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INTRIGUE®

TALL, DARK AND WANTED

MORGAN HAYES

Morgan Hayes

Tall, Dark And Wanted

«HarperCollins»

Hayes M.

Tall, Dark And Wanted / M. Hayes — «HarperCollins»,

Policewoman Molly Sparling remembered everything about Mitch Drake–his wild eyes and low, sexy voice, his touch…and that they had parted badly. Now Mitch, a protected witness, was missing and presumed dead.Molly refused to believe it. And though duty demanded she track him down, she feared that coming face-to-face with Mitch again might be more than her heart could bear. With a killer shadowing their every move, she had to convince Mitch to return to protective custody and testify. But Mitch didn't want protection–he wanted Molly….

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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 35

He'd been gentle. So gentle…

Should it have surprised her? The second Mitch had touched her tonight, the soft heat of his palm had whispered memories to her.

Molly took another deep breath, trying to quiet the flutter that had started inside her the second he'd lifted her top to dress her wound. The bathroom had been far too cramped for the two of them. Definitely too cramped for the physical attraction she'd felt crackle across the narrow gap that had separated them.

"No." The sound of her voice forced back the images. And if that wasn't enough, Molly patted at the edges of the tape that held the bandage in place. It still stung, giving her a sharp bite of reality.

And the reality was, she was here to bring Mitch back to Chicago. Nothing more.

Dear Harlequin Intrigue Reader,

The holidays are upon us again. This year, remember to give yourself a gift—the gift of great romantic suspense from Harlequin Intrigue!

In the exciting conclusion to TEXAS CONFIDENTIAL, The Outsider's Redemption (#593) by Joanna Wayne, Cody Gannon must make a life-and-death decision. Should he trust his fellow agents even though there may be a traitor among their ranks? Or should he trust Sarah Rand, a pregnant single mother-to-be, who may be as deadly as she is beautiful?

Another of THE SUTTON BABIES is on the way, in Lullaby and Goodnight (#594) by Susan Kearney. When Rafe Sutton learns Rhianna McCloud is about to have his baby, his honor demands that he protect her from a determined and mysterious stalker. But Rafe must also discover the stalker's connection to the Sutton family—before it's too late!

An unlikely partnership is forged in To Die For (#595) by Sharon Green. Tanda Grail is determined to find her brother's killer. Detective Mike Gerard doesn't want a woman distracting him while on a case. But when push comes to shove, is it Mike's desire to catch a killer that propels him, or his desire for Tanda?

First-time Harlequin Intrigue author Morgan Hayes makes her debut with Tall, Dark and Wanted (#596). Policewoman Molly Sparling refuses to believe Mitch Drake is dead. Her former flame and love of her life is missing from Witness Protection, but her superior tracking skills find him hiding out. While the cop in her wants to bring him in, the woman in her wants him to trust her. But Mitch just plain wants her back….

Wishing you the happiest of holidays from all of us at Harlequin Intrigue!

Sincerely,

Denise O'Sullivan

Associate Senior Editor

Harlequin Intrigue

Tall, Dark and Wanted

Morgan Hayes

www.millsandboon.co.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

"Men and women finding love against great emotional odds and in the face of personal danger —that's what I attempt to deliver to my readers with each book," says Morgan Hayes. "For me, the combination of mystery and romance is the most fulfilling. With suspense and intrigue, I'm able to develop the compelling dynamics that, I hope, will keep my readers turning the pages not only to find out 'whodunit' but to discover how these characters are going to survive emotionally."

The inspiration for Hayes's suspense stories comes from her continued research in Baltimore, Maryland—primarily with the city's homicide unit. And quite often the inspiration for her characters comes from the admirable men and women behind the badge. With Mitch and Molly's story, there was the added inspiration of time spent in southwest Michigan at Shady Shores, a family-owned resort that hugs the shore of Dewey Lake just northwest of Dowagiac.

Hayes herself lives along the remote and rocky shores of Georgian Bay, Ontario, but admits that she needs the occasional dose of big-city life, and frequently travels to Baltimore and beyond. Ms. Hayes's book Seduced by a Stranger won the 1998 Romance Writers of America Mystery/ Suspense Chapter's Kiss of Death Award, and in 1996 her second Harlequin Superromance novel, Premonitions, garnered a Romantic Times Magazine Reviewers' Choice Award.

Bass Lake
Wawa
Lake Superior
ONTARIO
Sault Ste. Marie
N
Mackee
Lake Huron
Lake Michigan
MICHIGAN
ILLINOIS
Dowagiac
Niles
Chicago

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Mitch Drake—He'd lost everything he held precious in life and now he was on the run. But with former love Molly Sparling by his side, his heart began to heal—and to hope.

Molly Sparling—She swore the only reason she'd sought out Mitch was as a cop doing double duty to catch a ruthless killer. Still, she couldn't help but feel like a woman in Mitch's strong arms.

Sergio Sabatini—Known in Chicago as "Slippery" Sabatini, this mob boss would do anything to keep himself out of the can—starting with the murder of the key witness in his case, Mitch Drake, and that meddling cop, Sparling….

Leo Sparling—His only daughter, Molly, meant everything to this retired lawman, but even he couldn't keep her safe from the dangers on her trail.

Sergeant Karl Burr—He knew Molly was a maverick and so he let her have her head. But was Molly's "uncle" Karl getting in over his head?

Detective Adam Barclay—Molly's partner on the force and her sole confidant—but could he truly be trusted?

Tom Sutton—This good cop's murder spurred Molly on—but could she have saved him from the evil that stalked him?

Rachel McCloud—Tom's former partner in Vice was a top dog detective, but just how much did she know about Tom's murder?

In memory of Alice Nevins…
avid reader, shining light and boundless soul.
May her enduring spirit live on in the memories of all
those who call Shady Shores their "other home."
And for Susan Bergey and Robyn Landers,
whose endless generosity and card table
made this book possible.

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Chapter One

Mitch eased his hand around the cool brass of the door-knob. He turned it noiselessly, feeling the bolt slide free of the catch.

He didn't start when he heard one of the officers clear his throat behind him. He'd expected it.

"Uh, Mr. Drake, you weren't actually thinking of leaving, were you?"

Mitch turned in time to see a third officer round the corner to join the other two in the room. Expectation replaced the previous boredom that had marked all three of the officers' faces from the moment they'd arrived for duty at the safe house one week ago.

"As though I could go anywhere in this?" Mitch responded, nodding to the back window. Except for the narrow path that had been trampled down during the officers' frequent smoke breaks, the small, fenced-in yard was buried under a good three feet of snow. Chicago had been socked by one of the worst New Year's storms it had ever seen. Five straight days of freezing temperatures, nonstop flurries and winds that drove the snow into waist-high drifts, closing highways and more than half of the city.

"Why don't you guys go back to the game?" He could hear the Bulls game still blaring from the TV in the other room. "I'll be ten minutes."

"Look, Mr. Drake. It's the D.A. who makes the rules, not us, okay? And rule number one is we're not supposed to let you out of our sight."

"I won't be out of your sight. I'll be right outside. Now, if one of you wants to join me, you're more than welcome. I'm going for a smoke."

"But you don't—"

"I do now." He snatched up the pack of Camels left on the Formica-topped kitchen table, and tapped one cigarette out into his palm as though he'd done it a thousand times before. And when one officer tossed him a plastic lighter, Mitch caught it in the air, nodding the man an insincere "thanks".

He half expected one of them to scramble into his coat and come out after him. But no one did. The door slammed shut in its frame as Mitch stood against the full force of the gale that blasted around the side of the split-level bungalow.

No matter how bitter cold, he was grateful for the privacy. There'd been precious little of it these past few months, with a new safe house every couple of weeks, and a constantly changing team of officers breathing down his neck at every move as though he was the one waiting to go on trial.

Turning up the collar of his leather bomber jacket, he stepped off the snow-packed deck and ventured down the steps to the first low drifts. He buried his hands in his pockets, crushing the cigarette in the process, and followed the six-foot-high fence. Snow packed into the sides of his leather shoes. Icy wind bit at his exposed skin and whipped at his hair. He didn't care. At least it made him feel alive.

And—after eight months of safe houses, not to mention the two months prior to that recuperating in hospital—it was hard to remember what "alive" was anymore. Hard to remember there had ever been a life before this nightmare. Harder still to remember life with Emily.

He stopped at the far end of the yard, sheltered somewhat by the fence, and let the wind wrap its chill around him.

One thing he would always remember, however, was that night—the night his life had ended in one wrong turn, a detour directly to hell. Closing his eyes against the driving snow, he could, in an instant, conjure up every last detail of that night. The events unfolded before his mind's eye like some stuttering, overplayed movie reel—the grand opening of the Carlisle Office Complex he'd spent three years designing and building, the project that sealed his reputation and success in the world of architecture, a night of high society and glamor, of celebration and champagne. But the most vivid

image, beyond all the glitter and opulence of the evening's events, was Emily—her glowing beauty, that shimmering smile of joy, her laughter and her words.

"Look at this, Mitch. All this—" she'd whispered, waving one slender hand at the grandeur around them. "It's unbelievable, and all of it is yours. You did this. I am so proud of you."

She'd kissed him then, oblivious of any onlookers. It was a passionate kiss that Mitch knew he'd remember to his grave, because it had been their last.

Within three hours of that kiss, everything he had known and loved was gone. They'd left the opening early. Emily, in spite of all her good cheer and exuberance, hadn't been feeling well. Mitch could still remember the unseasonable warmth of the spring night air wafting through the car's partly open window as they left the city center behind them.

If not for the road construction, they would have been safe in their bed, his body molding to Emily's curves as he held her through the night. Instead, there was the detour sign, followed by a wrong turn. And then that dark street—made even darker now by the memories.

Emily had asked if he was lost. There was no time to answer. The sports car's headlamps panned to the left as he took the turn, the light glaring across wet asphalt, illuminating the graffiti-covered wall of the overpass and finally capturing the small group of men.

They stood under the concrete arch, next to two dark-colored sedans, as the world spun into slow motion. Mitch couldn't be sure which came first—the piercing crack of the gunshot or the flare from the weapon's muzzle. Then there was the figure, crumpling to the shimmering pavement. And finally, the man…the man holding the gun. He'd turned, his deeply lined, sallow face forever etched in Mitch's mind.

Emily was speechless, but Mitch remembered how she'd clutched at the sleeve of his tuxedo, tearing at it as though prompting him into action. The gearbox ground when he forced the sports car into reverse, the engine whining as he accelerated back to the intersection.

He didn't need to glance in the rearview mirror to know they were being followed. And he hadn't needed to hear Emily's panicked observations as he steered for the on-ramp to the expressway.

They were already on him. Headlights blazing in the rearview, then disappearing below the mirror's field of view as the tailing car took its first crack at Mitch's bumper.

The small car was no match. The vehicle lurched, then swerved just as the battering sedan delivered another ram, and then another, to the ruined bumper. Mitch had already known they weren't going to make it to the expressway. One dark sedan was alongside them. A single sideswipe from the heavy vehicle tore the wheel from Mitch's hands. There was the agonizing squeal of metal on metal as the passenger side ground along the guardrail, and a spray of sparks lit up the night like a million stars. Then there was Emily's scream. And finally the gut-wrenching crack as the rail gave way, hurtling the tiny car into a headlong somersault down the earthen slope.

Mitch remembered little after that. Not until the blipping of hospital monitors and support machines. It could have been hours or days that passed before the detectives came. Time meant nothing once he'd been told of Emily. Eventually he'd been presented with a photo lineup, and now, after months of safe houses, Mitch wished to hell he'd never pointed out the man he'd witnessed firing the gun.

He had never actually seen a photograph of Sergio Sabatini until he'd picked him out of the photo array. But he'd certainly recognized the name the instant one of the detectives uttered it: Slippery Sabatini. What resident of Chicago hadn't heard of the notorious mob kingpin who'd spent the past fifteen years slipping through one judiciary crack after the next, evading every last criminal charge the Chicago Police Department tried to pin on him?

As though life without Emily hadn't been bleak enough, from that moment on, Mitch's life had literally disintegrated. First there had been the weeks of recovery in hospital under heavy police guard. And then, when Sabatini's slick, high-priced lawyer managed to convince a judge that his client was established in the community with a family that depended on him, and was, therefore, in

no way a flight risk, Sabatini easily met the million-dollar bail. On that same day, Mitch was moved to the first safe house. And the next. And the next. He'd lost count after the twelfth or thirteenth, in the same way he'd lost count of the number of trial delays and the D.A.'s excuses for each one.

Now, ten months later, it was easy to lose sight of the real reason he'd subjected himself to it all—Emily.

With numbing fingers, Mitch drew his wallet from his back pocket. He ignored the razor-sharp wind that cut at his frozen hands as he flipped the leather wallet open. The one-inch photo behind the crinkled plastic was several years old, but Emily's beauty had never changed—from the day he'd met her in college her eyes had never ceased to shine, and her smile had only brightened over the years.

Mitch caressed the plastic over the photo with the pad of his thumb before closing the wallet and returning it to his pocket.

He was doing the right thing. In the end, in spite of everything he'd been through, it was the right thing. Only he could avenge Emily's death; only his testimony could put her murderer behind bars. There was no one else. Just him now. Up until three months ago, the D.A. had had two others lined up to testify against Sabatini, two witnesses who had seen the cars force Mitch's off the ramp that night. But now they were dead, or at least presumed so after their mysterious disappearances, which were currently under investigation by the CPD.

No, a conviction in the Sabatini trial lay solely in Mitch's hands. And yet how many times had he caught himself wishing he'd died along with Emily that night? So what if Sabatini went to prison for consecutive life sentences? It couldn't change the past. Emily was dead.

Mitch wiped the melting snow from his face and turned to look back at the safe house.

After all the safe houses, and after the trial, even after a conviction…what kind of life did he really have to go back to, anyway? Without Emily, it was hardly worth it.

He tilted his head and leaned against the fence, gazing up at the whirl of snowflakes. But it was images of Emily that swam before his mind's eye.

And it was at that moment, the instant he'd started to straighten from the fence, intending to head back to the house, that the frigid silence of the late afternoon was shattered. One second there was quiet, and the next the world was ruptured by a violent explosion. It tore through the flimsy structure of the safe house, ripping it into a million fiery pieces that spewed out in as many directions.

Instantly the air was thick, churning with the heat of the blast, alive with the hiss of the inferno that consumed the small house. Flames licked at the heavy sky, their heat blistering along Mitch's skin as his lungs took in the first wave of acrid smoke.

It was the second blast that knocked Mitch off his feet. It hurled him back against the fence under another shower of burning debris, and pitched him into utter blackness.

MOLLY SHOULD HAVE expected the mass of reporters and media vans camped outside Police Headquarters. Coverage of the explosion that had destroyed the safe house in Huntington was all over the news.

She'd been numb from the second she'd stepped out of the shower this morning, padded into her bedroom and seen the photo of Mitch flash across the TV screen. She'd been numb as she drove through the city and parked her car in the police garage around the corner; numb when she'd shoved change into the slot of the newspaper box and taken out a Tribune. She was still numb as she elbowed her way past the media and up the steps to the doors of Headquarters.

Even sitting down at her desk in the far corner of the Homicide unit, Molly was still in a haze of disbelief. Ignoring the chaos of phones and other detectives around her, she shrugged off her suit jacket and unfolded the paper. The front page of the early edition offered even less information. At least the TV report had suggested only three bodies were recovered from the late afternoon blast that had ripped through the Huntington bungalow. And unless Witness Protection was working under a new rule with less officers posted, that could mean…could mean there was still one survivor. Which one, though?

Her gaze scanned the rest of the page, scrutinizing the photo of the wreckage and finally stopping at the black-and-white image of Mitch. It wasn't a good photo. Grainy and blurred. He looked directly into the camera, his lips curved in the same sexy smile that touched the corners of his eyes. And in spite of the poor quality of the photo, there was no mistaking that something in his eyes—a light, a spark. She'd never been able to describe that look, but it was the same one that had always managed to trip her pulse and bring that rushing swell to her heart. It was the same look she had felt so certain would forever be reserved for her, and her alone.

Molly gave herself a mental shake. How was it possible that twelve years couldn't erase that sensation? Especially when the romance had lasted barely a quarter of that time? Then again, who was to say that at age seven she hadn't already been in love with "that Drake boy" down the street?

Mitch Drake, the much-celebrated architect behind the new Carlisle Office Complex and now a protected witness for the prosecution in the upcoming murder trial against Sergio Sabatini, is among those presumed dead in the Huntington explosion. Police are withholding comment until investigators have assessed the scene, and the medical examiner's office has identified the remains….

Molly swallowed the bitterness of bile threatening to rise to her throat. He couldn't be dead. Not Mitch.

She needed answers. Glancing across the squad room to her sergeant's office, she wasn't surprised to see his door was shut. With officers dead, the brass would be all over this case, and no doubt Sergeant Burr was either on the phone or in conference.

She stared again at the newspaper photo of Mitch. How was it possible for him to look even better than her memory made him out to be?

It was the same photo the Tribune had already used countless times in reference to the upcoming Sabatini trial. In it Mitch's hair was longer, and he sported a mustache and a trimmed beard. Molly had seen the combination on him only once, when he was nineteen, back from Boston after his first year of college. She hadn't had to say anything about the new look. Mitch had known almost immediately by her expression that she didn't like it, and he'd shaved for her that summer. Their last summer…

When she'd kissed him goodbye in September, how was she to know it would be her last?

"So you heard the news?"

Molly looked up. Adam Barclay, her partner, lowered himself behind his desk. His blond hair was damp and windblown. No doubt he'd slept in again and been forced to make yet another mad rush across the city so as not to miss roll call.

She nodded, then eyed the coffee cup he lifted to his lips as the steam circled his handsome face. "I don't suppose you brought me one of those?"

"Sorry. So what's the word then?" He nodded to her paper and she tossed it onto his desk.

"It's the early edition. They know even less than the vultures out on the front steps."

"Walden told me in the elevator that they got only three bodies, and the M.E.'s been working on 'em all night. Sarge talk to the squad yet?"

"Not yet."

"Well, this has definitely got Sabatini written all over it. First those other two witnesses and now Drake." Adam shook his head with obvious frustration. "I wouldn't be surprised if the D.A.'s office tosses the entire case now. Without Drake they've got nothin'."

Molly refrained from comment. There was far too much truth in Adam's suggestion.

"Thing that gets me," Adam continued, "is how they manage to keep this architect guy out of Sabatini's hands for ten months, and then, bammo. How do you figure Sabatini got the location? The way I hear it they were moving Drake every couple of weeks, and the Witness Protection guys were so tight-lipped about it, I doubt that even we could have found out where they were stashing him. If you ask me—"

But whatever theory Adam hoped to articulate was dashed the second Sergeant Burr's door swung open. The man's growling voice brought the clamor of the squad room to an instant hush.

"Sparling. In my office." With his large frame filling the doorway, he barely afforded her a glance before turning back to his desk.

"Sounds serious," Adam murmured.

But it was more the abruptness in Burr's voice that made Molly reach for her suit jacket and pull it on. Sarge rarely used surnames, and when he did, it was no time for informalities. Tugging the edge of the jacket over her gun's holster, Molly caught Adam's "good-luck" glance before she headed to the open door.

"What's up, Sarge?" She stepped into the narrow office.

"Take a seat."

As she did, Molly was struck by the pallor of his complexion. Exhaustion racked his face, and all of a sudden he looked much older than his fifty-five years. No doubt Sarge had been one of the first people called after the explosion late yesterday. He'd probably been up all night.

"I guess I don't need to tell you what this is about."

"The Sabatini explosion."

He nodded solemnly. "The verdict's still not in on whether this was a Sabatini hit."

"What have they got so far?"

"Three bodies…or what's left of them. Just got a call from the M.E.'s office. He's finally confirmed the identities of the three officers posted to the safe house."

Relief didn't come close to describing what flooded through her just then. Mitch was alive. She leaned back into the vinyl-cushioned chair across from Sarge's desk, about to release the breath of tension she'd been holding when the gravity of Sarge's expression reminded her this wasn't just about Mitch. Three officers were dead. Killed in the line of duty.

"As for Drake, the witness, they haven't found his body yet, but he's gotta be dead. There was nothing left of that house. And if he wasn't in it when it blew, you can bet Sabatini got to him first. Hell, we'll probably never find his body. But right now, we've got three officers dead. We're gonna see some heat on this one, Molly, and I want you on the team."

"Sir?"

"You're my best. I want you to get out to Huntington and start working with the Bomb Squad."

"Sarge, I really…I'm not sure—"

"What is it, Molly? Your caseload? Adam can pick up the slack on your other cases."

"That's not it, Sarge. In fact, you know I'm all caught up." Just like she always was, Molly thought. Every one of her cases was closed, with only two having outstanding warrants. And why not? Considering the number of overtime hours she put in, she could have closed all of Adam's cases on top of her own. For a year now, the only thing in her life had been work.

"So what's the problem?" Sarge asked again, his voice adopting the more personal tone she was accustomed to hearing from him whenever they were alone together. "I would have thought that thorn in your side was digging a little deeper ever since you'd heard about the explosion. Bad enough Sabatini's going to walk away from another murder charge, but three officers, Molly…I would have thought—of all the detectives on this unit—you'd be itching the most for the chance to get Sabatini on this one."

"I know. It's just—"

"Molly, listen to me." Sarge rose and circled his desk, propping himself against one corner so he stood in front of her. This wasn't her sergeant talking now. It was Karl Burr, her father's old patrol partner, the man who'd taught her to swing a bat when her father had given up, the man who had helped build her tree house when she was six, the man who'd filled in at parent-teacher's night the time her father was sick, the man she'd called "Uncle" for years because it best defined their relationship.

He reached out and placed one large hand on her shoulder. "I'm offering you this opportunity," he continued, "because I know you want Sabatini. Ever since that son of a bitch killed Tom, I've held you back from anything to do with Sabatini. I didn't think you were ready. I thought the grudge was

too deep for you to maintain a healthy and safe perspective. But it's been over a year now. I think you're ready."

Yes, it had been over a year. But it hardly seemed long enough to get over the murder…no, the execution of her former partner. Then again, how much time was enough? Especially when she'd been the one who could have saved him?

Every day of the past year, she'd tried to put the haunting memories behind her, tried to forget. But not a day went by that Molly hadn't remembered, that she hadn't thought about Tom Sutton, her first patrol partner and closest friend.

They hadn't been partners the night Sabatini had had Tom murdered, but she'd known the risks Tom was taking. He'd come to her the day before, then called her again only an hour before he'd been shot. Working undercover Vice, he said he'd found something on Sabatini, something that might actually "stick" once and for all. And Tom had turned to Molly for help.

Only…she'd been too late.

"Molly?" Sarge prompted her. "Are you telling me you're not ready?"

"I'm not sure, Sarge," Molly said finally, noting how confusion deepened the lines in his face as he folded his arms across his wide, barreled chest.

But it wasn't just Tom she was thinking of now. There was Mitch.

Mitch was alive. He had to be. She had that gut feeling—the same one Tom had taught her to heed above all others.

Yes, Mitch was alive. And it was Mitch who was the ticket to seeing Sabatini behind bars. It was Mitch's testimony that would finally do it. She couldn't waste her time working potentially dead-end leads with the Bomb Squad. She needed to find Mitch. And she needed to find him before Sergio Sabatini did.

"This doesn't have to do with that search-and-seizure warrant, does it? It was a good warrant, Molly," Sarge was saying. "You know you weren't to blame for those charges against Sabatini being thrown out."

Another deep twinge of guilt. "You know I was, Sarge. But that's not why I can't join the team."

"Why then?"

"I need some time off."

"What?"

"I was planning to ask you before all of this broke," she lied. "Besides, you know I haven't had a single vacation day in almost a year. I'm due."

"But now?"

"Now more than ever. I'm burned out, Sarge. My cases are all closed. It's the perfect time. I need a break. It has nothing to do with Sabatini."

For a second, as she watched his eyes narrow into a scrutinizing stare, she wondered if he saw through her lie. Molly Sparling never needed a break. And the fact that she was asking for it now had to raise suspicions.

She expected him to demand what she was up to, to ask her flat out if she intended to go after Mitch. But he didn't. Instead, he let out a long breath, shook his head and resumed his seat.

"All right. Whatever you say, Molly. I only figured I'd give you the opportunity before anyone else on the squad. I'd thought…Well, forget it. If you say you need time, then you need time. Besides, your father already thinks I work you too damned hard."

Molly returned the rare smile that twitched at the corners of Karl Burr's mouth, the same smile she was quite certain only she had ever been privy to over the years he'd commanded the squad.

"Get your vacation slip to me. I'll sign it. You can start today, if you like."

"Thanks, Sarge."

"Don't thank me, Molly. They're your days. 'Bout damned time you took some off." He picked up his mug, the CPD logo on it lost behind his big hand as he lifted it to his lips.

When he opened the first file on his desk, Molly studied the top of his head, a mass of salt-and-pepper hair that seemed more "salt" than "pepper" these days. She wondered if it was due to age or stress, or more likely a combination of both. Still, there'd been no convincing him to join her father in retirement. Karl Burr was married to the force; more than that, he was committed to his squad.

"You'd better get that slip before I change my mind, Sparling," he muttered, not looking up. But Molly could see the quiver of a smile on his lips before she turned to the door.

"I REALLY WISH you'd reconsider, Mitch."

Mitch shook his head, heaving the last of Barb's bags into the trunk of the rental car.

"I'll be okay," he assured her again, closing the lid.

"You know I'm going to be worried sick about you up here alone. It's not safe. You should go to the police."

They'd been over this at least a dozen times already, and Mitch had figured that by now Barb Newcombe, one of his closest friends in college, would have remembered his stubbornness.

"I'm not going to the police, Barb. I went to them once, and it almost got me killed. I'm better off keeping a low profile up here."

She gave him a look, her blue eyes making the sternness appear even sharper. He'd seen that look too many times in the past couple of days.

He forced himself to smile then, and reached out to brush snow from her shoulder. "I'll be fine," he said, trying to assure her again.

"Well, you've got my numbers in Chicago. You call me…for whatever reason. Just call to let me know you're okay, 'cuz I know you won't answer the phone."

"I'll be fine," he said again, feeling like a broken record.

She studied him for a long moment as the snow tumbled down around them in the still air. To his right, he was vaguely aware of the sun setting behind the distant line of firs, but even the slight blush of orange in the sky did little to warm the cold that settled over the northern landscape.

And then, as though Barb had at last given up trying to persuade him to do the logical thing, she threw her arms around him and gave him a hug.

"You've got the keys to my Blazer. And I've left you some more cash on the kitchen table," she said, stepping back and lifting a hand to stop his objection before he could voice it. "Take it, Mitch. You can't risk using your credit or bank cards. Think of it as a down payment. I'm considering an addition to the house."

She smiled and walked around the car. When Mitch joined her, she turned to him once more.

"Be careful, Mitch. Promise me."

"I promise. Everything's going to be all right." And Mitch wished he could believe his own words.

She nodded, touching his cheek with one cold hand. "By the way, I like you without the beard and mustache, you know?"

"Yeah?"

"You should have shaved it years ago. And the hair…" Mitch ran one hand across the short cut. It was definitely a different look than the one he'd sported the past few years. One he hoped would buy him some anonymity up here in the relatively secluded northern Ontario wilderness.

"…it suits you," she finished. She flashed him a parting smile and folded herself elegantly into the driver's seat of the rental car.

"Just be careful, Mitch," she added one more time before rolling up the window and popping the vehicle into reverse.

He watched her back the car out the drive, giving her a quick wave as she turned down the side road and disappeared out of sight. Even after the sound of the engine was swallowed up by the dense, snow-covered forest, Mitch stood in the drive, recalling the many words of warning Barb had given him over the past couple of days.

She was right in a lot of her fears. There was only so long he'd be able to hide, only so long he could run from Sabatini. And it wasn't as though any of this nightmare was going to just go away on its own.

Eventually, Mitch turned back to the house nestled in the firs and pines. From its rocky perch, it overlooked frozen Bass Lake, sheltered from most of the other cottages and houses that clustered along its shore. Barb's house couldn't exactly be classified as a cottage, even if it didn't quite measure up to the grand expectations both she and Mitch had talked about back in college. But when Barb finally made CEO of a software company in Chicago, she'd held Mitch to his college promise to design her lakeside retreat.

The two-story, wood-and-glass structure was easily one of the most impressive in the lakeside community, he thought with pride as he headed up the front steps. Now more than ever Mitch was grateful he'd talked Barb into adding the spare bedroom to the initial plans; he'd made good use of it for the past three nights.

Nothing had felt better than that extra bed after the full day he'd spent on a Greyhound from Huntington all the way through Sault Ste. Marie and on up to Wawa, followed by a one-hour car ride after Barb picked him up at the terminal.

He'd had a whopping headache by the time they pulled into the hidden driveway, but he'd known it was more on account of the blow he'd sustained from a flying plank during the explosion than from the long hours sitting in a cramped coach.

Reaching the wraparound porch, he lifted one hand to his forehead and fingered the neat piece of gauze that covered the healing gash. It had bled fiercely when he'd scaled the fence of the bungalow's backyard. He mustn't have been unconscious for long, he'd decided. He'd already staggered a good three or four blocks from the safe house before he'd heard the wail of sirens.

He knew then that, unless he had a death wish, he couldn't return to Chicago, and even before he located the bus terminal in Huntington, he'd already decided he had to come here. He could trust Barb. No one else. Not even the police, it seemed.

There was one person on the Chicago police force he might be able to trust with his life. He couldn't count the number of times he'd thought of Molly during the past few days. Then again, how was that any different from the past twelve years? In all that time, not a day went by when he hadn't thought of her, when he hadn't wondered about calling her, seeing her. But in all those years, he'd never had the courage. Nor had he ever been able to think of the words to apologize for what he'd done to her.

Chapter Two

Molly gripped the wheel of her Jeep Wrangler a little tighter and eased her foot off the gas as she maneuvered the vehicle into a sweeping curve. The headlights skimmed across the high snowbanks, hinting at the dark trunks and dense underbrush beyond. Normally she'd enjoy a drive like this—twisting blacktop through the middle of the wilderness. But with the snow coming down even thicker now, and with the wind battering against the side of the Wrangler, the fun was lost to the struggle against the elements.

Not to mention the fact that she was exhausted. For almost ten hours straight she'd battled the slippery conditions of Highway 131, then traffic along the I-75 heading north through Michigan; she'd spent another three past the Canadian border, fighting whiteouts and snow-covered roads the entire way. The thrill of the drive was long gone, replaced with anxiousness as Molly glanced down at her gas gauge.

"Bass Lake, eh? Oh yeah, that's just up the road a few kilometers," the proprietor of the last convenience store had advised, and he'd proceeded to give her directions that had convinced her she'd make it there on the quarter tank of gas.

But "a few kilometers" had translated to miles. And those miles had been added to when she'd missed the snow-plastered sign and the turnoff, and ended up driving a good twenty minutes beyond before realizing the mistake and having to backtrack.

The needle of the gas gauge dipped even farther below the E as she banked the Jeep through the next curve. Molly cursed. Why hadn't she heeded that voice of warning in her head when she'd considered stopping a couple of hours ago to scout for a motel?

Because her gut had told her not to. Her gut told her Mitch was alive, and that she had to get to him before Sabatini did. Her gut had led her to Mitch's closed-up architecture firm in the Jackson Boulevard Complex, where she'd rifled through his files and Rolodex, and found Barb Newcombe's name and the address of her summer place in Ontario. And Molly's gut had told her that of all the possibilities, it was his college friend's cottage Mitch would most likely run to.

Of course, it wasn't her gut that was running on empty and was about to die along this deserted stretch of godforsaken, freezing road, Molly thought, cursing again.

She'd called Barb Newcombe's secretary yesterday afternoon in Chicago, and managed to find out that the CEO had taken an extended New Year's vacation in Canada and wasn't expected back to work until the day after tomorrow. The chance of Mitch being at Newcombe's cottage with her had seemed even more likely after that, and Molly had started packing.

She'd almost finished by early evening when Adam had shown up at the door of her apartment. He hadn't waited for an invite, but pushed his way in, demanding to know what she was up to and why she hadn't responded to any of his attempts to page her.

"Yeah, right, Molly," he'd said, standing in the doorway of her bedroom as he'd watched her shove more clothes into her overnight bag. "You aren't visiting your aunt in Cleveland. Unless, of course, you always pack your off-duty for family reunions." He lifted one fleece sweater to reveal the compact Walther 380 tucked in its ankle holster. "Hell, you probably don't even have an aunt in Cleveland, do you?"

Molly ignored the question, praying he wouldn't search further and find her on-duty weapon in the bag as well.

"Adam, would you do me a favor?"

"Nope."

"Adam, come on, it's just—"

"No way." He shook his head, and Molly followed him into the cramped living room, where he attempted to pace.

She'd always thought Adam Barclay was built like a linebacker for the Bears, and in her small apartment, he looked even broader as he tried to maneuver around the clutter.

"You've got a key to my place," she continued, adopting a plea in her voice. "Just come in and feed Cat once a day? Please?"

"That ungrateful bag of—"

"Please?"

"Only if you tell me where you're really headed."

"I can't do that, Adam."

"You're going after him, aren't you?"

The question shouldn't have surprised her. After all, practically everyone in the Homicide Unit—especially her partner—knew of the deep-seated grudge she held against Sabatini. How could Adam not have guessed what she was up to?

"I don't know what you're talking about," she stated.

"The architect. Mitch Drake. You figure he survived the bombing, that he's alive and hiding out someplace. So you're going to single-handedly bring him in. The unwilling witness."

"And how do you arrive at that conclusion?"

"Come on, Molly, I've been your partner three years, and in all that time you've never taken a vacation. I think I can figure it out. So…what d'you think you'll get for this stunt—bringing in the one witness that can finally put Sabatini behind bars? Assuming you can pull it off, that is. You aiming for another bronze star?"

The rancor in Adam's voice had confused her. "Why are you so bothered at the thought of me taking a little vacation time to follow a personal hunch?"

"Oh, I don't know." His voice had sharpened. "Maybe because I don't want to lose my partner?"

She'd thought she saw a glimmer of concern sweep across Adam's face then.

"Come on, Molly." He softened his tone, as though still hoping to convince her. "This is insane. Sabatini isn't your crusade, and you're not some one-woman crime squad, as much as you've been trying to act like it ever since Sutton's murder. Even if this Drake guy is alive, it's suicide to think you can bring him in on your own, against Sabatini's men. And I'm tellin' you, if Sabatini hasn't already had the guy executed, you can bet he's got every hired thug of his out there lookin' for him. Leave it to Witness Protection or the Fugitive Squad or whoever it is they've got searching for Drake."

"I'm just going to take a few days and see what I can come up with, Adam. That's all."

"You're just going to take a few days and get yourself killed, is all. Just like Sutton, for God's sake. Guess you learned more from your former partner than I gave you credit for, huh?"

"Look, Adam, I appreciate your concern. Really, I do. But I have to do this. I have to try. Mitch…he…if he is alive, he's running scared. He's not going to trust anyone now."

"And what makes you think he'll trust you?"

"Because…because he and I have a past," she admitted before she could change her mind about sharing the personal tidbit.

Her gaze had involuntarily flitted to her fireplace. It was so brief, but Adam caught it. He looked to the framed photo of her and Mitch, barely out of high school, in one another's arms. She didn't know why she kept it there on her mantel, but anytime she tried to put the photo away she wasn't able to.

"Adam, I have to at least try. If anyone is going to be able to find Mitch and convince him to testify…it's me."

But now, as Molly strained to see the next road sign through the mounting snow squalls in her headlights, she was beginning to doubt what she'd told Adam. And as she slowed to make the turn toward Bass Lake and felt the first sputter of the Jeep as it accelerated on what could only be fumes at this point, Molly silently prayed that her past with Mitch would have some power in convincing him to return to Chicago and do the right thing.

It wasn't just to see Sergio Sabatini behind bars, Molly realized as she spotted the distant glimmer of lights beyond the thumping wipers. Mitch's life depended on it.

BARB'S WORDS HAD PLAGUED Mitch all day. He'd shoveled snow, split some firewood, even changed the oil in the Blazer. And all the while he'd weighed the wisdom of doing as Barb suggested and going to the police.

Still, he'd not been able to see any reason for doing so. Returning to Chicago to testify against Sabatini would have no affect on his own life, anyway. It would do nothing to change the fact that Emily was dead and his career was over. The only reason left for testifying now was to ensure Sabatini didn't kill any more innocent people. But how was it that he owed anyone anything?

Bitterness had consumed him several times throughout the day. It would clutch at his heart and start the small, familiar fits of anger he'd felt far too often over the past ten months. What did he owe anybody, after what he'd been through, after everything he'd lost?

By early evening, after spending an hour wandering through the house, reacquainting himself with his past design, he'd finally settled down by the fireplace. He'd picked up a pad of paper and a pencil and started sketching possible plans for the addition Barb had mentioned. What else did he have to do except bide his time? Wait for Sabatini's men to find him…

The sketching, however, had done little to take his mind off his situation. In fact, it only served to remind him of the work and the life he no longer had back in Chicago.

Mitch lowered the pad and pencil at last. He checked his watch: almost 11:00 p.m. The living room lay in shadows, the only light coming from the fireplace and the lamp next to the wing chair he'd occupied for the past several hours. The classical CD on the stereo had finished long ago, and the entire house seemed to have been swallowed by the silence of the surrounding wilderness.

He might not have heard the neighbor's German shepherd otherwise. But there was no mistaking the anxious bark from the next lot. Mitch set his sketches on the coffee table and moved across the dimly lit room. He approached the east window with caution and fingered open one of the shutters to peer into the darkness.

It was the thin beam of a flashlight through the thick, swirling snow that caught Mitch's eye first. With such low cloud cover, the night was black, but he could just make out the silhouette of the figure behind the flashlight. It was impossible to tell if it was a man or woman who struggled through the mounting snow, but there was no mistaking the person's seemingly determined route—straight down the drive toward the front door.

Maybe it was paranoia, but the name Sergio Sabatini jumped to the front of his mind. It was too late at night for lost or stranded tourists, and even if it was just some hapless soul, Barb's was certainly not the first—and definitely not the most obvious—house along the lakeshore road.

It was that thought and a renewed sense of self-preservation that spurred Mitch away from the window and into action.

MOLLY COULDN'T PUT a finger on the bad feeling that had started in the pit of her stomach from the moment she'd seen Barb Newcombe's name on the mailbox, but the feeling had risen steadily with each step she took toward the virtually unlit house. A dim but warm light slipped through the shuttered windows of a single downstairs room, flickering through the driving snow. The only other light came from the front porch.

As she mounted the steps, Molly switched off her flash-light and shoved it into a pocket of her anorak. She brushed herself off, removing one glove and wiping at the melted snow on her face while she stared at the set of double front doors.

The bad feeling moved up from her stomach and clutched at her lungs. She took a deep breath to try to calm it.

It wasn't like the feeling she would sometimes get while working a case, moments before something went very wrong. And it was different from the kind that had saved her skin on more than a couple of occasions in the line of duty. But it was definitely a "feeling."

Maybe she was tired.

Then again, maybe she was just worried, Molly rationalized. Worried about the kind of reception she might receive from Mitch after all these years.

She lifted a hand to one door and knocked solidly.

She waited.

Nothing happened.

Again she knocked. And again, nothing. The cold, black silence of the night, so different from the bright lights of Chicago, only added to her sense of unease as she reached for the door's brass handle.

And that unease intensified when the latch moved freely and the door swung open. Maybe it was one of those gut feelings she was having, Molly thought as she took the first tentative step into the house and lowered her knapsack to the floor. Something definitely felt wrong.

What if Sabatini had gotten to Mitch first? The thought sent a hot prickle of fear along her skin. Lifting the bottom edge of her anorak, she unclipped the holster at her hip and removed her duty weapon. The Glock's grip was cold, and her fingers shivered along the icy nickel as she drew back the slide.

She refused the urge to call out Mitch's name. If Sabatini's men had already found the house, there was the chance they were still on the premises. She certainly couldn't afford to announce herself, she thought, taking another step into the dimly lit foyer and nudging the door closed behind her.

Vaguely, she was aware of the interior, the predominance of pine, the spaciousness of what had initially appeared to be a small house, and the tasteful, expensive decor including huge plants that thrived in the abundance of natural light that undoubtedly flooded through the floor-to-ceiling windows and the several skylights overhead during the day. The curved staircase reached up toward a darkened second floor, and to her right was the living room.

A warm glow flickered across the hardwood floors from the blazing fireplace. The only other light was a reading lamp beside an empty chair. As Molly moved cautiously through the room, she spotted the sketches on the coffee table. Architectural sketches.

Mitch was here. Or, at least, he had been.

Molly tucked a stray wisp of hair behind her ear and looked to the hearth. If Sabatini's men had found Mitch, it had been very recently. She'd not seen any headlights in her long walk from where the Jeep had finally run out of gas, and the fire had been recently stoked. So maybe they were still here.

Like a sixth sense, the bad feeling gripped her again. It shivered its warning along her spine and caused the fine hairs at the back of her neck to bristle. Tightening her grip around her weapon, she started down the shadow-filled hallway to what she guessed was the kitchen.

But Molly didn't get far. Barely two steps through the arched doorway, a blinding pain stopped her in her tracks—a pain that seared along the base of her skull and pitched her to her knees. For one wavering moment, Molly was aware of the floor's ceramic tile, cool against her cheek. And in the next, blackness swallowed her.

ALL OF A SUDDEN the chunk of firewood in his hands seemed unbearably heavy—heavier than it had before he'd swung it high and felt its reverberating, almost sickening contact with the woman's skull. With a small twinge of guilt, Mitch set the makeshift weapon down next to the body sprawled across the kitchen floor. He hadn't thought it would be that easy when he'd taken up the piece of firewood and slipped into the kitchen before the first knock at the door.

His grip had tightened around the wood as he'd listened to her move through the front hall, then the living room. And when she'd rounded the corner to the kitchen, stepped through the doorway past his hiding spot, and he'd seen the light from the living room glint along the metal of the gun she held in her hand, he'd needed no more incentive. Mitch had swung.

Maybe he'd brandished the log a little too hard, though, he mused now as he turned on the kitchen lights and knelt beside her unmoving body. Thankfully there was no blood, but what if he'd broken her neck?

Part of him knew he shouldn't care; after all, she'd come here to kill him. If he hadn't attacked her first, she would have turned that gun on him. Still, she was a woman, and he had just struck her with a blow beyond anything he'd considered himself capable of inflicting on another human being.

Mitch slipped his hand beneath the collar of the woman's anorak to the soft skin along her throat. Relief swept through him. There was a pulse.

In the harsh glare of the kitchen's overhead fluorescents, Mitch was surprised at her small stature. When he'd seen her shadowed figure come through the arched doorway, her back to him, she'd looked bigger somehow. Or maybe it was the gun that had made her appear more formidable. But now, with her face turned away and her arm splayed out across the tiles as though she were reaching for him, she looked almost fragile.

Taking a deep, fortifying breath, Mitch reached for her. He grasped her shoulders in his hands and slowly eased her limp body over.

He wasn't certain what came out of his mouth first: a curse or her name. But as he stared into her face, disbelief washing over him, there was no stopping the string of expletives that escaped his lips.

Her complexion seemed pale—almost frighteningly so—and Mitch felt for her pulse again.

"Come on, Molly. Snap out of it." His voice filled the silence of the house, panic causing it to waver. "Molly, come on. I know you're tough. Don't do this to me. You're going to be all right. Come on, honey."

But there wasn't so much as a moan or a twitch. She was out cold.

He should take her to the hospital, Mitch reasoned. But how could he? Even if anonymity wasn't a crucial factor in his life right now, the closest ER had to be a good hour away at least, and that didn't take into account the storm.

God, if he'd only known it was her. What was she doing here? How had she found him? Why hadn't she called out for him? What had possessed her to just walk in with her gun drawn? And then Mitch was cursing her all over again as he unzipped her jacket. He checked her pulse a third time.

Beneath the dark green fleece lining, she wore a form-fitting thermal top tucked into her jeans. It puckered around the leather strap of her gun's empty holster, drawing suggestively over the gentle swell of her breasts and her delicate rib cage. Mitch watched the fabric pull slightly as she took another shallow breath.

Twelve years…They'd certainly been good ones to Molly, he thought, staring into her face. The rounder lines that had been there in her youth had been replaced with more angular, mature features that accentuated the extraordinary bone structure beneath. Mitch was reminded of all the photos he'd seen of Molly's mother. And when he looked at the seductive curve of Molly's slightly parted lips, full and still moist, it was as though the years hadn't passed, as though it was only yesterday that he'd tasted that tantalizing mouth.

Reaching out to brush back a stray wisp of dark hair, he touched her cheek. So soft. Like silk. He could still remember the feel of her skin…its softness against his, the supple curves of her body molding into his, the eager heat of her passion melding with his until he'd hardly known where his longing had begun and hers ended….

"Come on, Molly," he murmured again, trying like hell to push the torrid memories back. "If you can hear me, you've gotta snap out of this. You're scaring me, honey. Do you hear me? Molly?"

He leaned even closer to her, not sure what to do next, but knowing that he had to get her off the cold, hard kitchen floor. And that was when he smelled her—subtle traces of jasmine mingling with that intoxicating scent that was undeniably and forever Molly. The years melted away…they were in her father's house, in Molly's bedroom. She'd lit candles, while old Elton John tunes played on her stereo. She'd been bolder that night than she'd ever been, knowing her father was working midnight

shift at the precinct. In twelve years, Mitch had never forgotten the tantalizing smile that had played on her lips when she'd shed the short, silk kimono, letting it fall to the floor as she stood naked before him, her skin glowing in the candlelight, her dark hair tumbling over her tanned shoulders and the shadows playing along each seductive curve, while he lay on her bed…waiting.

It was the last time they'd made love, one week before fall semester started, the night before he'd had to return to Boston. The last time he'd ever seen Molly…

"Molly, please…" he begged her again, but this time he slid his arms beneath her and gently lifted her delicate body from the floor. "Please, honey…"

God, she had to be all right, Mitch prayed. She had to be.

Chapter Three

Molly was aware of the pain first. The dull throb stemmed from the base of her skull and spiked upward. Then she felt the heat—a radiating warmth against her left cheek—and she could hear the low crackle of fire in the hearth.

The memories came together like scattered pieces of a puzzle. She'd walked through the house, seen Mitch's sketches on the coffee table, moved down the hall with her gun drawn, and finally there had been the blow and the blinding pain. Silently, she cursed herself. Yes, she'd certainly done a good job of walking directly into someone's trap.

Sabatini's trap? It had to be. She pushed back the instantaneous surge of panic. His men must have gotten to Mitch first, then had probably left her for dead.

But…the last thing she remembered was the cold, ceramic tiles of the kitchen floor. Even without opening her eyes, she knew she was on the leather sofa she'd seen in the living room. Why would Sabatini's men move her?

"How do you feel?"

In twelve years…no, in a million years, she'd never forget his voice. Its deep, resonant tone slipped through the silence, smoothing out the sharper edges of her pain and wrapping itself around her like a lover's embrace.

The only thing more seductive than that was the sight of him.

Mitch sat less than three feet away, perched on the edge of the coffee table. He leaned forward with his elbows braced against his knees. His forehead creased and those dark eyes narrowed with what appeared to be genuine concern.

Molly blinked several times, gradually bringing him into focus. She had to be dreaming.

It wasn't the Mitch of the photos she'd seen over the years—always dressed to the nines in hopelessly crisp suits and expensive ties as he endured the limelight his success garnered, or even donning a hard hat at some groundbreaking event for a new Drake construction, still wearing what appeared to be an Armani.

No, this was the Mitch of Molly's memories, of twelve years of recurring dreams and fantasies. That rugged handsomeness, that overwhelming masculinity, dressed in a rumpled denim shirt over a sparkling white T tucked into a faded pair of jeans…

And his hair…It was cropped short. The mustache and beard were gone as well. The warm glow of the fire softened his sharp features—the square chin, the strong jaw-line, those chiseled lips and that perfect nose with the smallest of clefts at the tip. But it was his eyes that riveted her and seemed to have stolen her ability to speak as she watched them reflect the flames' dancing light.

This was the Mitch she knew, the Mitch she'd made love to and believed would be with her forever. This was the Mitch she'd kissed goodbye as she saw him off to college twelve years ago. This was the Mitch who had smiled as he'd driven off to Boston, and out of her life….

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She managed a nod, but her eyes never left his.

"Talk to me, Molly," he prompted again, the lines of worry etching even deeper. "Are you all right? How do you feel?"

"Like I've been clubbed over the head." Her voice cracked and she cleared her throat. The simple act sent another shot of pain searing through her.

"I thought I was going to have to drive you to a hospital."

"I'm fine," she lied, and attempted to sit up. But the effort was more than she'd anticipated. Her vision blurred again and dizziness swept over her.

She should have expected Mitch to reach for her then—strong hands grasping her, guiding her up and then lingering on her shoulders as though assuring himself that she was all right. More than

that, however, Molly should have expected the almost instant physical reaction her body had to his touch.

"I'm fine," she said again, brushing his hands away.

He backed off, but only briefly. From the coffee table he picked up an ice pack and settled onto the sofa next to her. She could smell the faint trace of aftershave on him—something she'd not smelled in years, and yet it seemed as familiar as yesterday. She fought back the memories.

"How long have I been out?"

"Not long. Fifteen minutes…maybe twenty."

He reached behind her, attempting to settle the ice pack against the tender and throbbing source of her pain. Molly winced and reflexively reached up to take the pack from his grasp.

"I told you I'm fine."

She heard the release of his breath before she saw him shake his head.

"How could I forget?" he asked, a frown quivering at the corners of his mouth. "Just as stubborn as your old man."

She watched him lift a hand and run his fingers through the short-cropped hair, as though he expected to find long locks of black hair still there.

"So I guess I have you to thank for this goose egg?" Molly bit her lower lip as she eased the pack against the injury, feeling the initial burn of the ice.

"What do you expect when you come creeping through the dark? And with a gun drawn, no less?"

Molly caught his quick nod to where her Glock lay on the coffee table. She cringed at the idea that she'd so easily lost her on-duty weapon. Yes, she'd certainly messed up. If it had happened in the line of duty, the incident would have been written up in a heartbeat.

"I did knock," she said.

"Yeah, well, you should have announced yourself." There was a definite edge to his tone. But the anger wasn't at her, Molly realized then. It was more at himself, for having struck her the way he had. And judging by the residual dizziness and the pain hammering through her head, it must have been a damned good swing. She could only imagine what had gone through his head when he'd seen her drawn gun coming through the kitchen door.

"So what the hell are you doing here, Molly?"

"You have to ask?" She shifted the ice pack and tried not to wince again.

"You're wasting your time."

"Whether or not you testify is up to you, Mitch. All I want to do is ask that you reconsider what you're doing."

"And what am I doing?"

"Honestly? I'd say you're committing suicide. Thinking you can stay out of Sabatini's reach. It's insane. After all, I managed to find you. It can only be a matter of time before Sabatini's men catch up with you as well, and you're a fool if you think you can hold your own against them. You're not safe, Mitch. No matter how much firewood you have," she added.

"And you're saying I'm safe in Chicago?"

"Certainly safer than running, yes."

He stared at her for what could only have been seconds, but caught in those dark eyes, it felt like an eternity.

"Well, I'll take my chances," he said at last. "Like I told you, you're wasting your time."

In the intensity of his stare she thought she saw resentment, anger, and beneath that…a kind of resignation, a glimmer of defeat that frightened her. When he drew himself to the edge of the sofa eventually, and turned to look at the fireplace instead, Molly studied his profile. But she could still see that sense of hopelessness she'd glimpsed. It was the look of a man who didn't care whether he lived or died. And Mitch Drake was the last person she'd ever expected to see it in.

No, the Mitch she'd grown up with was a strong man. A man who loved life, who had never let anyone or anything cut him down or hold him back. She'd fallen in love with that strength, that vitality, probably before she was even old enough to understand those qualities. And later, in high school, it was that love for him that had left no question in her mind as to who she wanted to be with, who would be her first lover.

She'd been Mitch's first, too. Sure, she knew he'd kissed a couple of other girls on occasional dates before she had dared to profess her feelings. But Molly knew, beyond a doubt, that Mitch spoke the truth when he'd sworn that night on a blanket along a stretch of Lake Michigan beach, under a full sky of stars, that Molly was his very first. His first and only, he'd vowed.

They'd dated through his senior year and then Molly's while Mitch started college in Boston. And in their last summer together—before Mitch went for his second year at Boston and Molly joined the Academy as her father had done—they'd made grandiose plans for their future, even dared to speak of marriage a few times. But Mitch had wanted to finish school first so he could afford to buy her a real ring. Even back then Molly had wondered if there was more to Mitch's holding off than the cost of a diamond ring, because he knew her well enough to know that she would never have worn something as precious as a diamond.

Then, through their grapevine of friends, Molly had learned of Emily Buchanan, a girl Mitch had met during his second year of college. Molly had learned he was bringing his new girlfriend home during the Christmas break, and she'd made it a point to escape Chicago for the holidays, leaving her father on his own and heading to the slopes with friends just so she wouldn't have to see or speak with Mitch. And when she returned to the city to start her new life as a patrol officer with the CPD, Molly had vowed she was through with Mitch, through with the dreams and the hopes. She'd returned his few letters unopened, and didn't respond to any of the phone calls he'd placed to her father.

And then, three years later, when she'd heard the news of Mitch's marriage to Emily, Molly had at last come to the painful conclusion that it had never been a matter of Mitch not being ready for marriage all those years earlier. It had never been a matter of timing, or money for an engagement ring. It had simply been a matter of her not being "the one."

Even so, it hadn't been easy seeing the pictures in the papers and the magazines over the years as Mitch's reputation grew in Chicago and the architectural world. Harder still to look at that one photo in which he'd posed with his new wife on his arm at some Chicago high society event. Emily had been everything Molly wasn't—tall, elegant, poised; not some tomboy down the street Mitch had grown up with, pitching stones at old factory windows and racing their matching CCM bicycles through trash-cluttered back streets.

No, she certainly hadn't been "the one," Molly resolved yet again as she watched Mitch stand and cross the dimly lit room to the fireplace.

There was no missing the way he favored his left leg, the slight limp seeming uncharacteristic of his obviously sturdy, muscular build. Molly was reminded of the crash ten months ago that could very easily have claimed his life. She should have been used to the guilt she felt now; after all, it had plagued her ever since she'd heard about the accident and hadn't made the effort to see Mitch. Not that she would have necessarily been allowed in to see him at the hospital or even been able to find out the location of the safe house if she'd tried. And not that she would have known what to say if she had.

She watched him throw another log onto the fire. A burst of sparks sprayed out and up the flue.

"I…I'm sorry, Mitch," she murmured now. "I'm sorry about the accident. About…your wife." The words sounded flat, even though she'd meant them.

His back was to her, but she could see the rigid tension that straightened his spine then and tightened his shoulders. And when he turned to her again, there was no mistaking the pain that darkened his face. He rubbed at the gold wedding band, and Molly couldn't help thinking it was a completely unconscious habit of his.

In the uncomfortable silence that fell over the room, Molly tried to imagine the kind of loss he'd suffered. Yes, she'd lost her mother years ago to cancer, but she'd been only four, too young to have known her, too young to fully comprehend the loss.

And then, just as quickly as it had appeared, the dark pain in Mitch's expression was gone again, as though maybe she'd only imagined it. The wall came up and masked his features in a way only Mitch could manage.

Molly remembered the first time she'd seen him do that—so skillfully construct walls around his emotions. They'd been ten years old when they'd found his dog at the side of the road, killed by a car. Mitch had carried the collie in his arms the whole six blocks home, and it was only days later that Molly had at last seen him cry.

That memory, and many others, flashed before her mind's eye as Mitch stared back at her. Only when he cleared his throat was she able to return to the present.

"Where's your car?" She lowered the ice pack and tried to draw herself to the edge of the couch. Another cruel wave of pain surged through her head, and the room threatened to spin again. "About a mile back, at the side of the road," she answered, remembering the long, cold walk. "I, um, I underestimated. Ran out of gas."

"Well, you can't leave it there. With this snow, the plows'll be through at least once tonight," he said, turning from the fireplace. "I've got a spare tank. I'll drive you out there."

SOME OF THE COLOR had returned to Molly's face before they'd left the house, and she seemed to have regained her equilibrium. But from the moment she'd reholstered her gun and pulled on her anorak and boots, she'd been silent. Even now, in the passenger seat of Barb's Blazer, she said nothing, only stared out the windshield into the mesmerizing swirl of snow.

Mitch could only imagine her thoughts as he backed the vehicle out the drive and nosed it south along Lakeshore Drive. Was she remembering as well? No, Mitch thought, more likely she was thinking about the years that had separated them. Was it resentment that turned down the corners of her mouth now? he wondered as he snatched another quick side glance. Was it bitterness and anger, harbored over the years because he'd never been able to offer her an explanation?

In spite of the sickly green glow of the dash lights, her features appeared soft and innately feminine. Still, her angular profile had maintained that strong, almost fierce look of determination he'd always remembered. The loose ponytail that drew up her dark hair revealed the delicate curve of her neck, leading to the regal jawline—the same jawline he'd so often watched jut out with that unparalleled Sparling stubbornness.

Another glance and he caught the determined chin, the tight yet exquisite lips, the fine, straight nose, the subtle hollow below her cheekbone, and those gently arched eyebrows. But even with his gaze directed out to the mounting storm beyond the windshield once more, Mitch could see Molly's eyes. They had long since been burned into his memory—exquisitely wide, and dark…almost black, like a bird's, Mitch had often thought.

In the confines of the vehicle, it was impossible not to remember the early days of their relationship: the summer evenings at the drive-in theater, when he'd sneaked the same side glances at her and hoped to sneak a kiss as well. The late-night drives home, and then sitting outside her father's house with the porch light still blazing. That's where he'd kissed her the first time, at 1:00 a.m. on May 16, in the front bench seat of his father's old Plymouth.

It hadn't mattered that he'd kissed other girls before then; with Molly it had felt like the first. From the moment he'd leaned across the seat, buried his fingers in her thick hair and drawn her mouth to his, Mitch had known it was more than just another kiss. Much more. There was no comparing, because that kiss, and every one they'd shared after that, had always felt like…coming home.

Mitch's body responded to the memories, and he tried instead to shift his focus to the road ahead of them, keeping the Blazer steady through the accumulating drifts. The weatherman's predictions had certainly been accurate. Between the heavy snowfall and the unrelenting wind, whatever tracks

Molly had made in her walk to the house had long since been covered or blown clear. Mitch was grateful that Barb had left him with the four-wheel drive and rented a car to get back to Chicago.

"So the police know I'm alive?" he asked finally, needing something—anything—to break the heavy silence between them.

In his peripheral vision he caught the flash of Molly's eyes, but the second he tried to meet her stare, she looked away again.

"No," she answered flatly, her soft voice almost drowned out by the Blazer's fan and the thumping wipers. "They think Sabatini got to you first."

"But you didn't?"

She shook her head.

"Why?"

"Call it a gut feeling."

"So you came all this way on the department's budget?"

"No. This is my vacation time, Mitch. My budget. I wanted to find you."

Was it possible? he wondered. Could Molly have driven all the way from Chicago just for him? Out of concern for his safety and well-being?

No. The truth of the matter was Molly was a cop. Vacation or no vacation, as a cop she'd searched for him, and as a cop she wanted him to come back to Chicago. To testify.

"So how did you find me?"

"I broke into your office," she said, so matter-of-factly she made it sound like standard police procedure. "Went through your Rolodex. Process of elimination. Figured that of all the places you'd run to, I'd find you here."

He saw her nod past the windshield.

"My Jeep's just around the next turn. I thought I saw headlights."

"Probably the plow," he suggested. But if there had been a plow or another vehicle it was gone by the time he steered around the bend and caught sight of the Jeep's four-way flashers.

Mitch drove past the vehicle and pulled the Blazer to the shoulder of the road as well. Leaving it idling, he stepped out into a blast of icy air. In spots where the wind had blown the road clear, the packed snow squealed under his boots as he took out the gas can and walked back to the Jeep. There was no other sound; the heavy blanket of snow over the dense forest muffled the jangle of Molly's key ring as she unlocked the gas cap, and the clank of the can as Mitch brought it up and fitted the nozzle.

Holding the flashlight in one hand, Molly lifted her collar and tugged her scarf up under her chin against the biting cold. Mitch didn't know why she unzipped her anorak from the bottom just then and fumbled underneath as though checking her gun's holster. If he'd had time to think about it, he might have taken the gesture as a warning. He might have thought Molly sensed something that he didn't. Or…he might have wondered if she'd expected what happened next.

But the thoughts had barely begun to form themselves in his mind when they both heard the low rumble of an engine. Together they turned in time to see the sudden glare of high beams as a vehicle careened out of the darkness and around the corner. Momentarily caught in the headlights of the Blazer, the dark-colored SUV accelerated along the snow-covered road.

"What the hell? It's coming right at us!" Molly shouted above the revving engine.

But Mitch didn't need any warning. Instinct drove him. There was no time to wonder what lay in the darkness beyond the snowbank to his right. Anything was better than the grill of the oncoming vehicle. He dropped the empty gas can, and before it even hit the road, he'd snatched Molly's hand in his.

He cleared the bank before she did, dragging her after him, up and over the hard slope and into the soft, deep snow beyond. Vaguely he was aware of branches whipping at his face and an exposed boulder gouging into his back as he rolled with Molly. And finally, his own wind escaped in a gasp, knocked out of him as she landed on him.

In the same instant, above the engine's roar came the gut-wrenching sound of impact. It was followed by the scream of metal grinding against metal, of tortured steel and shattering glass.

He heard Molly's curse as she bellied up the bank, and when he joined her, peering over the top, the Jeep was a good forty feet from where it had been parked. It wasn't until the assailing four-by-four slowed to a stop farther down the road and finally turned around that Mitch was able to see the damage it had inflicted on the smaller vehicle. In the other vehicle's headlights, it was clear Molly's Jeep had been spun around, the driver's side crushed and the windows smashed out.

Again he heard Molly curse, but this time she followed it up by lifting the edge of her anorak and taking out her gun. In the brief glare of headlights, he could see the determination in her face as she gripped the weapon in one gloved hand.

"Molly, what are you doing?!"

"What does it look like?"

"It might have been an accident."

"I hardly think so. Get down, Mitch," she ordered, pulling back the slide of the semiautomatic.

"Molly, what the hell—"

But he didn't need to ask, nor did he need to hear Molly's explanation behind the defensive stance she took, her body pressed along the snowbank, her elbows propped against the hardened surface as she brought the gun up. He, too, watched the four-by-four slow as it neared their hiding place, and when the passenger window rolled down, Mitch was shocked to see the weapon in the man's hand.

"Get down," Molly warned him once more, a mere second before the night erupted in gunfire.

There was no telling which shots were which then. To Mitch, it sounded like a virtual torrent of bullets. A war zone. From where he crouched just below the top of the slope, he could almost hear the small missiles piercing the air above him, striking trees and ricocheting off boulders in the darkness beyond. When he snatched a look at Molly, he saw she was holding her position at the top of the embankment, one round after the next exploding from the black muzzle of her gun.

Mitch could only imagine that her shots were far more accurate, because as suddenly as the gunfire had begun, it ended. There was the rev of the four-by-four's engine and the grinding of huge tires against the frozen road as it sped off.

But Molly wasn't finished. Far from it. Mitch heard her mutter something about them getting away, and in a flash she was on her feet.

"Molly, no! Let them go." He snatched at her coat, hoping to stop her, but it was pointless. She tore loose and charged down the snowbank to the road before he'd even caught his balance.

In the roadway, Mitch winced with each earsplitting shot as Molly let off several more rounds at the fleeing vehicle. And that was when he smelled the gasoline.

Behind them, only one of the Jeep's hazard lights continued to blink through the inky darkness. The four-by-four must have struck the Wrangler's fuel tank.

"Molly!" But his voice was lost to yet another shot as the four-by-four's taillights disappeared around the bend.

"Molly!" he shouted again.

The blast of her final round echoed through the woods. It was followed by the quiet, yet unmistakable whisper of a fire igniting. In the next second there were flames. Over the low crackle, he heard Molly curse again, turning to the vehicle as though she hoped to rescue some of her belongings.

"Molly, no. Come on!" he shouted above the hiss, tugging at her coat.

She'd lowered her gun, and in the intensifying red-orange glow of the hungry flames that already engulfed the driver's side of the Jeep, Mitch saw the shock in her expression. The heat of the flames, searing against his own cold-numbed skin, seemed to hold her back.

The air was swollen now with the heat of the fire. Flames licked higher and higher into the stormy night, fanned by the wind.

"Molly, now! It's going to blow!" This time when he grabbed at her coat, Mitch didn't let go. He half dragged, half ran with her away from the Jeep and down the empty road, uncertain how much distance was needed.

It wasn't enough.

There was the low whoosh of gas igniting, followed by an earth-shattering explosion that hurled both of them to the cold ground. The shock of the blast rippled through the air around them, followed by a wave of thick, acrid heat and a storm of flying shards that rained down around them.

"Are you all right?" His body covered hers, and when he raised himself enough that she could move, Molly rolled over and sat up. She brushed snow and grit from her face and stared back at the burning wreckage, the flames reflecting in her wide eyes.

"Are you all right, Molly?" he asked again, taking her by the shoulders.

She managed a nod and instantly scanned the snow-covered ground. Locating her gun, she brushed it off as well.

"Yeah," she said at last, "I'm okay. I think…I think we need to get out of here."

"I couldn't agree more."

It was when Mitch started to stand that he spotted the two figures in the roadway. Twenty… maybe twenty-five yards away, they were no more than silhouettes in the flickering glow of the fire, but there was no question as to their intent. Each of them carried a gun, and each approached with the steady determination of hired killers.

Chapter Four

He'd saved her life. Not once, but twice now. And Mitch seemed bound and determined to do it a third time, Molly thought as he tore at her sleeve.

This time, however, Molly needed no prompting. With one eye on the two advancing men in the roadway, she nudged Mitch to the side of the road. She winced against the searing pain along her right side. She'd felt it for the first time up on the embankment, and hoped it had been a rock or a stick that had caused the injury. But now it felt warm. Hot, in fact. And Molly wondered if she might have actually taken a bullet during the rain of gunfire.

Hurriedly, she reached under her anorak with her bare hand, certain she felt the slipperiness of blood as she groped for her Glock's extra ammunition clip.

"Over the bank," she whispered harshly, jamming the magazine into the grip of her semiautomatic.

Even at fifteen yards, she could feel the singe of the flames as the two of them stumbled across the road. Vaguely, she was aware of various parts from her Jeep strewn about them from the explosion. She and Mitch had been lucky.

But there would be no counting of blessings if she didn't get them out of there…and fast. Sabatini's men were serious—dead serious. The guns they wielded were nothing short of illegal. To her trained ears, even in the heat of the gunplay only moments ago, she knew the men's weapons were fully automatic.

With the cold, wet Glock in one hand, and Mitch holding her other, Molly relied on his strength to drag her to the top of the embankment. On the other side, the snow was deep and loose, swallowing them almost to their waists. Molly needed no words. Mitch seemed to understand she had a plan. She moved ahead of him and led the way back toward the section of the road where they'd left the Blazer idling.

Molly could only pray that Sabatini's thugs didn't expect them to be brave enough to come back right at them with little more than the embankment for cover. But what other option did they have? Stumble through the deep snow and the storm into the middle of the bush? And then what? No, their only option was to get to the Blazer.

Staying in a semicrouch, Molly pushed her way through a tangle of branches and saplings. She could feel Mitch right behind her. He'd caught her more than a couple of times as she nearly tripped over hidden rocks and fissures in the earth beneath the thick snow.

They had to be close now. If Sabatini's men had kept up their pace, then they should be parallel to them. Only a few yards separating them. A few yards and a snowbank. Molly realized she was holding her breath, as though the men on the roadway would actually hear her over the roar of the fire that steadily consumed her Jeep.

Still, she didn't dare peer over the bank to confirm her guess. They had to keep moving. Only now, she gestured to Mitch to go ahead. Testifying aside, she was here to protect him, and protect him she would. No matter what happened, if Sabatini's men wanted Mitch, they'd have to go through her first.

For a panicked moment, she thought she heard their voices. Shouts over the crackle of the flames. And any second she expected to see one of the men crest the snowbank, his gun blazing. But…nothing happened.

With Mitch ahead of her now, the going was a little easier. She followed the path he cut, ignoring the snow that jammed down the tops of her boots and blew under the collar of her anorak. She wasn't sure where her gloves were; she'd removed them when she first took out her gun. Her hand was numb around the weapon's rubber grip. Sore even. She hoped she'd be able to fire the Glock when and if it came to that again.

A transient wave of relief swept through her when she heard the low sound of the Blazer's idling engine. Sabatini's men could easily have tampered with the vehicle, but instead they'd passed it by, obviously more intent on finding Mitch. Perhaps even thinking the explosion had taken care of their business for them.

Molly snagged the edge of Mitch's coat. He stopped. Waiting for her next move.

With extreme caution she eased herself to the top of the bank and peered over. She scanned the roadway behind the Blazer. There was nothing visible but the burning Jeep. And then, finally, she saw them. The first man had obviously spotted their footprints and seen where they'd scaled the snowbank. He was already halfway up, stumbling over clumps of ice and gravel. His counterpart was right behind him.

"They're onto us," she whispered to Mitch. "Come on—" she nodded to the Blazer "—you take the wheel. Circle around the front. And the second you're in, floor it."

She didn't need to wait for his nod of acknowledgment. Mitch was right behind her. Together they scrabbled down the crusty bank, a small avalanche of frozen snow cascading around them and onto the roadway. There was no way of knowing whether it was their movements or the sound of the Blazer's doors opening that alerted the men, but in the same instant that Molly landed in the passenger seat, the black night erupted around them for a second time.

Bullets sliced the air, some exploding against hard-packed snow, while others struck deeper in the forest where the road curved to the left.

"Go, Mitch!" Molly shouted between bursts of gunfire. "Drive!"

But he hardly needed motivation. There was the unmistakable whack of one bullet striking what had to be the Blazer's steel bumper. And then another. And another.

Before he'd even slammed the door, he'd jammed the car into first gear and his foot was on the gas. The wide tires spun, throwing snow and gravel up against the vehicle's underbelly, until they found purchase.

Molly looked at the passenger-side mirror. In the flickering illumination of the fire, she saw the two figures. Their pursuit by foot was no match for the accelerating vehicle, and when Mitch steered into the curve, Molly could no longer see them.

In the dim glow of the dash lights there was no mistaking the tension in Mitch's face. Molly had heard about his valiant attempt to escape Sabatini and his men that night ten months ago—the high-speed chase to the expressway and the violent tactics used by the pursuing men to force him off the road. She'd seen the police photos of the wrecked sports car and remembered wondering how anyone could have survived in it.

As she watched Mitch's knuckles whiten around the Blazer's steering wheel, she could only imagine the kind of fear he was reliving now. He didn't check the rearview, but concentrated on the road as the gunfire from behind continued.

Ahead, just past the curve, Molly spotted the thugs' SUV at the shoulder. Exhaust curled up from the idling vehicle, caught in the glow of the rear lights.

"Stop," Molly ordered as they neared it.

"What? Are you insane? They're—"

"Stop," she said again.

"Molly, they're right behind us." Amplifying his concern, another burst of gunfire erupted around them.

"Just stop!"

She heard him curse as she started to open the door, and—with no choice—Mitch brought the Blazer to a skidding halt. She was out of the car in a flash. Icy wind blasted against her. With freezing fingers, she tightened her grip on her gun while she grappled at the door handle of the other vehicle.

She had no idea if there was a third man behind the tinted windows of the four-by-four. She could only pray.

Flinging open the door on the driver's side, Molly brought her other hand up to her gun, prepared to fire. But there was no one inside. As another rain of bullets pierced the air, Molly reached across the driver's seat and turned the key. The heavy engine shuddered and died, and in the same second she tore the key from the ignition. Mitch shouted something then, but over the gunfire there was no making out the words.

Behind them she thought she could just discern the two figures running up the middle of the road.

"Molly! Let's get the hell out of here!"

This time she heard Mitch. She turned, reaching for the Blazer's door handle, but not before hurling the keys to her right, deep into the forest and the snow. She'd barely landed in the passenger seat when Mitch gunned the engine and they sped away.

MITCH HAD TO TAKE the roundabout way back to Barb's house in order to avoid Sabatini's thugs. It entailed a good twenty minutes of driving, the buffeting wind and snow making the going even slower. And although there wasn't any sign of headlights in the rearview mirror, Mitch's heart rate didn't slow one bit. Even after he closed the garage door, his pulse raced and the adrenaline continued to lick through him.

The snow was coming down thicker as he and Molly made their way to the house. He tried to take comfort from that. If Sabatini's men did have a second set of car keys, the tracks left by the Blazer would be covered in a matter of minutes. They'd have to search the entire community along Bass Lake, and that was providing they even knew Mitch was here.

Still, Molly didn't seem willing to take a chance. Before he'd closed the front door behind them, she kicked off her boots in the foyer and started to move through the house, turning off lights. She hadn't said more than a dozen words during the drive back. Then again, he hadn't been any conversationalist himself. He'd been practically speechless, thinking about what he'd just witnessed, amazed and shocked at the extreme courage Molly had displayed tonight. It was a side of her he'd never seen, even though he should have expected it from her.

Molly had always been somewhat fearless. Bold and spirited. Always prepared to do battle for whatever person or cause needed defending. He hadn't been at all surprised to learn about the bronze star she'd received from the police department. It had been four…no, five years ago, when she and her patrol partner had single-handedly saved the life of a convenience store owner during an armed robbery while they'd been off duty.

But seeing Molly tonight, atop the snowbank, firing one round after the next, and then racing out into the spray of bullets to steal the thugs' car keys…

It was like a movie, Mitch thought. Only the bullets had been real.

Very real.

He shuddered now at the thought of how the night could have taken a very different turn. No, he shouldn't consider how close they'd both come to being killed tonight. Mitch focused his attention instead on the fire in the hearth. He stirred the ambers with a poker and was just reaching for a fresh log when Molly stopped him.

"Leave it," she instructed. "Let it die. Turn up the furnace if you need to, but if they do come looking for us tonight, we want the house to look empty."

"You think they will?"

"Maybe not tonight. I'm guessing they didn't have a spare set of keys. But I'm sure they'll be rolling before long. Let's hope they wait till morning to start searching."

Mitch turned from the fireplace. Molly stood in the middle of the living room, facing him. And for a moment, illuminated by the warm glow from the hearth behind him, she looked nineteen again. It was one of the images that Mitch had carried in his mind all these years…of her standing in the middle of her bedroom with the light of a dozen candles dancing across her face.

Molly stared back at him, and he wondered what memory, if any, she was conjuring up herself.

"I, uh, I need to use your washroom," she said at last, obviously feeling awkward at the sudden silence.

"It's upstairs. To the left."

He watched as she tossed down her scarf and lifted her anorak over her head. It wasn't until then that Mitch saw the blood. There was only a hint of it on the dark-colored anorak, but beneath it, and the green fleece under that, the startling crimson stain had spread across the snug-fitting thermal top.

"Jesus, Molly, you're bleeding!"

"I know." Her tone sounded so matter-of-fact. However, Mitch thought he detected a slight waver in it.

In a second he'd crossed the room. Before she was able to cast aside her jacket and fleece, Mitch was gently tugging the top from the waist of her jeans. It was soaked, as was the heavy denim. He thought he heard her quick intake of breath and sensed her body stiffen as he lifted the top farther. The hearth provided enough light for him to see the blood glistening against her skin, and the dark, ragged tear in the flesh of her midriff.

"You got shot?"

"I guess so." She looked at the wound herself now, and let out a small groan.

"How bad is it?" he asked.

"It's fine."

"Fine, my ass. Look at all the blood!"

"Mitch, really. I'm all right." She inspected the injury again. "It's just a graze. It looks worse than it is."

"Come on." He took her hand in his, refusing to let her protest further, and led her to the stairs.

In silence she followed him.

How was it that people never changed? Molly was just as stubborn now as she had been at ten. That was the first time Mitch had witnessed her unparalleled stoicism. Never a whimper. Never a complaint. Not from Molly Sparling.

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