces were distorted by grief.

Who in this crowd had betrayed them? Which grieving face hid a lying heart?

"How are you holding up?" As people began to move away from the graveside, Cord took her arm and met her watery gaze. "If you think you can manage it, I'd like to stick around for a while and talk to a few people. But if you'd like to leave—"

"Someone here isn't who they seem, Cord. Someone here was no friend to Paul or Sheila," Julia cut in flatly. "I know that as well as you do, and of course we'll stay and find out what we can. Stop treating me like I'm a basket case."

"You remind me of a sweet little girl I once knew who told me she could recognize poison ivy without my help," Cord said dryly. "Oh, yeah—that was you. Still as prickly as ever, aren't you? I only thought you might feel out of place here now that you aren't on the force anymore."

"Oh." Julia was nonplussed. "I thought you were worried that I might…" Her words trailed off, and a faint color mounted her too-pale cheeks.

"Worried you might what?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I guess I thought you might wonder if I could handle an emotional situation like this without a—a crutch." She looked at her hands, unconsciously twisting the strap of her purse. "Without needing a drink," she said quietly.

"Do you?" His question held no condemnation. When she didn't answer his hand gently cupped her chin and tipped her face back so that their eyes met. "Do you need a drink to face something like this?"

"Once, I would have," she said simply, looking into his gravely sympathetic face. "And for the rest of my life I'll be aware that it's a trap I could fall into again if I let myself."

In the strong sunlight, dappled by the overarching elm boughs, his eyes darkened, the thick lashes throwing sharp shadows onto his high cheekbones. "Were you going through this when we were together?"

The conversation, personal as it had been from the start, was straying into forbidden territory as far as she was concerned, Julia thought. She withdrew from his grasp and shook her head.

"No. There was an incident at work that…"

She closed her eyes as the familiar images flashed through her mind like a home movie from hell—the narrow ledge of the office building, the stalled traffic far below, the hopeless and hate-filled expression of the man holding the child—

She drew a deep breath and forced her eyes open. The day was still perfect, the peaceful park-like setting around her a watercolor-like blur of soft greens and the gray of weathered stone as her vision wavered and cleared. "I was stressed out and I chose the wrong way to handle it. It had nothing to do with us."

Her tone was deliberately final in an effort to shore up the barrier between them—a barrier that had somehow dangerously weakened in the last few minutes. He'd always been able to slip under her defenses, Julia thought nervously. It was one of the reasons she'd been relieved yesterday when he'd decided to make his base of operations a motel room in town rather than the lake house with her. He'd said it was more convenient that way, but they'd both known that living under the same roof, however temporarily, would be too emotionally distracting at a time when they needed to focus on working smoothly together.

She looked past him to a nearby group of mourners—fellow officers of Paul, she realized, recognizing one or two—and then her own edginess vanished as she took in the uncomfortable expressions on the group of faces and saw the reason for them.

"Good Lord, isn't that—" she began, but Cord, following her glance, finished her thought.

"Dean Tascoe, damn him. And it looks like he's spoiling for a fight." His lips thinned and he scanned the area swiftly. "Betty must have left already, thank God, but even so, I'm not about to stand by and let Paul and Sheila's funeral be turned into a free-for-all by that bastard. Emotions are running high enough as it is."

Turning on his heel and striding purposefully across the lawn, he was already several yards away from her before Julia gathered her wits together and hurried after him. Ahead of her, Cord's back was rigid with anger, the broad shoulders set stiffly under the somber and well-cut suit jacket. His hair, as glossy as a raven's wing, gleamed with blue-black highlights under the buttery afternoon sunlight.

Tascoe had chosen the wrong place to air any grievances he might feel he had, she thought apprehensively. Cord had dealt with the man in the past and had made no secret of the fact that he considered him a disgrace to the uniform he'd once worn. To have him attempting to sully this solemn occasion was intolerable.

"Hey, Chief—long time no see." Breaking off from the heated discussion he'd been having with an attractive but angry-looking woman—Paul's partner, Cindy Lopez, Julia realized with belated recognition—the stocky ex-cop fixed a grave expression on his heavy features. "Hell of a note, isn't it? The thin blue line just got a little thinner, but we all know that comes with the territory. To take out Durant's lady too, though…"

He shrugged meaty shoulders. "Well, I guess we're agreed that when this scumbag gets caught, the odds are pretty damn good he's going to suffer a fatal accident long before he gets the chance to go before some bleeding-heart jury and tell them how misunderstood he is, right, folks? We know how to handle cop killers—all of us except for Chatchie here." He shot a disgusted look at Lopez, and her lips tightened.

"Tascoe, I just lost the best partner anyone could have, so don't tell me I wouldn't know what to do if I found his killer," she said, her dark brown eyes hard with contempt. "I'd read the bastard his rights, cuff him and expect justice to take its course—because that's the way Paul would have handled it. I swore to uphold the law, not take it into my own hands."

"You sound pretty cool for someone whose partner just got whacked, chiquita. I thought you people were supposed to be hot-blooded," Tascoe drawled insinuatingly. "Or do you just reserve all that passion for your girlfriend? Now, that's one hell of a waste."

"Your kind of policework got you kicked off the force, Tascoe." Stepping in front of the other man, Cord gave him a tight smile, his eyes glittering like chips of black ice. "Too bad you still haven't figured out we're supposed to be the good guys. If you came here to pay your respects to a decent cop and his wife, you're going the wrong way about it."

"He's right, Dean. Don't start anything."

For the first time Julia noticed the thin, middle-aged blonde standing beside the burly ex-cop. Her face, like the faces of many there, bore traces of tears but Julia had the distinct impression that in her case grief was a constant companion rather than a reaction to today's funeral. She tugged again at Tascoe's arm.

"Please, Dean. Let's go home."

To Julia's surprise, instead of shaking her off impatiently, Tascoe looked down at the woman with uncharacteristic gentleness. He patted her hand awkwardly.

"Don't worry, Jackie. I know you've got to work with these people, and I've said what I came to say, anyway." He raised his gaze to Cord, still standing in front of him. "I've got to admit, Chief, when I learned it was you who blew the whistle on me I was hoping for a long time that I'd run into you in a dark alley some night. But that's all water under the bridge as far as I'm concerned—you did what you thought you had to do, and I'm on easy street these days. I've got my own investigation agency now. If you're ever looking to change jobs, give me a call."

He fished a dog-eared business card out of the breast pocket of his blue suit and handed it to a silent Cord, but as he did, his glance fell on Julia, and the slightly bloodshot eyes widened in recognition. Then, curiously, his glance slid uncomfortably away from her and back to Cord again. He addressed him with insincere enthusiasm.

"Hey, you two lovebirds made up! I'll tell you, Chief—this little girl just fell completely apart when you dumped—"

"Not one more word, Tascoe."

Cord's voice barely carried, but its very lack of emphasis was a threat in itself. If he was forced to take on Dean Tascoe he wouldn't even break a sweat, Julia thought with a flicker of gratification that she instantly suppressed. Although clearly the other man had once been formidably muscled, much of his bulk had turned to fat, and despite his bullying manner it was obvious that he knew he'd pushed Cord to a dangerous limit. He gave an unconvincing shrug.

"No offense, Chief. I just thought—"

"Calling me Chief is offensive, Tascoe." Cord sounded suddenly weary. "But today all I want is to say goodbye to my two best friends in peace. Just go."

"We're going." The blond woman Tascoe looked pasty and ill, and her voice was thready. "I—I'm sorry about your friends. What happened to them was—was terrible. Terrible. Especially since there was a—a child involved." The thin hand on Tascoe's sleeve trembled visibly.

Tascoe bent his balding head once more to his companion, and again Julia was struck by the complete change in his personality as he did so. His arm around her, he nodded to Cord, ignoring Cindy Lopez and the others, and led the distraught Jackie away.

"I can't believe he used to be a cop." Darting a disgusted look at his retreating figure, Cindy raked strong fingers through a swath of shining hair and then patted her pockets. "I don't want anyone ragging on me for this," she said belligerently, pulling out a pack of cigarettes and scowling. She lit one with a quick nervous gesture and took a deep drag. "I'm trying to quit, but having to deal with that yahoo right after a funeral is too much."

"Jerks like that aren't worth it, Cin." A slender, almost fragile-seeming woman in the group spoke up, her voice attractively husky. Chestnut hair curved in elegant feathers around the delicate

bones of her face and her arched brows knitted together as the other woman drew agitatedly on the cigarette. “Why don’t we go home and I’ll brew up some maté? We can have it out on the balcony.”

Her clear green gaze rested on Cindy with a mixture of love and concern that seemed oddly familiar to Julia. With dawning comprehension, she realized that it was the same look that she’d seen in Sheila’s eyes when the stress of the job had gotten to Paul. The knowledge took her aback, but only for a moment. Although she hadn’t guessed at Cindy’s lifestyle when she’d met her after Cord had transferred out two years ago, Paul certainly would have known shortly after being partnered with her. He’d counted her among his friends, and that was good enough for Julia. Lopez sighed.

“I know, Erica.” She frowned and looked at Cord. “Dammit, he was grilling me for details like some stringer for the National Enquirer—asking me whether Paul was shot and then stabbed, or stabbed and then shot, wanting to know exactly where Sheila’s body had been found, what she’d been wearing…” Her voice shook. “Hell, after everything I’ve seen at work you’d think I’d be handling this better.”

“He used to be my partner. I’m not handling it too well, either,” Cord said bleakly. “Being a cop doesn’t mean you stop feeling—unless you want to end up like Dean Tascoe.”

He squinted through the elm branches at the cloudless sky, his hands shoved negligently in the pockets of his trousers, his jacket open. Against the crisp white of his shirt Julia glimpsed the worn brown leather of his shoulder holster, and at the sight a small jolt of fear ran through her. He’d come armed. What was he expecting to happen here, of all places?

“It seems all wrong, somehow, doesn’t it?” Cindy’s friend Erica looked at the perfect sky as Cord had and sketched a small, graceful gesture that encompassed the beautifully landscaped grounds, the freshly leafed trees, the golden sunlight bathing the scene. “If this was an opera the heavens would be splitting open with thunder and lightning, the sky would be dark, and we’d be rending our clothes and cursing the gods.”

“This is my only decent pantsuit,” Lopez said with a lopsided smile. “But that cursing the gods thing sounds good to me. Erica designs stage costumes,” she added to Julia with a note of pride in her voice. “She gets a little Wagnerian once in a while, but this time she’s right. I’d feel better if I could just be doing something.”

As they’d been speaking, the crowd around them had gradually thinned. Lopez’s frustrated comment brought forth a ragged and dispirited chorus of agreement from the few remaining officers clustered nearby, and one by one, men and women in uniform shook hands or clasped each other in brief, wordless hugs before heading toward the high and ornate iron gates enclosing the area. Beyond the gates, parked cars lined both sides of the winding, graveled drive that entered the cemetery.

“I guess we should be heading out, too, Cord,” Lopez said heavily. “Although tonight I don’t think a nice hot cup of maté’s going to cut it.” She shot a defiantly guilty look at Erica that under different circumstances might have brought a smile to Julia’s lips. “I’ve got a date with an almost full bottle of Scotch that I’ve been saving for a rainy day. Right now I feel like Noah.”

There was a heartbeat of silence after her words, and then her appalled gaze found and held Julia’s. Her color rose under the smooth tan of her cheeks.

“God—sorry, Julia. I didn’t intend to—I mean, I know it’s probably something you’d rather…” She raked her hair back, her expression contrite and her words trailing away. “Me and my big mouth,” she mumbled.

Great, Julia thought dully. Her only consolation these last two years had been that at least the people she’d once worked with had no idea of how completely her life had disintegrated. Now it seemed that her personal problems and weaknesses had been common knowledge right from the start. It was humiliating, and shameful, and…

…and strangely liberating, she thought with a slight sense of shock. She wouldn’t have to watch what she said or concoct any elaborate excuses—make that lies, she told herself—in the event that

she found herself in a social situation. It felt as if a weighty load had been lifted from her shoulders —a weight that she never would have had the nerve to shrug off without Cindy's faux pas.

Although she had been able to tell Cord, she realized, surprised.

"Please don't think that Paul violated any confidences—" Cindy stammered, but Julia cut across her apologies.

"I know he didn't. I thought it was such a terrible secret that I didn't tell anyone about it."

Seeing the stricken look in the expressive brown eyes watching her, she laid her hand tentatively on Lopez's arm. The disconcerting thought came to her that it had been a long time since she'd reached out to comfort another person.

"Cindy—it's okay. I'm not upset." She attempted a grin. "I'm certainly not about to run off to the nearest bar and knock back a dozen tequila shooters because of this."

It was time to change the topic, she thought, wishing all of a sudden that she was back at the lake, alone in the big house with no one but King to intrude upon her solitude. But the German shepherd was with Lizbet at Mary Whitefield's house, where he would stay until all danger to the child had passed.

"You must have your own theory as to who targeted Paul and Sheila." She directed her comment to Lopez, but she was conscious of Cord beside her. "I know neither of us has any official standing in this matter, but maybe the very fact that we aren't as close to the investigation as you are might help us see a pattern here."

"I think I see the pattern," Lopez began, but then she broke off, darting a quick glance over her shoulder at a cluster of overall-clad workers standing by the discreet, foot-high chain that surrounded the rectangles of fresh earth a few dozen yards away. Julia followed her glance. Just beyond the two new graves the rolling landscape took a slight rise, and from somewhere out of sight she could hear the rumbling noise of a piece of machinery idling. It sounded like construction equipment, more suited to the side of a highway than to this pastoral setting.

Cord had heard it, too. Julia saw the pain that flashed across his features without understanding the reason for it. A second later she understood.

"I think we're holding up their work." His hand moved as if to touch her, but then he checked himself. "Let's go," he said quietly. "They want to fill in the graves."

"Oh."

The startled exclamation that escaped Cindy's lips made her suddenly sound much more vulnerable than her tough exterior suggested. Erica, taking in the situation at a glance, laid a hand on her back, shepherding her gently toward the gates that led out of the cemetery.

"You said you thought you saw a pattern?" Cord's question was a timely diversion. Erica shot him a grateful look. Julia heard Cindy take in a deep, shuddering breath and saw her square her shoulders.

"Yeah. And I think we were supposed to see it." She frowned at the velvety turf underfoot, and Julia realized that the dark-haired woman beside her was back in the unassumingly comfortable suburban house that she'd visited so often before as a guest, but that now had turned nightmarishly into a crime scene, with her partner and his wife as the victims.

"It was the way Paul was killed, of course," Lopez said haltingly.

Julia knew she was reliving the moment when, after getting the call at home and racing to the scene, she must have run up the pebbled walkway to Paul's house, her badge held wordlessly out to the phalanx of uniformed officers. She would have had to put away all personal feelings at the time, Julia thought with aching compassion, and it couldn't be done. She knew that from her own experience. But Lopez, with her cigarettes, her nervous mannerisms and her obvious stress, was tearing herself apart trying. Julia only hoped that Erica would be there for her when the inevitable emotional crash came.

"The shot to the head killed him, and the killer would have known that. Anyone would have known that, just—" her throat worked convulsively "—just by looking at him. It was bad. Real bad."

Her eyes were luminous with sadness. As they passed through the iron gates and headed toward the private road, now almost empty of cars, she continued with an obvious effort. “So the stabbing had to be some kind of sign. Its only purpose was symbolic, and once we accepted that, it was obvious what it was meant to symbolize.”

“You and Paul had been trying to destroy the heart of the DiMarco organization.” Cord’s statement was matter-of-fact. “The authorities were being warned off the mob investigation, and killing Paul that way was a brutal example of the retaliation in store if the case continued.”

“Yeah. You’re good, Detective Hunter.” Lopez shot him a twisted smile. “That’s the way I read it, too. We’d targeted Vince DiMarco’s chain of Laundromats because we knew there was more getting washed in them than just clothes.” She gave a short laugh. “Now that heroin’s trendy again, thanks to a couple of irresponsible movies that impressed the hell out of a whole new generation of kids, DiMarco—ever the savvy businessman—has gotten into it in a big way. Which means big money. Big dirty money that he’s passing through his legit operations, including the Laundromats, so it loses that unpleasant smell of dead junkies and ruined lives.”

This time Erica’s comforting touch couldn’t stop the shaking. Her hair falling like dark brown silk around her face, Lopez stood stock-still at the edge of the drive, fists clenched at her sides, her head bowed. Julia looked up at Cord helplessly. He met her stricken gaze and this time she welcomed the brief moment of closeness. Then he stepped away, facing Lopez and gripping her shoulders.

“You had a cousin. She died of an overdose, didn’t she?” His words were gentle and barely audible, but at them Lopez’s tearstained face jerked up.

“How did you know that? Nobody knows that!”

“Before I left for California I needed to be sure that whoever was replacing me as Paul’s partner was someone I could trust. I won’t apologize for investigating you, Lopez. If you’d been in my position you’d have done the same. We both cared too much for Paul to leave anything to chance where his partner was concerned.”

The woman in front of him nodded slowly. Julia felt some of the tension of the moment ease, and beside her Erica let out a pent-up breath.

“Tina and I were as close as sisters. She was a few years younger than me, but the difference in our ages didn’t seem to matter. We did everything together. But at the time I decided to become a cop she was dating this guy that no one in the family liked, especially me. I knew he was bad news and I couldn’t see what she saw in him.” She shrugged, her eyes clouded with memory. “Well, you two know how consumed your life becomes when you’re in training. Then, after I found out I’d made the cut and took my first rookie position, I seemed to have even less of a personal life. I was working crazy shifts, pulling doubles a lot of the time, taking more training…” Her voice broke. “I should have made time for her. The day I made my first arrest I came home to tell my family. My mother was just hanging up the phone when I walked into the house. She told me Tina was dead. She was only seventeen, and when I saw her body at the funeral home I thought I was looking at an old lady.”

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