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SUSPENSE
RIVETING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

*To Trust
a Stranger*
LYNN BULLOCK



Lynn Bullock

To Trust a Stranger

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A faded childhood photograph of the Barker girls was the only clue found at a crime scene. But it didn't explain who'd want Jessie Barker's sister dead. The snapshot brought back memories of another tragedy, shrouded in mystery, that left the Barker girls orphaned as children. Jessie had to find out what happened to her beloved sister, but she'd have to trust a stranger with a twenty-five-year-old story that no one had ever believed. Yet detective Steve Gardner did believe— and with God's help he would aid Jessie in her dangerous quest for the truth...

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To Trust a Stranger

Lynn Bullock



To Joe, always
And
To Cheryl, my friend and encourager

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PROLOGUE

Twenty-four years ago

Jessie Barker sat in the backseat of her parents' car, staying as quiet as possible. Mouse quiet. Falling-leaf quiet. So quiet they wouldn't hear her breathing and know she was awake while they had another argument.

As the station wagon rolled along the dark country road Mommy and Daddy were arguing in the front seat. In the backseat Jessie curled up against the door as much as she could with her seat belt still on and pretended to be anyplace else besides where she was. She looked through slitted eyes at her little sister, Laura, sitting next to her. Laura just looked down at the floor, but then Laura was brave, or maybe too young to understand.

Jessie wanted to yell back at Mommy and Daddy and tell them how to do their job. If she was a mom she would never yell at her kids and she'd let them watch cartoons on TV, and sometimes she would buy the good kinds of cereal from the store, the ones with marshmallows. Then Jessie and her kids would eat it straight out of the box. Mommy never bought the marshmallow kind of cereal because she didn't like it.

They were still yelling in the front seat. It was the same thing again. This time it went on so long that Laura finally leaned over and whispered to Jessie. "Why doesn't she just try it? They make us try at least three bites of everything at the dinner table, even gross, slimy asparagus."

Jessie knew she looked at her sister as if she was stupid. Jessie felt bad when she did that, but she couldn't help it. She looked at Laura a lot that way. "Try what?"

"The tea. The fackle tea. Daddy said if Mommy was the right kind of fackle tea wife we could stay here for ten years. That's a long time."

Jessie sighed. "There's no tea, Laura. That is not what he means. You are so dumb."

"It's still a long time," Laura said. She turned her face toward the other door so Jessie wouldn't see her cry. Jessie ignored her as she spread her fingers out in front of her, looking at the little bit of Hot-Hot Pink nail polish she put on her right pointer finger yesterday before Mommy caught her and made her stop. Laura was right about one thing. Ten years was a long time. If they could stay in the nice apartment they had now for ten years, maybe Laura could go to Jessie's school when she was old enough to start kindergarten in the fall.

"And I still don't see why we had to take this route—" Jessie could hear Daddy mutter "—middle of nowhere."

Did nowhere have a middle? If you were nowhere, how did you know when you got to the middle of it? Jessie wanted to ask somebody about that, but her parents were still fighting so she kept quiet. Jessie was still thinking about the middle of nowhere when she really drifted off to sleep.

That was when the bang came.

The loud noise startled Jessie awake. She felt hot and sweaty and didn't know where she was. Rough hands pulled her out of the car, making her cry out because they didn't unhook her seat belt first, only unfastening it when she yelled. Where were they? What was happening?

It was dark and scary and she couldn't see anybody else at first, not even Laura. Once she was out in the night air she wasn't hot for very long; she only had a sweater on instead of a coat and the wind was cold. Then Laura started to whimper. Jessie spied a patch of tall weeds and pulled Laura close to her into it, feeling the need to hide. "Be quiet," Jessie whispered.

When her eyes got used to the dark Jessie could see some more things. A strange man was talking to Mommy. The man was big and loud and he looked mean. Laura shrank away from the noise and for once Jessie just hugged her and patted her. She couldn't see Daddy anyplace, and nobody was

paying any attention to two little kids, even the other man who had dumped her out of the car. Laura cried without a sound, shivering in Jessie's arms.

After a while Laura struggled free and she called out softly, even though Jessie dragged her back even farther in the weeds. "Mommy? Daddy?" Nobody noticed either of them. Jessie couldn't see much of what was going on.

The big man said something else and Mommy started screaming louder than she had been when she and Daddy were arguing in the front seat. "No. Not the babies. That wasn't the way it was supposed to go." What babies? Did they mean her and Laura? Jessie was a first-grader and her sister was almost five. Neither of them were babies.

The big man standing with Mommy looked mad. "What are we supposed to do? We can't take them. You want us to leave 'em on the side of the road?"

Mommy stopped screaming. "Yes. I do." She looked at Jessie but something about the look on her mother's face made her stand still where she was instead of running to Mommy the way she felt like doing. Jessie had let go of her sister but Laura wasn't moving, either.

Why didn't Daddy get out of the car and check on them? Daddy was always the one who checked when Laura had a fever or Jessie skinned her knee or anything. Mommy looked worried sometimes, but Daddy gave the hugs and said "It will be all right" when he was home.

Laura looked as though she could use a hug right now. She was crying harder, and her nose was running. Jessie was just trying to stay as quiet as she'd been in the car. Something told her that making noise would be a very bad thing right now. Jessie grabbed Laura's hand again and she could feel her sister trembling.

The big man who was the boss, the one dressed in black with a leather jacket, was saying things to the other men. One of them walked over and shoved the girls roughly far away from the car and Laura sat down hard in the rocks and grass by the side of the road. The big man took Mommy by the arm and said, "Come on. Let's go." She didn't even look back at the girls. Laura started to wail then. Jessie tried to cover her mouth, but it didn't matter. Nobody paid attention to either of them.

The big man and Mommy got in another car, a big black one. They drove away. Where were they going? Did they really mean to leave them here all alone?

Jessie started to run toward Daddy's car, hoping that he would help them. She stopped after taking only a few steps. A man was dragging a lady across the ground. She looked funny, all limp, and she wasn't moving. He stuffed her in the front seat of the car where Mommy usually sat and slammed the door. Jessie could see Daddy still sitting behind the wheel but he didn't look right, either. He wasn't moving and he slumped over toward the middle of the car.

Then the other men did something to Daddy's car and it rolled down a hill. There was a loud noise and fire and then the men got into the other car and it drove away. Daddy never came back. Laura cried so hard she threw up.

For a long time it was just the two of them out in the dark. Then the fire truck and the police cars came and there was a lot of noise. Nobody would believe Jessie about Mommy and the big man in the black car. And through it all, Laura just howled.

No matter how many times Jessie told the story in the coming days through the hospital and the offices and the foster homes, nobody ever believed her. The grown-ups in charge acted as if she was making stuff up. One of them even told her that she had to face the fact that Mommy and Daddy died in the car accident and act like a big girl about it.

It all made Jessie want to quit talking altogether, as Laura had done. After she quit howling in the dark, it was four days before Jessie heard her sister talk again. By the time she did, she wanted to talk to Jessie about what they'd seen and heard. By then all Jessie would tell her was "Forget it ever happened." If nobody believed her, why should she keep telling the same story? Jessie was only six, but already she had learned that the world was a dark and scary place and there was nobody in it who wanted to help her.

ONE

“He’s late,” Jessie Barker said to her sister. “You said he was going to be here by eleven.”

“Well, he isn’t here, is he?” Laura rolled her eyes the same way she had when they were kids. “Not everybody can be as punctual as you. Maybe his car broke down, or the traffic is backed up on the bridge, or he overslept or something.”

Jessie sniffed. “Those are all excuses I don’t let my students get away with. Why should I take them from a Web site designer?”

“Because he’s willing to work cheap and give us a decent product. And stop shaking your head at me like that, unless you want to hear my opinion on your hair color.”

“I don’t. I like my brown just the way it is. And I don’t see why a beautician needs a Web site.”

Laura sighed in her dramatic way. “Esthetician, sweetie. I’m not a beautician. Leave it to you to look down your nose at my business and get things wrong at the same time.”

Her attitude made Jessie want to stick her tongue out at her sister. Why did they always argue like this? Probably because neither of them had anyone else to turn to. Laura wasn’t ready to let it go yet. “Having my own Web site would be a great help for my business. I could link it to the day spa’s site and get more clients. Besides, I figure I could interest some people with a few beauty hints. That would reach a lot more women on the Web than a newspaper ad.” Unable to sit still while she talked, Laura dusted the coffee table.

“So the print medium is worthless now?” Jessie looked over her glasses at Laura, who looked as though she could feel a headache coming on.

“Nuts, Jessie. Why do you always make me feel like I’ve said the wrong thing? I’m twenty-nine years old and around you I still feel like a kid. And not a very smart one, either.”

Jessie melted a little. She always did when Laura looked hurt. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to growl at you, but you hit a nerve with that newspapers-are-worthless comment.”

Laura waved a hand. “Now I didn’t say they were worthless. You know I wouldn’t ever say that. In fact, I thought you’d want a Web site to promote your new book and link to online bookstores. It would sell a lot more copies that way, wouldn’t it?”

Jessie shrugged. Laura might not have been labeled the “smart one” when they were kids, but she’d always been creative. “If you think that many people would be interested in a history of urban legends published by a small university press.”

Her sister’s face lit up, showing how beautiful she was. “Of course I do. You could probably get a spot on the radio or even get interviewed by one of the TV features reporters just by promoting your book on the Web.”

It sounded good, but first things first, Jessie thought. “If you say so. But to do that I’d have to have a Web site. And to have a Web site your Web designer would have to show up, now wouldn’t he?”

Laura pressed one hand to her temple. “Couldn’t you be something other than logical and literal just once in your life?” Then she laughed. “No, probably not. You wouldn’t be Jessie then.”

Before Jessie could respond, Laura was grabbing her purse. “Look, if it’s such a big deal I’ll go looking for him, okay? Give him a break, anyway. He’s not a whole lot older than most of your students. He probably just overslept or something. Computer geeks keep odd hours.”

Jessie tried to still the aggravation she felt. “I’m not all that familiar with them. They don’t speak up in class.” Not even in the “pop culture” class that was her favorite, where she got a lot of responses from most of the students.

Laura grabbed her car keys and headed for the garage. She called over her shoulder to her sister. “I’ll call you if there’s any kind of problem. Otherwise I’ll be back here, probably with Adrian in tow, in the next hour, okay?”

“Fine.” Jessie tried to look interested in a stack of papers she had to grade. Anything so that Laura didn’t see the look of worry she knew crossed her face as her sister left. Laura was an adult. There was no sense in treating her like a child.

Cassidy stood in the shadows across the street from Adrian’s town house and watched as Laura Barker knocked on the door. To Cassidy, Laura looked more like a teenager than a woman in her late twenties, with her bouncy step and the way she rapped on the door. When the door opened, the man answering looked far older than Laura Barker, mature and wary in a way Laura wasn’t, even though he was years younger.

After Laura went inside, Cassidy pondered how much time to give the two together. It all depended on how much Adrian Bando had connected the dots with the information he had. Cassidy knew the young man was bright; if he’d worked things through and now shared that information with Laura, everything could fall apart even after all these years of careful concealment.

Cassidy knew that timing could be everything. One wrong decision made life collapse like a row of dominoes. Suddenly there was another figure at the door and Cassidy scrambled for even more cover. Being seen now was a bad idea. The figure at the door stood impatiently, checking the street. Then he made a quick motion at the lock, and the door opened without anyone on the other side. Half a block away the noise of an idling engine stopped. The driver of a black sedan opened the door and stepped from the car.

Fifteen minutes later the driver slipped back behind the wheel of the car. The engine purred to life and he pulled away from the curb, slowly turning the corner to disappear from view. If the town house had a back door onto the alley behind it, the car could stop there without being seen.

Ten minutes later Cassidy stood at the front door of the town house, listening for clues to the situation. It was too quiet for more than one person to be in the place. The woman Cassidy found was surprisingly still alive. In fact, if anybody came to her aid now, she might live. That would mess up everything, Cassidy thought. But it was easy to fix.

Thirty minutes later an unidentified person made a 911 call from the pay phone across the street from the town house. By then the fire had been burning long enough that the woman inside would be no trouble to anyone. In the chaos of the arriving fire trucks, no one paid any attention to the nondescript person in jeans walking away from the complex.

Where was her sister? Jessie was at the pacing stage. Laura was usually really good at calling if she was going to be late. Of course she wasn’t quite as good at remembering to charge her cell phone, so she might have had the best of intentions and not followed through. That was Laura. Still, most of the time she showed up when and where she said she would.

Living with Laura’s quirks and habits was such a part of her life Jessie knew them all by heart. And they hadn’t changed that much since Jessie’s junior year in college. That was when Laura had turned eighteen and aged out of foster care. At the ripe old age of twenty Jessie gave up her brief taste of the carefree life on campus to find an apartment for the two of them and make a home for them.

Even that long ago it had been Laura who’d concerned herself with the niceties of things. Jessie would have been content with “starving student” decor like bookshelves from planks and cinder blocks and a couple of mattresses on the floor if she had to have it that way. Their finances didn’t allow for much more. Still, Laura was always filling a jelly glass with wildflowers, or scrounging around in thrift stores for something else to give the place a little lift.

The doorbell rang, jarring Jessie out of her thoughts. “Finally.” She went to the condo’s incredibly small front hall and looked through the peephole. The man on the other side of the door was alone and he didn’t look the way Laura had described the Web designer. Maybe he had gotten a haircut for the occasion.

“Adrian?” she asked, opening the door.

“No, I’m afraid not. Were you expecting him?” In the light of day it was easy to see this definitely wasn’t Adrian. This man was taller, lean in a fit way and his hair was a lighter brown than Laura’s description.

Laura had called Adrian sort of different looking. “He has long black hair, usually tied back, and he’s very pale. Looks like the black belt martial artist that he is, somebody you wouldn’t want to meet in a dark alley. But so far he’s been this big teddy bear to me.”

This man was older than her students, probably older than her for that matter. Sharply dressed in a dark suit, the set of his jaw said he was definitely no teddy bear. He’d asked her a question and Jessie wasn’t sure how much information she should give a stranger, no matter how good-looking or nicely dressed he was. She decided to go with the minimum. “Yes, I was expecting someone. We had an eleven o’clock appointment.”

“If it’s Adrian Bando, he won’t be keeping it. I’m Stephen Gardner with the St. Charles County sheriff’s department. I’m looking for Jessica Barker.”

“I’m Jessica. And I’d like some proof you’re with the sheriff’s department.” He nodded and took out his identification as if he expected it. She looked it over quickly, trying not to panic. “Nobody who knows me calls me Jessica except for something very official. What’s wrong?”

The man on the doorstep shook his head slowly, looking even more serious than before. “If you don’t mind, let’s do this inside.” He looked like Jessie knew she did when she had to tell a kid they were on academic probation. So the news wouldn’t be good. She asked him in then because she was afraid that if she stood there in the doorway talking to Stephen Gardner any longer she might pass out.

“Something’s happened to Laura, hasn’t it?” Jessie didn’t usually get flustered easily but there was an air about Gardner that sounded alarms in her head. “Tell me she’s not dead.”

He looked a little relieved then but his dark eyes were still somber. “She’s not dead, Ms. Barker. But she is in Mercy Hospital thanks to Adrian Bando or somebody who was in his apartment. And it’s bad. Quite bad.”

Jessie felt her heart in her throat. “How bad? Are you saying she might not make it? She’s only been gone a little while. What on earth happened?”

“There was a fire. And something happened to your sister even before that. I don’t think the doctors know yet how serious her other injuries are. But I know we need to hurry. If you get your things I can take you to the hospital.”

Jessie got ready faster than she’d ever done anything in her life. Only halfway to the hospital in the unmarked sheriff’s department sedan did she notice that she wore two different tennis shoes. She hoped against hope that once she got to the hospital she could laugh with Laura about the shoes. Then she worried the rest of the way there that she might not get the chance.

TWO

Was this her sister? Jessie knew the still figure on the hospital bed had to be Laura, but her brain couldn't process what she was seeing. The woman on the bed could have been anybody the same height and weight as her sister. The one eye not swollen shut was the same bright blue as Laura's, but it wasn't focused. Most of her hair was gone, burned in the fire that consumed far too many other things for Jessie to hope that her sister would live. But the hair that was left was the same dark gold Jessie knew. She'd envied it for years, knowledge that sent pain knifing through her now.

"Her lungs filled with smoke from the fire. That's why she's on the ventilator, and partially sedated so that she doesn't fight the machines," the nurse explained softly.

"Is there anyplace that I can touch her? Can I hold her hand?" Tears blurred Jessie's vision and clogged her throat. It was hard to find a patch of skin on her sister that wasn't burned, bandaged or had medical equipment attached.

"You can sit here next to her. She's going to drift in and out some, given the amount of pain medication she's on. If she gets more lucid she'll probably be glad to see a familiar face." Jessie nodded numbly and found the hard plastic chair, pulling it as close to the bed as she could without getting in the way of anything attached to Laura.

At least she wasn't alone. The man from the sheriff's department was still there, just outside the cubicle. "How did you know who she was, or how to get in touch with me?" she asked him. What was his title, anyway? In all the upheaval she didn't remember any of that, if he'd even told her. Was he a deputy or a detective, or something else altogether?

His voice sounded only a little less choked than hers. "Her purse was in the entryway of the apartment on the floor. It apparently wasn't a robbery, because her money and credit cards were there along with her driver's license."

Her sister had hated her last driver's license photo, Jessie remembered. Laura said it made her look "goofy." Staring down at the puffy, unfamiliar face Jessie ached. What she wouldn't give right now for her sister to look merely goofy.

"There was one more thing. What does this mean to you?" Gardner held out a snapshot, faded and worn with one corner ripped off.

"That's us," Jessie said, wondering why on earth Laura had it with her. The two little girls smiled out at the camera, sitting on a blanket in the park. Memories rushed in as she saw the image. She could almost feel the hot sun on her shoulders and taste the tart lemonade they'd taken on the picnic. "It's the only picture we managed to keep of the two of us before...our parents died." There was no sense in getting into their tangled history with this man. Better to just stick to the official version that everyone else insisted was the truth anyway.

"You must have been awfully young when that happened." Jessie didn't know when she'd heard such compassion in someone's voice without pity. In the short time she'd known him, this man struck her as unique. She only wished she'd met him under different circumstances.

"I was six and Laura was four. The picture was taken about a month before the accident."

He looked at the photo again. "Can you think of any reason for your sister to have this with her?"

Jessie shook her head, listening to the machines whoosh and beep around them. "Not really. Maybe later she can explain that."

His pained silence said more than words would have. He didn't think there was going to be a later for Laura. And looking at the still figure in front of her, Jessie was afraid he might be right.

"What do I call you, anyway?" It had been hours since she and Steve Gardner had really conversed. He'd gotten them bad coffee from a vending machine or the hospital cafeteria, and a couple of apples. Even though she was hungry, Jessie couldn't imagine eating much else with the

trauma going on around her. She was still hoping that someone would come out of Laura's cubicle and tell them that things were dramatically better; that she'd turned the corner and then Jessie would go eat something.

That hope was starting to fade, but Jessie tried to keep it alive even in the face of the gravity of the situation. Several cubicles in the unit were filled with people, and a full complement of doctors and nurses attending to them. Laura hadn't shown any clarity or recognition yet.

The officer tossed a mostly empty coffee cup into the waste can in the corner of the family lounge. Hospital staff had shooed them out of Laura's cubicle and hadn't let them back in yet. "What do you mean?"

"Your title. It's obviously not just plain 'Mr.' Gardner. Are you a deputy, a detective, what?"

"Technically I'm a deputy, and also an investigator. I've passed the test for detective but haven't gotten the promotion officially yet." He looked as tired as Jessie felt. She watched him reach up and try to knead a knot out of his neck. In this windowless room, Jessie realized she had no idea what time of day it was.

Looking down at her watch for the first time in a long while, Jessie felt shock. They'd been at the hospital over seven hours. "You probably were off duty hours ago, weren't you?"

The deputy shrugged. "In a case like this, it doesn't matter. Besides, I brought you here. If I leave now, how will you get back home?"

"I won't be going home for a while. Not until I talk to my sister, or..." Jessie couldn't force herself to finish her sentence.

"Or she is past the point of talking," Deputy Gardner finished. "I'm likely to stay until then, too."

"You don't think she's going to make it, do you?" Jessie challenged.

His dark eyes flashed. "I'm not a doctor, so I can't predict what will happen. But I'll admit that things don't look good. If she makes it, she'll be in the hospital a long time. You realize that, don't you?"

Jessie nodded. She felt the same way, but she couldn't think about saying goodbye to her sister. Laura was the only family she had. What would happen if she died? "I just wish there was something I could do."

"Other than pray I don't think there's anything that anybody, including most of the doctors, can do for her right now."

"Pray? Do you really think that helps anybody?" Did someone like this man who saw all the evil in life really believe in prayer? It sounded as likely as one of the urban legends she researched.

"I think it helps." The deputy's face held no hint of a smile. "Many times I think it's the only thing that helps."

"Suit yourself. I can't imagine something like that helping."

He looked at her silently and lifted one shoulder, seeming to wordlessly indicate that he wasn't going to argue with her. That was good. There didn't seem to be anybody else on her side except this deputy. This wasn't the time for them to pick a fight.

Deputy Gardner finally went home in the early hours of the morning. He tried one more time to get Jessie to let him take her home. "They'll call you if anything changes. You need some rest," he argued.

Her temper flared. "How do you know what I need? It isn't your sister in the intensive care unit." Jessie regretted her words the moment she said them. This man had stayed with her at the hospital for hours and here she was snarling at him.

It made her feel even worse when he seemed to be fighting tears. He brushed the back of one hand over his eyes and sighed. "You're right. I'm sorry I suggested it. But I've been up for about

twenty hours and I have to go home and get some sleep and a shower. I just thought you might want to do the same.”

Jessie tried to keep calm. “Honestly, thank you for your concern but I’ll stay. I’m afraid that if they called me I wouldn’t have time to get back here.”

He nodded. “It could be a possibility. Is there anything I can bring you when I come back?”

Her mind felt totally blank. “Maybe breakfast that didn’t come from a vending machine. And a roll of quarters or a cell phone charger.”

“I think I’ll go for the quarters. There isn’t anyplace on this floor that we’re supposed to use a cell phone.” Jessie felt grateful that he understood that much. She didn’t want to get any farther from Laura than she had to. Even the nurses were beginning to point out problems that Laura was experiencing. Jessie knew that wasn’t a good sign. After midnight a doctor had been in to examine her, and then told them solemnly that they wouldn’t be preparing her for debriding and skin graft surgery in the morning.

That was when Jessie knew she was waiting out a vigil that would only last a day or so...perhaps a lot less. “Maybe you should just go into work instead of coming back here. Start trying to find out who did this to my sister,” she blurted with more anger than she expected.

“There are folks doing that already. We’ve got fire inspectors and crime scene investigators sifting through everything at Bando’s apartment. Until they’re done we can’t do much else.”

“Okay, then. I’ll see you later.”

“Try to get some sleep. I know they’ll wake you up if you sleep in the family waiting room.” Jessie remembered seeing several recliners tucked into corners there and she could almost hear one calling her name.

“I’ll get some rest, as much as I can.” Jessie didn’t expect to sleep with everything going on, but was surprised how quickly exhaustion claimed her when she pulled a soft blanket over her in the vinyl chair.

It only felt like a few minutes later that someone was shaking her awake. “Ms. Barker? Laura’s more alert. And the doctor wants to let her off the ventilator soon so that she can talk a little if she’s able.”

Jessie came out of the blur of sleep, sitting up in the darkened room. The clock on the wall announced that someone had pulled the shades to block the morning sun. She felt thankful that the other families had vacated the room and let her sleep into daylight hours. She tried to digest the nurse’s words. Did taking Laura off the ventilator mean she was rallying or that this was a last time to talk?

“Is Deputy Gardner back? Or should you call him?”

“He’s on the way,” the young nurse said. “Now why don’t we find you a cup of coffee and a little time to wash up and you can go see your sister.”

Jessie took a few minutes to pull herself together. She tried to avoid really looking in the mirror, knowing she wouldn’t like what she saw. She felt haggard and haunted and knew from experience there would be circles under her eyes. Splashing cool water on her face, she found a comb in her purse and ran it through her hair.

Then she remembered who she would be seeing. This was her beautiful sister who was always after her to take better care of herself. Drawing a shaky breath, Jessie forced herself to do her hair with more attention and found a tube of lipstick in the bottom of her purse. She willed her hand not to shake as she put it on, and then went in to see Laura.

Jessie stifled a gasp when she saw her sister. Laura seemed to have gone downhill rapidly in the five hours or so that she’d been sleeping. Her face was even puffier than before, and bruises of all colors streaked everywhere. Still, there was a little more focus to her one good eye. Jessie saw that the head of Laura’s bed was raised so that she was lifted into a better position to breathe or speak.

The nurse who'd gotten Jessie from the family lounge positioned herself there, leaning over. "Laura? We're going to take you off the ventilator like we talked about. You may not be able to stay off of it long, but this will give you a chance to talk to your sister."

Then the nurse looked at Jessie. "I'm going to have to ask you to step to the doorway for just a moment so that we can take the breathing tube out. I'll call you back in less than a minute."

Jessie nodded, too upset to speak right now without letting Laura hear the panic she felt. She stepped to the other side of the curtain that made up the front wall of Laura's cubicle. Outside Deputy Gardner was there again.

He didn't look much more rested than she did. His hair was slicked back as if still wet from the shower and his blue shirt and red tie looked hastily put on. "Ms. Barker. They paged me at home. Are things worse?"

"It looks like it. They're taking her off the ventilator so that she can talk." Jessie felt her eyes fill with tears. "Do you want to speak to her first? I know you need to ask her questions about who did this."

The investigator shook his head. "You need to talk to her before I do. She's on enough pain medication that she may not be able to answer my questions anyway. Plus, she'll probably panic if she sees a stranger first. When you've had a chance to talk, maybe I'll come in."

Jessie appreciated his kindness, but she knew that there might not be much time. She wanted him to get as much information as he could, to find out who had done this to her sister.

"You can come in with me now. I'll tell her who you are. And after we've had a chance to talk I'll let you have your time." It was important that Laura talked to the deputy in case she could identify her attacker.

The nurse motioned them back in and Jessie went to the head of Laura's bed, sitting in the chair next to her and making herself stay dry-eyed. "Hi, sweetie. It's me. I'll stay here as long as you want me to." Her sister's hand reached out and grasped hers with surprising strength. "And the man with me here is Deputy Steve Gardner. He's one of the people investigating what happened yesterday."

There were so many things she wanted to say to her sister. So many questions that she might never have time to ask. I will not cry now she promised herself. "I love you," she told Laura. It was the most important thing she could say.

Laura's breathing was rough and uneven. Her hand let go of Jessie's and reached for her face. The effort failed before she made contact. "Jessie?" The word rasped out of her sister like a rusty gate swinging open. "You're beautiful." The effort of three words seemed to use all her strength. Jessie didn't push for more. Instead she grasped Laura's hand again gently and patted it as softly as possible.

Laura's breathing became ragged and panic played across her ruined face. "We're going to have to put you back on oxygen," the nurse said as she stepped in. "I'm sorry you didn't get to speak to her." Jessie realized that the nurse was looking over her shoulder at the deputy.

"Next time," he said.

Jessie felt like thanking him for his brave words. There probably wouldn't be a next time, but there was no sense in saying that in front of Laura. In a few minutes her sister was breathing easier again, pure air going to her lungs and pain-killing drugs coursing through her system. Jessie sat in the hard plastic chair still patting Laura's hand and willing herself not to cry. She felt so many regrets, and most of them went back more years than she wanted to admit.

Unbidden, her mind swirled back to an incident twenty years before. She could almost hear the leaves crunching under their feet as they walked home from school to the foster home where they shared a set of bunk beds.

Even then she'd been hard on her sister. "So you had that dream again. It's just a dream, Laura. Nobody will ever believe it's real. I'm not sure I even believe it's real anymore." Their foster mother, Mrs. Dinkins, always said that Jessie was the smart one and Laura was the pretty one. Being smart didn't seem to matter even back then, because Laura could charm her way out of almost anything.

That day Jessie got gum in her hair and Laura had somehow known what to do. She always knew stuff like that, the things you couldn't learn from books.

While Jessie haunted the library, Laura's favorite reading was Mrs. Dinkins's glossy magazines. If they went to the drugstore Laura always went to the magazine counter to read the ones with models or movie stars on the front.

Usually Laura's knowledge served her better than Jessie's book learning. That day she'd gotten the gum out of Jessie's hair in a flash, working in egg white like shampoo while their foster mother was upstairs soothing a fussy toddler.

Jessie could still picture her sister in the kitchen that afternoon squirting green dish soap in the sink, bubbles rising around her hands. That was Laura's favorite thing, getting everything all clean and in a row.

If her sister had problems, she hadn't thought to ask about them. Then, as now, Jessie just dumped her own problems on her sister instead. The memory of the incident probably lasted longer than the reality that afternoon. Jessie looked down at the figure on the bed, not seeing her through the blur of tears. "Those really good times never lasted long," she whispered. And now she knew those times were over for good.

THREE

At ten that morning the deputy insisted on taking Jessie home. “I don’t care if you come back in an hour, but you need to get a shower, some different clothes and have your own car here.” His expression said he didn’t want any arguments and Jessie couldn’t think of any good ones anyway. She couldn’t remember being this tired and worn-out before.

“Will you go back to the hospital?” she asked on the ride back to the condo. It seemed longer going home, but then they paid attention to speed limits and traffic laws this time.

“Not right away,” Steve said. He sounded as tired as she felt. “I have about six cases I’m actively working right now and several need my attention. Plus I need to talk to the fire investigators and verify that this was arson. And we need to make sure there wasn’t anyone else hurt or killed in the fire. Most of the apartments in the complex were empty, it being the middle of the day, but there are always exceptions.”

Jessie shivered, thinking that some other family might be going through this the way she and Laura were. Her thoughts took her to a dark place and the deputy had to put a hand on her shoulder to let her know they had stopped in her driveway. It took a moment to come back to full alertness. It took even longer to make sure she had her key and thank the man for all he had done so far.

“I’d say I do this for all my cases, but that isn’t quite true,” he said. He was close enough to her, standing on her front porch, that she could see things about Stephen Gardner that she hadn’t noticed before. His dark eyes had little green flecks in them, and he had tiny, thin lines that could have been smile lines starting to crinkle just a bit at the corners of his warm eyes.

Right now he didn’t look as if he’d smiled in quite some time. “If you don’t give most people this kind of attention, why are you doing it now?” Jessie didn’t know why she asked the question, but suddenly the answer was important.

“Something about your sister...and you...has me deeply involved. So involved that I should probably turn the case over to somebody else, but I can’t.” He straightened his shoulders and looked back toward the car. “Right now I need to go work on this, and the other cases I’m investigating. I’ll see you soon.”

Jessie nodded. She didn’t know what to say. Stephen stood on her doorstep long enough to watch her put the key in the lock, open the door and verify that everything was all right. Then he left and she came into the condo past the front hall and sat on the sofa.

Jessie figured she would spend about half an hour at home and head back to the hospital. The rooms echoed with loneliness without Laura around. Would she ever come back here?

Looking over to the living room bookcase Jessie saw the photo album between two college textbooks on the bottom shelf. Getting up, she pulled it out and opened it to the first page and got a shock. The picture of the two of them on their picnic was right there in the album. But how could that be? Surely Laura would have told her if she had a copy made. This didn’t make sense. The print didn’t look as if it had been removed from the album and replaced any time recently, either.

She felt so tired she didn’t know whether she could trust her own senses. Maybe there really was a logical explanation for this. Jessie just couldn’t think of one now. Instead she went into her bedroom and pulled out clean clothes. After a hot shower she pushed away the temptation to crawl into the beckoning bed and went to the kitchen instead. She packed a bag full of the kind of snacks she usually took to school when she had long office hours and added a couple of peanut butter sandwiches. Now that she knew the gravity of her sister’s condition, she planned her stay at the hospital to be a longer one.

Hunting for the car charger to her cell phone, she remembered she’d given it to Laura last week. No sense in trying to find that. She made a mental note to ask Deputy Gardner about Laura’s car.

Somewhere in an apartment complex parking lot there was a sporty blue compact unless it had been destroyed by the fire, as well.

Jessie checked the contents of her bag and picked up her address book. By tonight she would need to call the department chair and a few others so that she could arrange for somebody to cover her classes for a while. She drove back to the hospital on automatic pilot, thankful that no traffic cop caught sight of her on the way.

“Dr. Anderson? I don’t recognize you. Can I help you with something?” The sharp-eyed nurse’s comment almost made Cassidy drop the medical chart. Why did the woman have to show up now, in this small window of time?

“I’m doing a neuro consult for Dr. Peterson on another case and this woman caught my eye,” Cassidy said with conviction. A firm voice could get one through almost any situation.

The nurse’s eyes narrowed. “Surely you don’t think anybody’s going to ask you to do a neurological exam on my patient?”

“Not a full exam, no. But I’m working on a paper on the neuropathology of specific trauma survivors and wondered if your patient might fit as part of my study. Once I looked at her chart more closely, I could see that won’t be the case.” Cassidy handed the chart back to the nurse. “I won’t disturb her.”

The nurse’s silent glare said that no one would be disturbing her patient while she was around. Cassidy walked away quickly, the way any busy specialist in a large hospital would. No one followed. Into the stairwell and down a flight quickly, Cassidy made it onto the staff parking lot before anyone could notice. The close call had been worth it; one look showed that the patient wasn’t going to cause any problems for anyone.

Laura didn’t show any more signs of being alert. “She’s not in terrible pain,” the nurse assured Jessie. “With third-degree burns the nerve endings are numbed enough that things aren’t as painful. We’re almost glad to hear that someone’s in a fair amount of pain because it usually means they’ve got more second-degree burns than third. Pain is easier to treat than the more severe burns.”

So what sounded like good news at first didn’t look like good news at all. Jessie asked about getting her sister off the breathing tube again, but that request was turned down. “She sounds like she could be developing pneumonia. We can’t risk it” was the doctor’s terse reply. After that he whisked Jessie out of Laura’s cubicle for a while for treatment. She went back to the family waiting room, which seemed quiet for a change.

“Ms. Barker? Jessie?” She knew she needed rest when she startled awake stiffly from her position on the couchlike vinyl bench attached to the wall. Even sitting straight up with the television high on the wall droning through news headlines, she’d fallen asleep. And judging from the urgent tone in the nurse’s voice it must have been for a while. “You need to come back with us now.”

Somewhere during Jessie’s last vigil at her sister’s bedside, it got dark outside. Laura didn’t ever look her way again with any kind of understanding in her eyes or say anything even when they switched the oxygen tube for one that would have let her talk. When they asked Jessie if there was anyone they should call, at first she shook her head. Then she called the nurse back and gave her Deputy Gardner’s business card.

He was there in a very short time. He looked as if he’d dressed hurriedly when he was called, no tie and a shirt that hadn’t been pressed. “You came,” Jessie said. “Thank you. I didn’t want to be alone right now.”

“You aren’t alone. You won’t be alone,” he said simply.

“Do you want to sit down?” It seemed odd to be talking about such mundane things while her sister lay dying.

“No, I’ll stand.” He looked at the figure on the bed. “It always seems more respectful somehow.” The way he said it made Jessie wonder how many people Steve Gardner had seen die. Personally she hoped she would never have to do this again. She felt ripped apart by grief as she watched Laura.

“Do you want me to call someone else? One of the chaplains or somebody from my church?”

Jessie shook her head, watching her sister’s struggle to breathe. “I don’t want anybody else, especially not some stranger.”

“All right.” It was the last thing he said out loud for quite a while. So when the end came, Jessie wasn’t alone there by the bedside. The deputy didn’t say anything but his presence seemed to lend a strength Jessie needed. She didn’t even comment when he stood there with a firm but gentle hand on her shoulder, obviously in prayer. In Jessie’s eyes Laura was far beyond most human help, and if he thought prayer might do something he was welcome to it. Nothing could hurt Laura now anyway.

After it was all over, hospital personnel led Jessie into the family waiting room where she sat again on one of the couches feeling numb and brittle as an ice carving. After a few minutes one of the nurses asked if she wanted to have a moment with Laura now that they’d taken out all the tubes and needles. Jessie almost said no, but something made her change her mind. Maybe it would hurt less some time down the line if she had a different last memory of Laura than the one she had now.

Jessie passed the deputy, writing something on a piece of paper at the nurses’ station. She hadn’t thought about all the paperwork that must have to get done at a time like this. It pained her that her sister’s life was reduced to paperwork for a sheriff’s deputy. Saying nothing, she went in to see Laura. The form on the bed looked as peaceful as possible. It was good to think that she was done with the horrible suffering of the last three days. Jessie reached out to touch a cool leg where the sheet had slipped. Her sister’s unburned flesh looked like pale marble in contrast to the bandages higher up on her body.

In that act of reaching out, her fingers froze and her brain refused to process what she was seeing. Perhaps she was even more confused than she thought. She went to the other side of the bed and looked down at the still body. Anger and bewilderment welled up in her. “Deputy Gardner?” When he didn’t answer, she said it louder.

He came into the cubicle still holding his papers. “What is it?”

“This isn’t Laura. I don’t know who this was, but it isn’t my sister.”

His brow wrinkled and he looked as if he wanted to say all kinds of things. Instead he stood there silently for a moment before he asked a simple question. “Why do you say that?”

Jessie lifted her right pant leg, exposing her ankle and the tiny bluebird tattooed there. “Look at this. We got them on vacation two summers ago. It was one of those stupid things you regret afterward when it’s already done.” Laura hadn’t regretted hers, though. In fact she’d shown it off.

He looked at the body on the bed before saying anything more, and then, understanding growing, looked back at Jessie. “Your sister had one, too?”

“On her ankle, just like I did.” Jessie pointed to the ankle of the person on the bed. The pale skin was unmarked by fire or anything else. Who just died in this hospital room? And where was her sister, Laura?

Steve Gardner’s brain hurt. An hour after the death of the person he’d thought was Laura Barker he’d made the first round of phone calls to get crime scene investigators involved. Although the hospital itself wasn’t the scene of a crime, the fact that this death was an obvious homicide meant all the sheriff’s department’s resources needed to be called into play.

It had been difficult to explain to the medical examiner’s staff why he needed as much care taken as he did. Nothing about this case so far made any sense. At first things seemed merely confusing; a young man who appeared to have come from nowhere was missing and a woman who’d only known him a couple of days was left in his apartment near death.

The fire someone had set to destroy evidence hadn't left many clues except the identity of the woman and now that was in question. Not just in question according to Jessie. She was firm in saying that the body didn't belong to her sister. In some cases he'd question a distraught relative's statement, thinking that they just wanted to believe against hope that the person they cared about couldn't possibly be dead. But Jessie wasn't hysterical or in denial. Instead she seemed perfectly calm.

He realized that Jessie was staring at him, waiting for him to make some kind of decision about what to do next. Here he was, with his first case like this as a lead investigator, and it was threatening to implode on him. If Jessie Barker was right, then he'd have to involve the Major Case Squad. Only the combined efforts of the best homicide experts in the five counties that made up the St. Louis area would feel qualified to deal with this. Steve groaned inwardly. The last thing he wanted to do was make an immediate call to the county sheriff, but he didn't have any other choice. "How sure are you that this isn't your sister?" he asked Jessie, knowing even then what her answer would be.

"I'm positive." Her gray-blue eyes were rimmed with red and her brown hair was in disarray, but Jessie spoke with a certainty Steve wasn't ready to question. She had radiated authority the whole time he'd known her and it had impressed him. Most of the relatives he saw in tough cases went to pieces, but not this woman.

No one else was around who could dispute her claim anyway. To do that, he'd have to talk with Laura's coworkers at the day spa and see if there were any friends there that knew her well enough to verify that she'd had that tattoo. Even then, he'd have more of a mess on his hands. If this wasn't Laura Barker who was it? And what happened to the real Laura, and Adrian Bando?

So far Bando hadn't turned up alive or dead, and trying to trace him hadn't been promising, either. It was as if he'd just shown up out of the blue less than six months ago without any history before that. No driver's license in any state, no Social Security number in the name he went by now and no other records that matched his name or fingerprints left in the apartment. Whoever Bando had been before that, he had a clean record and hadn't been in the military.

Steve shook his head, trying to clear the fog. "You know, one thing is pretty certain. If that isn't your sister..."

"It isn't. I know for sure now that it isn't," Jessie said firmly.

"I wasn't arguing with you, Ms. Barker. I was just thinking out loud. And if you'll let me finish..." Steve felt bad immediately about the tone he'd used. No one who'd just gone through what Jessie Barker had needed more grief.

He stayed silent a moment trying to compose himself, asking God to settle his troubled feelings so that he could do his job with the skill it demanded. "As I said, if that isn't your sister there's not much either of us can do here to figure out who it is, and where Laura might be now. I need to go back to work, and you should probably go home and get some rest."

Tears filled Jessie's eyes and Steve felt even worse than before. He had no way to comfort this woman on what was probably the worst day of her life. "I know you're right, but I feel so confused. Whoever this is, she must have looked a lot like Laura before all this happened to her." Her eyes widened and she sat down quickly.

"What is it?"

"I know it's not Laura, but I just realized something. The one time she spoke to me, she called me by name." Steve leaned in close as the tears started to slide down her cheeks. He just caught her last whispered words. "She said I was beautiful."

He felt an almost overpowering urge to gather this near stranger into his arms and give her someone to lean on. "Is there anybody at all we can call to be with you?"

Jessie shook her head. She looked at him with an intensity that made him wary. There was something that she wasn't telling him. But then she sighed and her mood shifted. "There's no one. I told you before that we lost our parents when we were children. We spent most of our childhood in the foster care system until Laura turned eighteen and we've lived together ever since."

“No boyfriend?” Why did he care about the answer suddenly?

“Nobody serious for either of us. I’m too busy and Laura, believe it or not, was a little shy around men.” Her expression brightened a little. “No, I guess I can still say Laura is a little shy.”

“That’s true,” Steve agreed, even though his practical cop’s nature felt like telling her that just because the figure on the bed wasn’t her sister didn’t mean Laura was alive. He prayed silently that when they opened the trunk of the car they’d impounded after the fire there wouldn’t be anybody in it.

Jessie hadn’t heard the change in his tone and he felt thankful about that. “Do you think you’ll be okay to drive home?”

She didn’t answer him right away. “Probably,” she said after a while. “I’m still trying to take in the fact that my sister is out there somewhere. After the last couple days, I’ve been getting myself used to thinking of her...not here.” She wasn’t the first person he’d seen who refused to say the word dead to talk about a loved one.

“How do you figure out who this person really is?” she asked, forcing him to pay attention to the process, as well.

“First we’ll call evidence techs from the county coroner’s office in to process her. We’ll take fingerprints and compare them to those on file in different databases. We’ll take blood and tissue samples to do DNA tests. And just to be sure we’ll need to take blood from you, as well, just to make the fact that this isn’t your sister official.”

Jessie nodded. He felt thankful that she wasn’t arguing with what he told her. “How long will the results of those tests take?”

“Days. Unlike the TV crime shows where they get their results in fifty-five minutes, real life works a little slower. I imagine you wish it didn’t.”

A half smile lifted one corner of her mouth slightly. “You’re right. The sooner we know who this is, or can at least prove it isn’t Laura, the sooner you might be able to find her.” The specter of whether the police might find Laura alive or not hung in the air between them as an unspoken threat. Steve decided not to pursue that for now.

The evidence technicians came into the room and Steve eased Jessie out so that the techs could do their work. Even now that they knew the figure on the bed was a stranger, he didn’t want Jessie to have to witness the things that would happen next.

“Is there anything else you want to tell me about your sister, or your own life?” The words were out of his mouth before Steve was quite sure why he’d asked them. Didn’t he already have enough to do? Still, his experience as an investigator made him value those hunches that drove him to ask a last question.

Jessie shrugged. “Not really.” Her expression said something else. There was information she kept to herself right now, but he didn’t know Jessie well enough to know how important her private information might be. Given her cryptic look it could be anything from a stash of unpaid traffic tickets to her sister being involved in criminal activity. What he’d seen of Jessie so far led him to believe that her secret might be closer to the traffic tickets, or something even more trivial. At least he hoped so; Jessie Barker intrigued him and for a change he wanted that feeling to come from something positive, not somebody’s criminal nature. Still, watching Jessie walk away gave Steve an uncanny feeling that something very serious was wrong.

FOUR

Jessie knew she should go back to work, but she couldn't quite push herself to do it yet. Laura wasn't dead, but she was still missing and no one seemed to have any idea where she might be. The condo felt so empty without her sister there. It took only two days for Jessie to realize how much Laura usually did around the place.

When the flowers on the kitchen countertop wilted Jessie threw them out, and had no idea where to get more. When she reached for one of her favorite coffee cups on the third day and couldn't find it, it took another hour to figure out that the cups were clean in the dishwasher. Laura always unloaded it. How many of the little pleasures of her life were due to her sister? Almost all of them, apparently. Without Laura life was amazingly mundane. There was no loud music in the house when she came home from errands, the shutters stayed closed even when it was sunny. In three days the quiet got to her so much she began to think about going to the pound and adopting a dog. She had even decided what kind of dog; something large and very furry of vastly mixed breed that would answer to the name of Spike or Tiger.

She was online looking up the address of the nearest animal shelter when the phone rang. When the caller ID showed that it was the country sheriff's department she picked it up immediately. "Deputy Gardner?"

"Yes. Ms. Barker? I have something to discuss with you. Would it be all right if I came over?"

Jessie turned away from the computer, her heart beating faster. Had they found Laura? "Certainly. Do you want to set up a time to meet?"

There was silence for a few seconds. "Actually, I'd like to come over now if you don't mind."

"All right." They hung up and Jessie shut down her computer and went to the kitchen to make a pot of tea. Coffee was out of the question because she knew there was no milk in the house to offer the deputy. She sighed. "Maybe once I get the dog we can walk to the store together," she said to the empty kitchen.

Deputy Gardner refused her offer of tea, and sat in the living room in the most upright chair available. "Have you gotten a lead on Laura? Do you know where she is?"

His brow wrinkled. "Not exactly." He leaned forward in his chair. "Is there anything about your family situation that you haven't told me? Anything that might change the way our investigation is going?"

Jessie's palms began to sweat. She had only known this man for a week. There was no way she could trust him. "No. What does this have to do with finding my sister?"

"I'm not sure yet. But it has a great deal to do with identifying the victim in the morgue who isn't your sister." His eyes narrowed, making him look much more like an investigator than the compassionate man she had started getting to know in the hospital. "How much do you know about DNA?"

"Enough. I teach history, not science. But I'm sure you're going to enlighten me," Jessie snapped.

"I won't go into deep detail. But we had a surprise with that sample we took from you to prove that the victim wasn't your sister. It proved that all right, but it gave us another interesting fact. The victim shares half your DNA profile."

"Only half?" She wanted to ask more, but it was all she could choke out. Jessie always thought fainting from shock was one of those things that only happened to Victorian women who wore whalebone corsets. Surely it wasn't possible today. But suddenly she had this funny buzzing in her head and there didn't seem to be enough air in the room.

“Only half,” Steve Gardner said. “Which makes the story you told me about losing your parents in a car crash just that—a story. Now I’ll repeat my earlier question. Is there anything you’d like to tell me?”

The buzzing was getting louder. “Only that I’m glad there’s no statute of limitations on murder because now I’m sure that someone killed my father.” After that her vision blurred and Jessie quickly lay down on the couch before she pitched forward into the coffee table. The last thing she remembered thinking was that when they found Laura she didn’t want to have to tell her that she’d ruined the veneer on the furniture, so she better pass out in a different direction.

Steve Gardner lunged for Jessie as she slumped sideways on her own living room couch. Before now he’d never seen anybody truly faint from stress or shock, but there was always a first for everything. Of course he’d never before confronted anybody with the news that a dead person thought to be a complete stranger was actually their parent, either. Had that really come as a shock to the woman, or was she only buying time?

The pallor of her skin and her general wooziness as he tried to make her sit up seemed to attest to the shock being real. He looked behind him and picked up the mug of tea she’d poured herself after he’d declined her offer to pour him some, as well. It was still quite warm, but not too hot to drink. “Why don’t you take this and sip it slowly. Then when you’re a little more composed we can start talking about this.”

She did as she was told; something he felt was probably out of character for Jessie Barker. What he’d seen so far told him that she liked to be in control of most situations. She didn’t seem to be in control of this one. Her hands shook slightly as she drank a little of the aromatic tea. “Are you going to be all right?” He didn’t want to go back to his seat until he was sure she wasn’t going to faint again.

She took one hand and pushed back waves of deep chestnut hair away from her face. In the hospital she’d worn her hair caught back rather severely in clips. Today it was gathered loosely at the nape of her neck, and shorter strands had worked their way out to brush around her cheeks. “I think I’ll be okay.” She put the cup down, placing it carefully on a coaster. “I don’t even know where to start to try and explain this.”

“Well, that makes two of us. Why did you tell me before that your parents were dead, when you must have known that your mother was still alive?”

She gave a short, mirthless laugh. “Well, see, that’s the problem. Nobody knew that but me and Laura. At least nobody else ever believed it. That car crash when we were small really happened. I’m sure you can find reports of it in the newspapers in the little town where my father taught at the state university. And in the cemetery at the edge of that same town there’s a very lovely monument with both of my parents’ names on it.”

Okay, this made even less sense than he’d expected. “How did that happen? Were you adopted?”

“No. I wondered that, too, when I got old enough to try and figure all of this out myself, but I checked the birth certificates for my sister and me and they both list our parents. I know that can be faked but nobody ever suggested that was the case. I figured that if we’d actually had another mother somewhere, the courts would probably have notified her and she would have come and gotten us. We wouldn’t have had to spend so much time in foster care.” Her gray eyes flashed with anger. “I mean, nobody would have abandoned two kids like that if they didn’t have to. I think our mother actually saved our lives by leaving us that night.”

He must have looked even more confused, because she took a deep breath and sat back on the couch. “I’m going to tell you this story once, and afterward you can ask any question you want as long as you give me the benefit of the doubt believing me. All right?”

He didn’t know why he should agree, but he had nothing to lose. If she shut down now he had no other real avenue to explore. “All right. Do you want me to keep from interrupting while you tell the story?”

“It would probably help. I haven’t told anyone all of this in more than twenty years. And I’ve never told it to anybody who believed me.”

The thought roused Steve’s interest like nothing else could. What could be so fantastic that an eyewitness account wouldn’t be believed, even that of a child? He got ready to write down what Jessie said, wondering where this tale would take him.

“Remember, I was only six,” she began. “My parents were arguing in the front seat of the car, which wasn’t unusual. It was more like squabbling most of the time, but they didn’t always get along. I don’t know how far away from home we were, and I don’t really remember where we’d been that day. Laura and I fell asleep in the backseat and I remember waking up after hearing a bang.”

“Was the car still moving?” Steve knew he shouldn’t interrupt but he couldn’t help himself.

Jessie didn’t seem to mind the simple question. “No. We were pulled over on the side of the road, not exactly like we’d been in an accident or anything. There were several strange men there, at least three of them. One of them pulled Laura and me out of the car and we stood in some weeds and watched our life fall apart.”

“Did any of them talk to you? And what about your parents?”

Jessie’s brow wrinkled. “From an adult perspective I know now that my father was already dead. I think he’d been shot, but I can’t tell you why I believe that. I didn’t see a shot fired.”

“You said you heard a bang as you woke up. Could it have been a gunshot?”

“Maybe. It’s hard to know.”

“How about the men. Do you remember anything about them, what they looked like or if anybody mentioned any names?”

She looked at him and her eyes filled with tears. “I’m sorry. I’ll have to think about that awhile.”

“I’ll stop barking at you so much.” He hadn’t meant to push her this hard.

“No, it’s not that. Nobody’s ever taken me this seriously before. I don’t know how to react.”

He felt more pain for her now than he did when he thought he’d intimidated her. What must it be like to carry this kind of secret for over twenty years? “Take your time. Try to recall as much of the scene as you can. Close your eyes if it helps.”

Jessie leaned back against the couch cushions. “I don’t remember any names. They were just big and scary looking.” She stopped for a moment. “Okay, there is one thing. When I just said the men were scary, something dawned on me. My mother wasn’t scared. Not the way I would expect somebody to be.”

“Do you think she knew them?” It would explain her not being afraid, but it led to a dozen more questions.

“I’m not sure if she knew them personally, but they were familiar to her, if that makes any sense. And now that I think of it, she definitely knew the man who was in charge. She didn’t talk to him the way you’d talk to a stranger. She felt free to argue with him some.”

“Argue how?” Steve had started listening to this story figuring it might be the fantasy of a child. But so far most of what Jessie had told him sounded plausible. He could almost see the serious girl she’d been at six, stuck in this terrible situation.

“I think he wanted to hurt us, maybe even kill us and put us back in the car with my father and the woman. I didn’t tell you about her, did I?”

Steve shook his head, not wanting to interrupt at this point if he didn’t have to.

“Two of the other men took a woman from one of the other cars and put her in the front seat where my mother usually sat. Again, once I grew up I knew that she was probably dead or at least incapacitated somehow. Then I didn’t understand why she let them put her in the car.”

“Why didn’t anybody realize that the body in the car wasn’t your mother?”

“It would have been hard to tell. At the time I remembered the men pushing our car down a hill. There was another loud noise and the car caught fire. Later when I found the newspaper articles they reported that the car had gone down a dangerous embankment and burned.”

“How did anybody explain that you and your sister survived?”

“I’m not sure. Nobody ever wanted to talk about the accident afterward. A few weeks later the social workers were telling us to forget what happened. Child counseling must have been so different then.”

“No kidding.” There were a few things that just didn’t sound right about Jessie’s story, but Steve didn’t want to tell her that now. Especially when she trusted him enough to tell him what she’d hidden for so long. “So what happened after that?”

Jessie sighed. “I don’t remember seeing any cars pass once the men put my mother in a car and they all drove away. Somebody must have seen or heard something, though, because after a while there were fire trucks and police cars there and they put us in the back of a police cruiser and took us to some kind of juvenile hall once they figured out we weren’t hurt.”

“Physically, at least. What you saw had to be an incredible shock.”

“It was. Laura didn’t say anything for about four days. And she was usually the chatterbox of the family. For a while I was afraid she wasn’t ever going to talk again. I stopped wanting to say anything more myself after the third or fourth time I told my story and an adult told me that it wasn’t true.”

Steve couldn’t keep from wincing. It had always been part of his nature to be as honest as possible, even with kids. What had motivated these people to deny Jessie’s story? “Were there services for your parents anywhere? Did anybody try to comfort you or take care of you?”

Jessie lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “I don’t think there were any services. We weren’t ever religious, and there wasn’t any other close family. If there was anything at the college where my father taught, they didn’t take us there. Like I said before, they were already telling us to forget that it happened, as if that would ease the pain. We went into foster care, and fortunately we always stayed together. I think Laura could have been adopted if it wasn’t for me. She was still young and cute enough to be attractive.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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