BRENDA
HARLEN

ONE MAN'S FAMILY

Cherish

Brenda Harlen
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Аннотация

When Children's Connection nurse Alicia Juarez came to private investigator Scott Logan's door, she was desperate: Her brother was in jail for a crime she was convinced he didn't commit, and his two kids were left in her care. Though he swore he wasn't much of a family man, something in the passion of the lovely woman begging him to help her got to Scott.And soon Alicia and the children became his priority in a way he never thought possible. He'd vowed never to get involved with a client. But his growing feelings for Alicia had him contemplating taking an altogether different kind of vow….

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One Man's Family

Brenda Harlen

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Special thanks and acknowledgment

are given to Brenda Harlen for her contribution to the LOGAN'S LEGACY REVISITED miniseries.

To my Dad—

because every little girl needs a hero,

and because you'll always be mine.

I love you.

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Prologue

"In the matter of the State of Oregon versus Joseph Elonzo Juarez…"

Alicia held her breath, straining to hear the words over the pounding of her heart. The jury had been deliberating less than twenty minutes, and she couldn't help but feel reassured by the quick decision. Clearly the jurors had seen beyond the flimsy and circumstantial evidence and knew that her brother hadn't committed any crime.

"…we find the defendant…"

Her grip tightened on the railing in front of her, her short fingernails biting into the lacquered wood, her attention fixed on the jury fore person.

This was it. Finally. The end of a seemingly endless four-day trial, and the beginning of a return to normalcy for her family.

"…guilty."

She couldn't hold back her shocked gasp as her gaze flew across the courtroom to where her brother was standing beside his attorney at the defendant's table.

Joe's shoulders were slumped with the weight of the world upon them, but he looked more resigned than surprised by the announcement. She, on the other hand, had to fight the urge to yell at him, to scream at the judge and rail at the jury for this blatant miscarriage of justice. Except that nothing she could say

or do would make a difference now.

She felt a gentle tug on her sleeve and looked down into the wide, trusting eyes of her eight-year-old niece.

"Is Daddy coming home now?" Lia asked.

Before Alicia could say anything, Joe Jr. responded with all the disdain a twelve-year-old boy could muster for his little sister. "He's not ever coming home, dummy. 'Guilty' means he stays in jail."

Alicia shot her nephew a warning glare over the top of Lia's head before kneeling beside her niece. The little girl's eyes were filled with tears and confusion. Alicia knew just how she felt, but she couldn't give in to the emotions that battled inside her. She was the only one these children had to look out for them right now.

"But he didn't do it." Lia's bottom lip quivered as she spoke.

"I know, honey," she said, trusting with all of her heart that it was true. "The jury just made a mistake."

"Tell them," Lia pleaded. "Tell them they were wrong, Aunt Alicia."

The child's fervent pleading broke her heart, but it was too late to tell the jurors anything. Having been thanked and dismissed by the judge, they were already filing out of the courtroom.

And it wasn't Alicia's job to convince them of Joe's innocence. That was something he should have done. But her brother had chosen not to take the stand, had refused—for reasons he didn't even try to explain and that she couldn't begin to imagine—to

defend himself.

"Tell them," Lia said again.

Alicia only wished it were that easy.

She would do anything for these children, give them anything. But what they needed most of all was their father, and his fate had been sealed by the jury's announcement.

Or had it?

Chapter One

Scott Logan had things on his mind and a crick in his neck, both courtesy of having spent the better part of three days hunkered down in the front seat of an aging Ford Escort on an insurance fraud investigation. Despite the mental preoccupation and physical discomfort, he felt good about the successful completion of another assignment and satisfied that he'd done his job well.

His former colleagues couldn't understand why he'd walked away from the police force for this kind of work, and Scott didn't know how to explain that the job that had once meant everything to him had meant nothing after Freddie was killed.

His family, who had never comprehended his wanting to be a cop in the first place, understood his new job even less. Not that they criticized his choices so much as they were clearly baffled by them. In a family comprised of mostly white-collar professionals, Scott had always been the odd man out.

You can do anything you want to do was Lawrence Logan's favorite mantra, and one which he repeated at every opportunity to each of his four sons. It was the kind of positive and nurturing approach he'd advocated in the self-help books that had brought him so much fame and fortune. His encouragement and support were genuine, his pride in his sons'accomplishments sincere.

He'd flown to NewYork to help LJ settle into his new

apartment when his eldest son had accepted a position with a prestigious public relations firm, had been sitting in the front row when Ryan graduated with his architectural degree, and cried tears of joy when Jake was accepted to medical school. But when Scott announced his intention to go to the police academy, the renowned psychologist had just shaken his head—as he'd done frequently over the thirty years of his youngest son's life.

Scott hadn't been deterred by his father's lack of support because there had been no other options for him. He'd wanted only to be a cop—to uphold the laws, put the bad guys in jail and help make the world a safer place. Of course, when his partner was killed—gunned down in pursuit of an armed suspect who was later acquitted on a technicality—Scott's faith in the system was shaken.

He banished these disquieting memories to the back of his mind as he pushed open the door to Darlene's Diner. The bell tinkled, announcing his arrival, and Darlene herself glanced up from the counter she'd been wiping down to greet him with a smile.

"Morning, stranger."

"How are you, Darlene?"

"Hanging in," she told him. "How about you?"

"Desperately needing my daily dose of caffeine."

She was already reaching for a large foam cup. "You haven't been in the last few days."

"Assignment," he said simply.

She glanced up at him again as she filled the cup. “You been sleeping in your car again? You look like hell.”

“I haven’t been getting much sleep,” he admitted. “Regardless of where I spend my nights.”

“You need a good woman, sugar. A reason to go home at night.” She set the coffeepot back on the element and winked at him. “And lots of steamy hot sex that wears you out so good you can’t help but sleep.”

“Is that an invitation?”

Darlene threw back her head and laughed. “Sugar, you wouldn’t know what to do with me if I said yes.”

“How will we ever know, if you don’t give me a chance?”

She snapped a lid onto the cup and slid it across the counter to him as the bell tinkled over the door again and another customer entered.

“Because despite your broad shoulders and tough-cop scowl,” she told him, “you’ve got a heart softer than the yolks of sunny-side up eggs, and I eat guys like you for breakfast.”

He frowned at that. “You must be confusing me with someone else.”

“Actually, I was thinkin’ it was an appropriate—if somewhat bizarre—analogy,” another female voice piped in from behind him.

Scott turned to see Aster Cooney, proprietor of the local salon and spa, slide onto a stool at the counter. Her hair, pink and purple today, was sticking out in tufts around her face, her eyelids

were covered in glittery lime-green shadow and her lips were painted orange. In a denim miniskirt that hugged her round hips and a lime green T-shirt, she should have looked ridiculous. But somehow she managed to appear almost stylish, if a little flamboyant.

"Good morning, Aster," he said, inwardly cursing himself for lingering to flirt with Darlene.

Not that he didn't like Aster. On the contrary, she was one of his favorite people in the world—open and honest and incredibly gutsy. And he usually enjoyed her company, but he felt at a distinct disadvantage now, knowing that she and Darlene would gang up on him over some issue or another.

"You're gettin'an early start today," Aster said. Then she turned to Darlene. "Decaf vanilla latte and a toasted cinnamon raisin bagel with cream cheese, please."

"I've been out of the office for the last three," he told her, as Darlene turned away to take care of the new order. "Lots of paperwork to catch up on."

"You look tense," she said, not unsympathetically. "I could squeeze you in for a massage around three, if you want."

"I'm fine," he said.

"I was just telling Scott how he needs a woman's hands on him," Darlene told Aster, then grinned. "Only I wasn't talking about a back massage."

Aster nodded her agreement. "That might be just what he needs—but only if it's the right woman."

Today, the topic of their interest was his personal life—or rather his lack of one. He admittedly hadn't dated much since breaking up with his long-time girlfriend a couple years earlier, but that was his own choice. And he had no intention of sticking around for their diagnosis of his dating problems because he was perfectly content with his life.

"Thanks for the insights, ladies," he said, tossing a couple of bills onto the counter. "But I'm already behind schedule and really need to run."

"You should do that," Aster surprised him by agreeing. "Because the way she kept glancin' at her watch, I doubt she'll wait much longer."

"She—who?" Darlene asked the question before he could.

"The gorgeous dark-haired woman who's standin' outside the door of his office buildin'."

Scott frowned. "She isn't waiting for me."

Aster shrugged. "Even if she isn't, she just might be the one you've been waitin' for."

"Aster," he said warningly.

"Go on. You can tell me later that I was wrong—" she grinned "—or not."

Scott left the diner certain that Aster was wrong.

He knew he didn't have any appointments this morning because he'd asked his secretary to clear his schedule for the entire week, not sure how long he'd be tied up with the insurance investigation. His only pressing concern now, and the reason for

his early arrival at the office, was dealing with the paperwork and e-mails and telephone messages that would have piled up during his absence. But maybe one of the other investigators—

The thought fizzled abruptly when he rounded the corner of the building and saw her standing there. And in the back of his mind came the assurance that Aster wasn't wrong about one thing: the woman was gorgeous.

His police training kicked in to make a more detailed assessment: Hispanic, five feet four inches tall, a hundred and twenty pounds, approximately twenty-five to thirty years of age. Long, dark hair tied into a braid that fell to the middle of her back, darker eyes, wide full lips, and dressed in hospital scrubs with white running shoes on her feet. It was an impartial and professional appraisal, but what came next was a purely involuntary and completely male evaluation: sensual, seductive, sexy.

She was petite, and he usually liked his women taller—long and leggy. But she had curves that would make any man's mouth water and lips that promised a taste of paradise. Though the punch of arousal that hit low in his belly was unexpected, it wasn't unwelcome. It was always good to know that he was alive and well, that his body wasn't dead even if his heart had long ago been buried beneath the unforgivable weight of grief and guilt.

"Scott Logan?" she asked, when he stepped closer.

"Yes."

His hesitant response was immediately rewarded with a warm

smile, and he felt a quick rush of heat through his veins.

She really wasn't his type. But there was something about her that called to him on a primal level—or maybe it was just that Darlene and Aster's teasing remarks in the diner had reminded him that it had been a very long time since he'd been with a woman.

"I was afraid you wouldn't get here before I had to leave for work," the woman said.

Her voice was as soft and seductive as her smile, and he almost didn't hear the words he was so caught up in the enjoyment of the sounds rolling off of her tongue. Then he realized she was waiting for him to say something, and he forced his brain to wrestle control away from his suddenly overactive hormones to respond to her statement.

"Do we have an appointment?" he asked, starting to question his earlier conviction that they did not. Maybe Caroline had booked it after he'd called yesterday afternoon to tell her that he'd be in the office this morning.

"No," she admitted. "But I was hoping you could squeeze me in, anyway."

He glanced at his watch, as if he were considering the request. But the truth was, he was intrigued enough by the woman to want to listen to whatever she had to say. Especially if she continued to speak in that smoothly melodic tone that made him think of steamy nights and steamier sex.

Whoa. He immediately reined in the shockingly un-

professional thought, surprised—and a little ashamed—at the purely visceral reaction he was having to this woman. It was Darlene's fault, he rationalized again. He wouldn't be having such inappropriate ideas if she hadn't started him thinking about how long it had been since he'd had a woman in his bed.

"Why don't you come in?" he offered, inserting his key into the lock.

She waited until he'd punched in the code to disarm the security system before she followed him through the door. He flipped on lights as he made his way toward his office at the end of the hall, conscious of her presence behind him, wondering what had brought her here so early in the morning.

Did she want him to check up on a spouse whom she suspected was unfaithful? He hadn't seen a ring on her finger, but he knew that wasn't conclusive evidence of anything. And while securing evidence of infidelity wasn't one of his favorite assignments, it was, regrettably, a regular one. Still, he had to wonder at the stupidity of a man who could have a woman like this one in his bed and still look elsewhere for pleasure. Of course, it wasn't his place to speculate or judge, only to do the job he was hired to do.

He settled in behind his desk and pushed the stack of unopened mail aside.

"I'd offer you coffee, but this—" he held up his foam cup "—is all I've got until my secretary gets in. Caroline's very proprietary about the coffeepot."

She lowered herself onto the edge of one of the visitor chairs

facing his desk and folded her hands in her lap. “I’m fine, thanks.”

Scott took a long sip from his cup, hoping the infusion of caffeine would jump-start his brain and help keep it one step ahead of his hormones. “Why did you want to see me?”

“I need you to get my brother out of prison.”

The unexpected statement jolted him even more than her presence, followed quickly by a pang of disappointment.

“I’m sorry, Miss—”

“Juarez,” she said. “Alicia Juarez.”

He paused, wondering why the name sounded vaguely familiar even though he was certain he’d never met this woman before. He had no doubt that he would have remembered.

“Yes, well, Miss Juarez, you’re obviously at the wrong place. If you’re looking for a bail bondsman—”

“I’m not,” she insisted. “I need you.”

He wanted to smile. Unfortunately, as much as he enjoyed hearing those words come from her lush lips, he was sure she didn’t mean them the way he wanted her to mean them.

She huffed out an exasperated breath when he didn’t respond to her announcement. “I thought Mr. Hall was going to talk to you about this.”

Mr. Hall—now that name was definitely familiar. “Jordan sent you here?”

“He recommended you to me—” and it was clear from her tone now that she was wondering why “—and promised he would give you the background on Joe’s case.”

“I apologize for not making the connection sooner,” he said, as the scattered pieces finally clicked into place in his mind. “I only talked to Jordan last night and while he did mention you would be contacting me, I didn’t expect it would be first thing this morning before I’ve even had my first cup of coffee.”

“I did intend to make an appointment,” she told him. “But when I called yesterday, your secretary said you’d been out of the office and I should call back today. I thought, instead, I’d try to catch you in person on my way to work this morning.”

“And you did.”

She nodded. “Did Mr. Hall tell you about my brother?”

“Joe Juarez,” he said. “Convicted of stealing an engine prototype and its design plans from the racing team he worked for and sentenced to five years in prison.”

“He was set up.”

“Whether he was or wasn’t…” Scott said—and he had his doubts “…what do you think I can do?”

“Prove his innocence,” she responded immediately.

“The police already investigated the case, your brother had a trial, and the jury convicted on the evidence presented.”

“But he didn’t do it,” she insisted.

“I appreciate your loyalty—”

“It’s more than loyalty,” she interrupted. “It’s the truth. I know my brother. He simply isn’t capable of doing something like this. And even if he was, he wouldn’t do anything that would even risk taking him away from his kids.”

Scott couldn't deny that she was convinced of the fact. Unfortunately, his experience in law enforcement suggested an entirely different scenario: if Joe Juarez was in prison, that was most likely where he deserved to be.

"You don't believe me," she said softly.

"It's not my job to believe or disbelieve," he told her.

"How can you do your job if you don't believe in your client?"

"Actually, I don't do a lot of investigating anymore. Most of what I do is surveillance."

"Oh." She frowned. "But Mr. Hall said that you were the best person for the job."

Scott bit back a sigh as he realized that whatever Jordan had said to this woman, she'd believed it—probably as easily and completely as she believed in her brother's innocence. He silently cursed his cousin's wife's brother for dragging his name into this mess. And then he cursed himself, knowing that he wouldn't be able to say no to this woman with the big, dark eyes that so clearly projected the hope and faith she was placing in him.

Still, he tried, because he really didn't want to be responsible for dimming the light in those eyes. "I'm not sure I am the best person for the job."

Her chin lifted, just a fraction, and her mouth set. "Are you saying you won't help me?"

"I'm saying, I'm not sure that I can help you," he corrected gently. "What if the only evidence to be found proves that your brother should be in jail?"

“I don’t believe that,” she said stubbornly.

“It’s a possibility you have to consider.”

“Then you have to consider the possibility that he was wrongly convicted.”

He had to respect her persistence. “Touché, Miss Juarez.”

“Will you help me, Mr. Logan?”

Damn, he really wished he could say no. The business was successful enough that he could mostly pick and choose his assignments these days, and he usually chose to work with big, faceless corporations, where the only thing at stake was money. He certainly wouldn’t have chosen a client who looked at him with such trust and vulnerability in her eyes and her brother’s liberty at stake.

But she had chosen him, and he found that he couldn’t turn her away.

“I’ll try,” he finally responded to her question.

And the smile she gave him was so full of warmth and pleasure, it would have knocked him off his feet if he hadn’t already been sitting down.

“Mr. Hall said you would need a retainer,” she said, already pulling a checkbook out of her purse, as if she was determined to finalize their agreement before he changed his mind.

Scott nodded.

The firm’s standard contract asked for a retainer of ten thousand dollars, but he knew that Jordan had handled Joe Juarez’s case through Advocate Aid, which meant there was no

way she had that kind of money at her disposal. He would have to severely slash his usual hourly rate and work fast to get this job done on a budget this woman could afford. “Is fifteen hundred agreeable?”

Her surprise was obvious and followed quickly by relief. She nodded. “That would be fine.”

Scott pulled up the contract on his computer, changing the retainer fee and hourly rate on the form with a few quick keystrokes while she wrote out the check.

“You know I can’t guarantee you the results you’re looking for,” he said, as he passed her the contract to review.

She nodded again. “I’m only asking you to do your job, Mr. Logan. The results will speak for themselves.”

He would do his job, and he knew that he would sincerely regret it if the results of his investigation destroyed her hopes for her brother’s freedom.

Alicia left the Children’s Connection at the end of her shift with a much lighter step than she’d started the day with. Her spirits had taken a decidedly upward turn when Scott Logan agreed to look into her brother’s conviction. Despite his initial reluctance, she instinctively trusted that he could find the necessary evidence to exonerate Joe.

For the first time in weeks, she felt as if there was hope, and Scott Logan was responsible for that.

Unfortunately, the P.I. was responsible for stirring other

feelings inside her, too. Like the unmistakable warmth of sexual attraction that spread heat through her veins when he looked at her with deep brown eyes that reminded her of the sinful temptation of dark melted chocolate. Or maybe it was the obvious strength in his broad shoulders that appealed to her at this time in her life when she so desperately needed someone to lean on.

The thought brought a rueful smile to her lips as she pulled into the designated parking space outside her apartment building and shut off her engine.

She didn't like to lean on anyone and wasn't in the habit of doing so. But she could imagine herself leaning on Scott Logan—and enjoying it, despite a track record with men that was both pathetically short and sad.

She hadn't been involved with anyone since her disastrous relationship with Ross Harmon more than three years earlier. And, truth be told, she hadn't felt as if she was missing out on anything. Or maybe she'd been so devastated by Ross's betrayal, and so angry with herself, that she'd accepted the denial of her own wants and needs as punishment for her error in judgment.

But no matter how attractive Scott Logan was—and he was, undoubtedly, very attractive—there were toomany other things going on in her life to even contemplate a relationship. And right now, she needed to pack up more of her clothes and personal effects to take to her brother's house.

She felt a pang of sadness as she stepped into her apartment

and looked around. It wasn't spacious or fancy, but it had been her home for the past three years. She'd moved in when she'd started her job at the fertility clinic linked to the Children's Connection, taking over the lease from another nurse who was getting married because it was an easy—albeit intended temporary—solution to her housing dilemma.

She'd stayed because she'd genuinely liked the neighborhood and her neighbors. There were the Walkertons, a young couple with a four-month-old baby; the Racines—Harriet and Abe—who'd been married almost sixty years and, if Myrtle Grossman was to be believed, fighting all of that time; Marissa Alonzo, a single mother who juggled three jobs to support her three children; Ronald Tedeschi, an engineering student at PSU; and Ingrid Stavros, her seventy-year-old landlady who baked cookies for every tenant on his or her birthday.

Alicia ignored the tightness in her throat as she shoved the last of her clothes into her duffel bag. She'd been living at her brother's house since his arrest, taking care of his children, and though she loved Joey and Lia more than anything, she really missed the eclectic group of tenants who had somehow become her extended family. And she missed her home—her private haven that was comfortable and familiar and entirely her own.

As she zipped up the bag, she pushed her petty regrets aside. She had no right to complain about giving up her home when her brother had lost everything.

Besides, if Scott Logan was as good as his reputation, she

wouldn't be gone for long.

He can't find evidence that isn't there, Jordan had warned her. But if there's anything the cops missed, he'll uncover it.

Alicia was counting on that. More importantly, Lia and Joey were counting on it.

Thinking of her niece and nephew, she hefted the stuffed bag onto her shoulder and headed back outside to her car. She waved to Myrtle Grossman across the street as she tried to recall if she'd taken anything out of the freezer for dinner that night. Steak, she remembered now. She'd planned to make a stir-fry—one of her nephew's favorites and one of the few ways she knew to get him to eat vegetables.

She had her key in hand to unlock the trunk when she noticed something written in the dust on the back window. One of the neighborhood kids—probably Marissa's eldest son, she guessed, although she'd never actually caught him in the act—seemed to think it was funny to write WASH ME on her vehicle when it was obvious that Alicia had neglected to do so.

But this time the message said: BACK OFF.

She felt a chill skate over her skin despite the late afternoon sun beating down on her.

It wasn't just the words that were different, it was the style of lettering. Bigger and bolder.

Or was she wrong?

She'd been uneasy since Joe had gone to prison, jolting at noises in the night, jumping at shadows. She was overreacting,

letting her imagination get away from her, envisioning dangers where there were none. No doubt this was another example of the same thing.

The message probably wasn't even intended for her, but for the driver of whatever vehicle might find itself behind her on the road. And the logic of this reasoning soothed her skittish nerves.

Until she noticed the slashed tires.

Chapter Two

Scott arrived at Alicia's apartment complex less than fifteen minutes after her call.

He recognized Detective Mel Rucynski from his years on the force and greeted his former colleague with a firm handshake.

"What are you doing here?" Rucynski asked.

"Alicia called me."

"Alicia, huh?" Rucynski lifted his thick black eye-brows. "Well, your taste in women has definitely improved in the past couple of years."

The cop's suggestive tone made Scott realize he'd slipped in referring to Alicia by her first name, as he'd slipped throughout the day whenever thoughts of her came to mind. And although those thoughts had been anything but professional, focusing on her as a woman rather than a client—a woman with dark sparkling eyes, wide full lips, and temptingly round curves that he wanted to feel pressed against him—he didn't want Rucynski to get the wrong idea about his relationship with Alicia.

"Actually, Miss Juarez is a client," he said, reminding himself as well as Rucynski of that fact.

"A client, huh?" the cop asked doubtfully. "Well, if she has enough money to call you out to investigate a juvenile prank, she should have enough money to move out of this neighborhood."

"What kind of prank?" Scott asked, ignoring the dig about his

fees. A lot of his former colleagues assumed he'd made the jump to the private sector to fatten his wallet. And while he did take home a heftier paycheck now, it wasn't money that had motivated the switch.

"Slashed tires." Rucynski gestured to the parking lot behind him.

Scott looked over his former colleague's shoulder and saw an ancient red Jetta in one of the few occupied slots. "Slashed tires" was something of an understatement, he thought, noting that the vehicle was actually resting on its rims because the tires had been so completely decimated.

"Looks like an unusually violent prank," he noted.

Rucynski shrugged. "Some kids are carrying around a lot of anger."

He nodded. It was an act of vandalism, possibly—probably—random, and yet there was something about it that bothered him.

"What did you tell Al—Miss Juarez?"

"The truth—that this neighborhood isn't exactly upscale, and the fact that she's lived here for three years without incident is only proof that she was due for some trouble."

"What about the words on the back windshield?"

"By her own admission, the neighborhood kids sometimes leave messages in the dust on her car."

Scott nodded, but he wasn't convinced.

Not that he blamed Rucynski for looking for an easy answer. He'd responded to too many of these same types of incidents

when he'd been in uniform, and usually the simplest explanation was the right one. But he'd also learned to trust his instincts, and his instincts were warning him that this might not be as straightforward as Rucynski wanted it to be.

"Is that going to be the conclusion of your report?"

"We'll ask around, see if any of the neighbors saw anyone or anything suspicious. But at this point, yeah, I can't see that it will play out any other way.

"I know that won't satisfy your…" Rucynski paused deliberately "…uh, client, but the truth isn't always what we want it to be."

Which was exactly the same point Scott had tried to make when he'd talked to Alicia about investigating her brother's case earlier, and he anticipated that she'd still be as resistant to it as she'd been then.

She responded immediately to his knock, and he saw that she'd changed out of the scrubs she'd been wearing earlier that day and into a pair of softly faded jeans and a simple scoop-neck T-shirt. Her hair was still in a braid, but her feet were now bare and her toenails, he noted with surprise, were painted blue and decorated with tiny white and yellow daisies.

Obviously there were layers to the woman he hadn't suspected, layers that he was curious to explore.

"What did Rucynski tell you?" she asked without preamble.

"Probably the same thing he told you—that it looks like a juvenile prank."

She folded her arms across her chest and paced across the threadbare carpet. There was an old—possibly even antique—couch against one wall, decorated with colorful pillows in various geometric shapes. Beside it was a newer-looking wing chair and ottoman. The coffee table looked sturdy, if scarred, and held a neat stack of magazines. Facing the couch was an ultra-modern entertainment unit of glass and aluminum that housed a small TV and modest stereo system, along with stacks of CDs and DVDs.

It was…eclectic, he decided. And yet somehow warm and appealing—like Alicia herself.

He turned his attention back to the woman who was still pacing.

The protective instincts that had sent him racing across town in response to her phone call rose up again and urged him to go to her, to wrap her in his arms and promise to take care of her. But he managed to resist the impulse, recognizing that holding her wouldn't just be inappropriate but potentially disastrous for his peace of mind. After only one meeting with the woman, he'd already found himself daydreaming about her. God help him if he touched her and found she was as soft and warm as he imagined her to be.

No, there could be no personal contact. He needed to remember that she was a client, off-limits, and to keep his distance. But that was tougher than he wanted to admit when she had her arms wrapped around her middle to disguise the fact that she was trembling.

“I can understand why this has shaken you—”

She turned abruptly to face him. “I’m not afraid of whoever slashed my tires.”

He frowned. Whoever had done that number on her car had been wielding a dangerous instrument. Hell, he was scared just thinking about the possibility that Alicia might have interrupted the culprit in the middle of his task and had the weapon used against her.

“I’m just furious that the cops think they can brush me off with statistics about the incidence of crime in this neighborhood.” She resumed her pacing, taking less than a dozen steps to move from one end of the room to the other, then pivoting on her heel to change direction.

“Rucynski assumed it was a prank at first glance and decided there was no need to dig any further.” She turned again, her eyes fairly sparking with fury as her gaze met his. “If those are the kind of cops who investigated my brother’s case, no wonder he’s in prison.”

He stepped into her path, forcing her to either stop or run into him. “Did you call me to complain about the apparent ineptitude of the police, or was there another reason?”

She huffed out a frustrated breath. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I just hate being spoken down to, and Rucynski did everything but pat my head.”

“He isn’t the most diplomatic cop I’ve ever known, but his instincts are usually good.”

“Well, I don’t believe for a minute that this was a random act of vandalism.”

“What do you think it was?”

“A threat—to stop me from looking into the charges against Joe. Think about it,” she said. “My car getting trashed the same day I hired you is just too coincidental.”

“You really believe there’s a connection?”

“It’s the only explanation that makes any sense,” she insisted.

“Did you tell anyone about our meeting this morning?” he asked.

She shook her head. “After I left your office, I went straight to work, and I’ve never talked to anyone there about my brother’s situation.”

“Was there anyone who knew about your plan to meet with me?”

“Just Jordan. And your secretary.”

And it was unlikely that either Jordan or Caroline would have shared that information with someone who could be responsible for the damage done to Alicia’s vehicle. Which, if this wasn’t a random act, forced him to consider another possibility—that Alicia had been followed.

Before he could ask any more questions, she glanced down at her watch, then turned away from him. “I’m sorry to drag you out here then have to take off,” she said. “But I’m already late and the kids will be wondering where I am.”

“How are you going to take off without any tires on your car?”

“I’ll call my mechanic to have it towed and take a cab to my brother’s place.”

“Call for the tow,” he said. “I’ll give you a ride home.”

Alicia was surprised by his offer—and tempted to decline.

She was a woman who prided herself on not needing a man for anything, but the truth was, she couldn’t help her brother on her own. She did need Scott’s help. And he’d already come through for her twice today. The first time when she’d shown up at his office without an appointment, and the second when she’d tracked him down on his cell phone to tell him about the incident with her car.

So she set her pride aside again and responded, “That would be great. Thanks.”

He waited while she called her mechanic and didn’t say a word or express the slightest hint of impatience when what should have been a two-minute conversation turned into a much longer one while Ernie pried the details of the situation from her and expressed indignation for her car’s plight.

“Sorry about that,” she said when she’d finally hung up the phone.

“Not a problem,” Scott said easily. “Are you ready to go now?”

She nodded and reached for her duffel bag at the same time he did. Their fingers brushed and she jolted at the contact, instinctively pulling her hand away as he said, “I’ve got it.”

She felt as if she should protest, but didn’t bother when she

saw how easily he slung the bag over his shoulder. The same bag she'd wrestled with to get it down the stairs to her car earlier, and then back up when it became obvious that she wasn't going anywhere in her own vehicle.

She followed him out the door, her mind moving ahead to the various tasks waiting for her at her brother's house.

Child care wasn't just cooking dinners and packing lunches, she'd soon realized. It was getting the kids out of the house in time for the school bus in the morning, then chauffeuring Lia to her piano lessons and ballet classes and Joey to his track-and-field practices and soccer games after school. There was also homework to oversee, tests to study for and bedtimes to enforce, all the while trying to ensure that the children were adjusting—as if anyone could adjust—to their father's absence.

Scott unlocked the passenger door of a sparkling powder-blue sportscar and tossed her bag into the back-seat before stepping back for her to slide in. She did so, almost sighing with pleasure as the butter-soft leather enfolded her in its embrace. He closed the door for her, then went around to take his seat behind the wheel.

As he turned the key in the ignition, the engine roared to life. His hand settled over the gearshift, his broad palm gently cupping the knob, his long fingers resting casually against the stick. He shifted gears and pulled away from the curb, the vehicle slipping smoothly into the stream of traffic.

Great hands, she thought, then tore her gaze away from the

man and focused on the car.

"I would imagine it's difficult for a private investigator to blend in driving something like this," she said.

"I have another car for blending," he told her. "This baby is for pure pleasure."

"I can imagine," she said, running a hand over the sleek contour of the dash. "Wow."

"That's exactly what I said the first time I saw her," he admitted.

"Her?"

He shrugged. "The most beautiful things in the world are female."

"And that includes a classic 1966 Corvette Stingray?"

"You know cars," he said, sounding surprised.

Now it was her turn to shrug. "My brother has a knack for anything with an engine, and I picked up a few things here and there from hanging around the garage with him when we were kids."

She fell silent, thinking about her brother and happier times. And she wished, more than anything, that he could be here with her now. He would love this car. More, he would love to be on his way home to be with his son and daughter instead of depending on her to take care of the children who meant the world to him.

"I'm guessing you picked up more than a few things," Scott said. "And I have to wonder how a woman who can appreciate a spectacular machine like this could be satisfied driving a tin

can on wheels."

"My little car has been getting me where I need to go for the past eight years," she told him.

"That doesn't answer my question."

"The answer is economics. My paycheck goes to rent, food, tuition, books and—every two weeks—a tank of gas."

"Tuition?"

She squirmed in her seat. She didn't usually talk about her schooling. In fact, no one other than her family and her supervisor at work even knew about the courses she was taking. "Med school," she admitted.

"Impressive."

"Have you requested the transcript from Joe's trial yet?" she asked, determined to move the focus of their conversation back to her brother's case.

"I left a message for the court reporter today, but she hasn't got back to me yet."

"Oh." Alicia wasn't really surprised, but she was disappointed.

"And I talked to Jordan," he continued. "He's going to get your brother to sign a release so he can give me copies of everything in his file. Then, when I know what evidence the court had, the names of the witnesses who testified and what they said, as well as everything your brother told his attorney, I'll be able to determine the best direction for my investigation."

She had been one of those witnesses, and she cringed at the memory of her appearance in court. She'd blamed Joe for not

taking the stand, but she'd realized—after the fact—that she'd made as big a mistake in choosing to testify. And when Scott read the transcript, he would know how badly she'd screwed up.

She was relieved when he turned onto Greenleaf Drive, as anxious to abandon the topic of the trial as conversation about med school. "It's the fourth house on the right."

She saw his eyebrows rise as he pulled into the driveway and noticed the plastic menagerie that lived in the front flower bed: the trio of faded pink flamingos, the banjo-strumming frog and flute-playing pig, and the cow wearing denim overalls and a straw hat.

"Interesting decorations," he said.

"Thanks." He hadn't turned off the engine, and she guessed that it was his intention to make a quick getaway. While there was a part of her that urged her to let him go, acknowledging that she'd intruded on his time enough already, there was another part—indoctrinated by her mother—that insisted she offer him a meal in appreciation of his trouble. "You'll stay for dinner, won't you?"

Before he could respond, she was out of the car and halfway across the front yard toward the neighbor's house.

"I just need to get Joey and Lia," she called over her shoulder to him when she heard the engine finally shut off. "They're next door with Mrs. Harbison. Then I'll be right back to get dinner started."

Scott had no intention of staying.

Although he appreciated the invitation—and he was more than tempted by the prospect of an actual home-cooked meal—he needed to remember that Alicia was a client. And sharing dinner with a client, when that client was a beautiful woman who stirred desires too long dormant, was dangerous—even with two children as chaperones.

Two children who were obviously surprised and none too pleased by his presence.

"Lia and Joey," Alicia told him, indicating her niece and nephew in turn. Then, to the kids, "This is Mr. Logan."

"So?" the boy asked.

Alicia's gaze narrowed on him. "So say hello."

"Hi," he muttered with obvious reluctance after another moment's pause.

"Hi," Scott said back, still wondering how to extricate himself from this awkward situation as Alicia opened a side door and led the way into the kitchen.

The little girl followed her aunt but kept her eyes—as dark and beautiful as Alicia's despite being redrimmed from crying—on him.

"You were late," she finally said accusingly.

"I was late," Alicia corrected her, laying her hand on the refrigerator door to keep it closed when she saw her nephew reaching for the handle.

"I'm going to start dinner now," she told Joey. "And I know

you had a snack at Mrs. H.'s, so you can wait twenty minutes to eat a proper meal."

Then, without missing a beat, she returned to the conversation she was having with her niece. "And I would have been even later if Mr. Logan hadn't given me a ride home."

But Lia clearly wasn't placated by this explanation. "You promised to be here when I got home from school."

"I know I did, but I had a flat tire on my car. And you know that if you ever get home and no one's here, you're supposed to go to Mrs. H.'s—just like you did today."

"But you promised." The little girl's eyes filled with tears again.

And Scott, who had almost no experience with kids and even less with female tears, felt for the child who had obviously dealt with too many broken promises of late.

"I'm sorry," Alicia said, immediately followed by, "Joey, come back here," to the boy who had snuck out of the room when he thought she wasn't looking.

"Okay," Lia responded, more than willing to forgive now that her feelings had been acknowledged.

Scott just stood back and watched Alicia handle the kids, impressed by the effortless way she anticipated their actions and responded to their needs. It occurred to him that this might be the perfect time to make his excuses and effect an escape. But he was afraid she'd call him to task the same way she'd done with her nephew's attempted defection.

“Any homework tonight?” Alicia asked, stroking a hand over the girl’s hair.

“Math, but Mrs. H. helped me with it.”

“Good, then you can go upstairs to practice the piano.”

“Okay.” And the child skipped off and up the stairs, her earlier displeasure already forgotten.

“What about you?” Alicia asked, turning her attention to the older brother who stood with his arms crossed and a scowl on his face.

“What?” her nephew asked.

“Do you have homework?” she prompted patiently.

The kid shrugged. “Some.”

“Did you do any at Mrs. H.’s?”

“Nah. Me and Randy were playing Nintendo.”

“Then you’d better get to your homework now.”

“But Class of the Titans is on TV.”

“You should have thought of that when you were playing Nintendo with Mrs. Harbison’s grandson instead of doing your homework.”

“Homework’s stupid,” he said.

“No it’s not, but you will be if you don’t do it.”

Joey rolled his eyes as he picked up his backpack and headed into the living room.

“Not in front of the TV,” Alicia told him.

“I can’t believe how much my life sucks,” the kid muttered as he changed course and carried his backpack into the dining

room.

"I can," Alicia responded evenly. "But it could be a lot worse—and will be if you don't start cooperating."

Scott was momentarily taken aback by her cavalier response, then realized she knew exactly what she was doing with each of the kids. Lia was obviously feeling uncertain and insecure and Alicia was giving her the comfort and reassurance she needed. Joey needed a firmer hand to prevent him from acting out the anger and frustration he was holding inside, and his aunt was making it clear that she was in charge and wasn't going to take any attitude from him.

Apparently the petite nurse had a lot more going for her than a pretty face and hot body—she understood these children, and was determined to help them adjust to the recent changes in their lives.

But who was helping her? he couldn't help but wonder.

And why did he suddenly feel the urge to plant himself firmly in her corner, to let her know she could count on him?

"Sorry about that," she said, turning back to him. "The kids are still having a difficult time adjusting to Joe's absence."

"I'd guess that's normal," he said.

She smiled wryly as she reached into the fridge, coming out with a package of steak and a bag of vegetables. "As if anything about the situation is normal."

"You're worried about them," he guessed.

"Of course." She found a glass cutting board and selected a

long knife from the butcher block on the counter, then began slicing the meat into thin strips. “Probably Joey more so than Lia, because he isn’t as open about his feelings as she is. She’s sad and she’s hurting, but she expresses her emotions—sometimes quite passionately—and gets over it. Joey keeps everything bottled up inside and I’m not sure that anything I say or do can help because, bottom line, I’m not his father.”

“Does he see his father?”

“He did last week.” She set a deep frying pan on the stove, drizzled some olive oil into it and turned on the burner beneath it. “I didn’t realize the intake process would take so long—more than four weeks—and that was the first chance we had to visit since he was transferred to Columbia River Detention Center.”

“How did it go?”

“Not good. Lia cried through most of the hour, Joey barely said two words, and Joe and I just stared at one another feeling helpless.”

The oil sizzled when she dumped the meat into the pan. “I wish I could believe it would get better, but I’m not sure that it will, and those kids have done nothing to deserve this.”

She dumped the board and knife into the sink, then turned on the tap and scrubbed her hands with soap and water. “Then again, I don’t believe Joe did anything to deserve his fate, either.”

She dried her hands on a towel, then found another board and knife and started slicing a red pepper into thin strips.

He watched her move around the kitchen, impressed by the

efficiency with which she worked, and glad that he was sitting here watching her make dinner instead of on his way back home.

He tried to remember the last time a woman had offered to cook for him and couldn't. He knew it had been more than two years because that was how long it had been since his ex-girlfriend moved out. And it had been a rare occasion for her to prepare a meal that didn't come ready-made for the microwave. She hadn't liked to cook and he'd understood that she didn't feel like hovering over a stove after spending ten or twelve hours at her job. And yet, here was Alicia, not only undertaking the task at the end of what he knew had been a long and difficult day, but making it look easy.

"I wasn't going to stay for dinner," he told her.

She smiled as she sliced briskly through a zucchini. "You have to eat, and I had to cook for myself and the kids, anyway."

"You look like you enjoy cooking."

"I do," she said, moving on to peel the carrots she'd set aside. "Even when I'm only cooking for myself, it relaxes me."

She took a couple of cans of soda from the fridge, offered him one. "I'm glad you decided to stay."

He noted that she started when their fingers brushed in the transfer, as she'd done when he'd reached for her bag back at her apartment. Was she just jittery? he wondered. Or was she also feeling the sparks generated by the energy between them?

"You didn't really give me a choice," he said, leaving the chemistry issue aside for now. "And maybe I should thank you

for that, because I would have gone home to a frozen dinner with only my TV for company."

She stepped away from him, turning to stir the meat and vegetables in the pan. "It's always more fun to share a meal with a friend than to dine alone."

He popped the top on his drink. "Are we going to be friends, Alicia?"

"I hope so."

Scott was starting to hope—against his better judgment—that friendship would only be the start.

Chapter Three

Alicia knew she had a tendency to talk too much when she was nervous, and she found herself rambling throughout the meal and even after. Scott Logan, on the other hand, seemed to be a man of few words. He answered the questions she asked and responded to statements directed to him, but he did so with a minimum of words and always managed to redirect the conversation back to her.

It was a disconcerting change for Alicia to sit across the table from a man who didn't regale her with stories designed to prove how interesting or important he was. Her most recent dating experiences had been with men who, though expressing an interest in her, were really more interested in themselves. She didn't know many who would have hung around to dine with two ill-behaved children and even fewer who would have stuck it out through after-dinner negotiations over TV shows and bedtimes. So she was more than a little surprised to return to the kitchen after running Lia's bath to discover that Scott Logan was not only still there but washing dishes.

Of course, this wasn't a date, so she really shouldn't compare the P.I. with the other men she'd dated. But she couldn't deny there was something about the image of a strong man with his hands immersed in sudsy water that made her heart skip a beat. Forget candlelight dinners and long-stemmed roses—a man who

willingly tackled household chores was the one who scored points with her.

"When I invited you to stay for dinner, I didn't expect you to help with the washing up."

"I don't mind," Scott said, wiping the cloth over another plate.

"Well, as much as I appreciate the effort, my mother would be appalled if I let an invited guest do my dishes." She nudged his hip with her own to push him aside so that she could take over.

Of course, the subtle hip check didn't even seem to register, except maybe in the glint of humor she saw in his dark eyes when he turned to meet her gaze. "In case you didn't notice, I'm a lot bigger than you."

"I noticed," she admitted. "But my brother taught me not to be afraid of someone's size. 'The bigger they are, the harder they fall,' he always told me."

"That might be true," Scott said. "But it would be easier for you to find a towel and dry these dishes instead of battling with me over washing them."

She shrugged as she retrieved a clean towel from under the sink. "If you really want to help, I'm not going to refuse."

"But it goes against your grain, doesn't it? And not just because of your mother would disapprove."

"What do you mean?"

"You strike me as a woman who feels compelled to do everything for herself, maybe just to prove to yourself that you can, or maybe because there hasn't been anyone around to lend

a hand."

His words struck painfully close to the truth. "Were you a psychologist before you became a private investigator?" she asked.

One side of his mouth quirked up in a half smile. "No."

"That's right, you were a cop," she said, remembering what Jordan had told her.

"Yeah, but my father's a psychologist."

"And you think that gives you license to perform an amateur analysis of my character?"

"No," he denied. "But I am curious."

"About psychology?"

"About you," he said. "About how a woman who already juggles a full-time job and med school ended up with legal guardianship of her brother's children."

"He asked," she said simply. "And there was no one else."

"Their mother isn't around?"

"Joe was granted full custody in the divorce," she said. "That should tell you something about Yvette."

"Grandparents?"

She shook her head. "Yvette cut all ties with her parents a long time ago. I don't even think the Solomons have ever seen their grandchildren."

"What about your parents?"

"They died almost four years ago."

"I'm sorry," he said sincerely.

“There was a fire in the restaurant they owned. They lived upstairs. I know it probably sounds weird, but I actually found comfort in the fact that they were together. They’d been married forty-two years and devoted to one another for all that time.”

She slid open the cutlery drawer, dropping in forks and knives as she dried them.

“They were the reason I got interested in reproductive technology,” she continued. “Because my mom suffered through so many miscarriages, both before and after Joe and I were born.

“She and my dad always said they wanted a dozen kids, but it took a lot of years before she finally had Joe. Then, when she had me less than a year and a half later, they thought their luck had turned around.

“But I was the end of the line, and although we never had reason to doubt how much they loved us, we knew they were both saddened by the loss of the other babies she couldn’t carry to term.”

“So now you help other women have the families they want,” he said.

She nodded. “Not all of our patients get the results they want, but for those who do…well, it really is a miracle.”

“And for those who don’t?”

“It’s just one more heartbreak,” she admitted.

“It must be hard dealing with those emotional highs and lows.”

His insight and understanding surprised her, and made it impossible for her to hold back. “A while ago, I was reprimanded

by one of the doctors who caught mecrying in the staff room. She said that tears were unprofessional and I had no business working at the clinic if I couldn't hold myself together."

"That was harsh."

"Dr. Logan thought so, too. He—" She narrowed her gaze on him. "Dr. Jake Logan?"

"My brother," he admitted.

"I should have guessed," she said. Jake was a little taller and Scott's shoulders were a little wider, but otherwise the physical resemblance was striking.

"You were telling me about crying in the staff room," he reminded her.

"And your brother came in and interrupted Dr. Morningstar's lecture to tell me that, in his opinion, compassion was more important than professionalism. Then he handed me a box of tissues and steered Dr. Morningstar outside so I could finish crying in peace."

She allowed herself a smile before admitting, "I cry a lot—tears of sadness and despair when a procedure fails, tears of happiness and gratitude when one of my patients experiences the joy of giving birth."

He rinsed the stir-fry pan, then pulled the plug. "Does Dr. Morningstar still give you a hard time about that?"

"She transferred to another clinic a couple of months ago—just after the Sanders adoption case hit the headlines."

"That was a nasty one, wasn't it?" He wiped around the inside

of the sink as the water swirled down the drain.

"I'm not sure it's over yet." She put the pan away and folded the towel. "Now Robbie Logan—" She paused.

"My cousin," he told her.

"Okay. Robbie has resigned and apparently disappeared, and there are still rumors that the agency might close."

Despite her boss's reassurances that they would weather this latest scandal, Alicia was concerned. Not just for the patients who desperately needed the hope the clinic offered, but for herself personally. If the Children's Connection shut down, she'd lose not just the job she loved, but her means of supporting herself and her brother's children.

"I thought LJ's campaign had turned things around."

"LJ?"

"The PR guy who was brought in from New York to help spin things for the media—LJ Logan," he explained. "Another brother of mine."

"How many of you are there?" she wondered aloud.

"Four. LJ's the oldest, then there's Ryan—he's an architect—then Jake, and myself."

"Four," she echoed. "I'll bet you kept your mother hopping."

"She blamed us for every one of her gray hairs."

She smiled. "What is it like, being part of a big family?"

"It's crowded," he said. "And noisy. But it's fun, too."

"You're close to everyone?"

"Mostly," he said, and left it at that.

“Joe and I have always been close,” she said, turning on the tap to fill the coffeepot with water, then dumping it into the reservoir. “And now—” she shook her head “—I just can’t believe any of this is happening.”

He didn’t offer any platitudes, for which she was grateful. There was nothing anyone could say that would make her current situation any easier to accept. There was no way anyone could understand what it was like for her brother to be locked away in prison, knowing he shouldn’t be there.

Still, she couldn’t stop herself from asking, “What would you do—if it was one of your brothers in jail?”

Scott started to shrug off the question. After all, he knew his brothers, and he knew that none of them would ever end up in the kind of situation Joe Juarez was in. Except he realized that Alicia felt the same way about her brother as he did about his, and that was why she was such a passionate advocate for his cause.

He also knew, from his years on the police force, that human beings were inherently volatile and anyone was capable of almost anything given the right motivation.

Could he imagine LJ smashing the window of an electronics store to lift a new stereo system? Or Ryan going door-to-door to scam people out of their savings in the name of home improvements that would never happen? Or Jake stealing cars to sell on the black market overseas? Of course not—the idea of any of his brothers involved in such criminal activity was

ridiculous. On the other hand, he didn't doubt that they were all capable of inflicting serious bodily harm on anyone who threatened someone they cared about.

"I'd do exactly what you're doing," he finally responded to Alicia's question. "And leave no stone unturned in trying to prove his innocence—or at least understand why he'd done whatever it was that landed him in jail."

"Joe didn't take the engine or those plans."

"I know you believe that, and you might be right. But maybe you should think about what circumstances might have forced him into a situation where he decided to take them."

"Joe wouldn't sacrifice his integrity under any circumstances."

"What if his integrity demanded he do it?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if he believed the emissions of this alternative fuel were carcinogenic?"

"That isn't what happened here."

"What if something like that did happen?"

"Then he would have urged the company to scrap the project." She handed him a mug of coffee. "Cream? Sugar?"

He shook his head. "No, thanks. And what would Joe do if the company refused?"

She frowned as she sat across from him, obviously considering possibilities she hadn't before and not appreciating the implications. "Can we stick with the facts as they exist?"

"Okay," he said. "What we know is that Joe had taken the

prototype and the engine plans home to make some alterations on them over the weekend. On Saturday morning, he couldn't find them.

"According to the statement he later gave to police, he tore the house apart looking for them and, when he still couldn't locate them, put in a call to Gene Russo, his boss. A review of his phone records confirms that the call was made, although he didn't leave a message on Russo's machine."

"Of course he didn't leave a message," she said, a little defensively. "He wanted to talk to his boss in person so he went to track him down—"

"—at the garage," Scott interrupted to continue, reminding her that this was his recitation of facts. "Russo went back to Joe's house with him and they called the police from there."

"And Joe admitted to Mr. Russo and the police that he'd taken the engine and plans home on the weekend, which he wouldn't have done if he'd had something to hide."

That had occurred to him, too. But he'd worked a lot of cases where suspects had unexpectedly admitted to incriminating activities, and he'd found such confessions usually allowed the investigation to be wrapped up quickly. Which is exactly what had happened here.

Had it been wrapped up too quickly?

That was a question he couldn't answer without more information and a close look at the transcripts.

"Other than the fact that Joe was the last person in possession

of the items that were stolen, what evidence did the prosecution have?"

"There was a five-thousand-dollar deposit made to Joe's bank account on Friday before the plans went missing."

"Five thousand?" It seemed a paltry amount to risk prison for, but he'd known people who did crazier things for less.

"Yes," she said. "And, yes, Joe had unpaid bills."

"What kind of bills?"

"Outstanding medical expenses from Lia's tonsil-lectomy in the fall."

"How much?"

"He's been making regular payments, but there's still about two thousand owing."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary. Just the mortgage, household utilities, that kind of thing."

"Credit card bills?"

She shook her head. "He didn't carry a balance on his cards."

"Did he gamble—horses, slots, stock market?"

"No."

"Do drugs?"

Her jaw tightened. "No."

"What did he do?"

"He worked and spent time with his kids."

"Did he have a girlfriend?" he pressed.

"No. He dated occasionally, but no one seriously or

exclusively."

"Who else had a key to the house?"

"Me."

"Anyone else?"

"No."

"Not even Joey?"

"No. But he knows there's a spare hidden in the ceramic frog on the back step." She brightened at the implications of that. "Where almost anyone could have found it and come into the house to take the prototype and plans."

"Anyone could have," he agreed. "But there's no evidence that anyone did."

She sighed. "You're right. I'm grasping at straws."

"What did Joe say when the prosecutor asked him about the money?"

Alicia pushed away from the table and went to refill her mug with coffee. "Nothing."

"He didn't answer the question?"

"He didn't testify," she admitted.

"Why not?"

"That seems to be the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question."

Or maybe, Scott couldn't help but think, in this case it was only a five-thousand-dollar question.

Alicia listened to the metal doors clang shut behind her and fought to suppress the instinctive shudder that ran through her

every time she heard the sound. She wondered if she'd ever get used to it and desperately hoped not. She didn't want Joe to be stuck in this prison long enough for her to get used to it.

She followed the guard to the visitors' room. It was mostly empty at this time of day, which filled her with both relief and sadness. She felt claustrophobic enough in here without the press of dozens of bodies around her, and yet, she knew that visits from family and friends were the only bright lights these men had, their only connection to the outside world.

She wouldn't have expected to feel any empathy for these convicted criminals, except that her brother was now one of them. He spent his days locked up in this prison with no one for company but the other inmates who lived behind these bars and the guards who monitored their every move.

The thought made her stomach clench. Her brother didn't deserve to be here. And yet, he was here, and she was scared to death that he wouldn't be able to survive without the oppressive environment crushing his spirit.

Joe had always been a kind person, a gentle soul, a dreamer. He believed the best in people and always looked on the bright side, even when life threw him a curveball. And life had thrown him a lot of those, starting with Yvette's unexpected pregnancy when they were both barely out of high school.

Joe had immediately proposed, wanting to marry her and give their baby a family. He hadn't listened to the naysayers who'd warned of the difficult road ahead because he'd believed that

their love was strong enough to triumph over whatever obstacles they might face.

And for a while, it looked as though he was right. Joe Jr. was born seven months after they married, then Lia came along four years later. During that time, Joe had worked two and three jobs to provide for his young family. When Yvette started making noises about feeling restless, Joe had done everything he could to make her happy, fought with everything he had to keep their marriage together. In the end, he'd let her go because it was what was best for their children.

Yvette had broken Joe's heart. Alicia knew it because she'd been there for him when his world was falling apart and when he'd started to put it back together again.

She'd been the first person he called when he was hired by Russo's Dirt Devils Racing Team. He'd been as excited as a kid, thrilled with the challenges and opportunities the job would present, and overjoyed to have a steady paycheck that would keep Lia in ballet slippers and allow him to get Joey that computer he'd been eyeing.

He'd worked hard for and with the team. He'd taken pride in their accomplishments while continuing to look ahead at what they could do to perform even better. And he'd been thrilled to be part of their secret project.

There was no way he would have compromised the work. No way he would ever have stolen the prototype or the plans. And she was furious that anyone who knew her brother could even

suspect him of such crimes.

The injustice of it all continued to gnaw away at her as she moved over to the table she'd started to think of as her "usual" table and sat in the hard wooden chair waiting for the door at the other end of the room to open.

A few minutes later it finally did, and Joe was led inside.

He looked tired, was her first thought, and thin. He'd lost weight in the few weeks he'd been incarcerated, weight that he couldn't afford to lose from his already slender frame. And the color had faded from his cheeks, leaving his skin pale, almost pasty.

He was little more than a shadow of the vibrant man she loved so dearly, and it broke her heart to see him like this after only five weeks in jail. How could he possibly survive five years?

"Hey, Ali." He managed a smile when she rose to give him a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek before returning to her seat in accordance with the strictly enforced rules of visitation. "I wasn't expecting to see you today."

But she could tell that he was pleased by her visit, grateful for the interruption of his mundane routine.

"I'm on my lunch break so I can't stay long," she told him. "But there was something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Are the kids okay?" he asked, immediately concerned.

"Joey and Lia are fine," she said quickly, anxious to reassure him even while she recognized the falseness of her assurance.

Of course they weren't fine—they were going through hell

trying to deal with the repercussions of their father being in jail. On the other hand, there wasn't any kind of medical emergency that she suspected Joe was worried about.

"Okay." He exhaled shakily. "Good."

"How about you, Joe?" she asked gently. "Are you okay?"

"Sure," he responded, though not very convincingly.

"I'm worried about you."

"Don't," he said. "Worrying about me in here isn't going to change anything."

"I know," she admitted. "But I can't help it. And I can't help feeling guilty for living my life while yours has been put on hold."

"Joey and Lia are my life, Ali. And because of you, they're able to move on with their lives. I can't tell you how much it means to me that you're there for them."

"It would mean more to them to have their father with them."

He winced as the barb struck home. "Dammit, Ali. You know this wasn't my choice."

"Then why didn't you testify, Joe? Why didn't you take the stand to tell your side of the story?"

"Haven't we been through this already?"

"Not really, because you always refused to answer the question."

"Telling my side of the story wouldn't have changed anything," he told her. "Not without proof that someone else took those plans."

"Then that's what we're going to find."

“What are you talking about?” he asked warily.

“I’ve hired a private investigator.”

“Why?”

She was stunned. “Because you shouldn’t be locked up for a crime you didn’t commit.”

“The jury convicted me,” he reminded her.

“Because the jury didn’t have all of the evidence.”

“Let it go, Ali.”

She frowned. “I thought you’d be pleased by this.”

“I’ll be pleased when my sentence is over and I can be home with my family again.”

“Well, hopefully Scott Logan will make that happen sooner rather than later.”

“Who?”

“The investigator I hired on the recommendation of your lawyer,” she told him.

“Jordan gave you his name?”

She nodded. “Because he believes, as I do, that you were wrongly convicted.”

“I can’t afford a private investigator,” Joe said softly.

“Have I asked you for any money?”

“You can’t afford it, either,” he reminded her. “You’ve got your courses to pay for.”

As if she could go to medical school while she was working full-time and caring for her brother’s children. Maybe becoming a doctor was her lifelong dream, but she could hardly pursue her

own self-interests while her family was in such turmoil.

"He wants to meet with you," she said, ignoring his comment.

Joe didn't say anything.

"Which means that you need to put him on your visitor list."

"I don't see what good it will do. I can't tell him anything that I haven't already told you."

"Will you do it anyway?" she asked softly. "Please."

He sighed. "I'll do it, but not because I think he'll actually find anything. Only because you do so much and ask for so little in return."

She managed a smile. "Thank you."

She didn't care about his reasons so long as she got the results she wanted, and she was trusting Scott Logan to get them for her.

Joe felt his cheeks burn with shame as he walked away from the table where Alicia remained sitting. Prison rules required that visitors stay seated while the inmate was returned to his cell. He hated her seeing him like this, locked in a cage, unable to move without a security guard shadowing his every step.

He didn't need to look back to know that she was watching. She had always watched his back, always stood firm in his corner. She wasn't just his sister; she was his unwavering champion, and his closest friend.

And every day since this nightmare had started, he'd thanked God that she was on his side. She was the first person he'd called when he was arrested, the one person he'd always been able to

count on, the only person he trusted with the children who owned his heart.

That thought brought a pang, sharp and deep, as did every thought of Joey and Lia.

He'd made his own choices, and he couldn't pretend otherwise. But he'd never imagined that he'd be torn away from them like this, or that every minute away from them would tear him up inside. But even if he'd known then what he knew now, he wouldn't have changed anything. He couldn't.

He'd done what he'd needed to do to protect them. Yet he wasn't naive enough to believe the decisions he'd made would leave them unscathed. They were just children, after all. Children who had lived the last five years without their mother and who now, for all intents and purposes, had lost their father, too.

He worried about Joey, his angry and strong-willed son who was balanced on that shaky precipice between childhood and adulthood, a boy in so many ways, a man in too many others. And Lia, his beautiful little princess and the light of his life, who always led with her heart despite the bruises it suffered too frequently and easily.

He swallowed around the tightness in his throat and stared straight ahead in defiance of the tears that burned his eyes, taking comfort, scant though it was, in the knowledge that his children had Alicia and each other.

Joey and Lia might bicker and fight as siblings tended to do, but they would stand together when it mattered. As he and Alicia

had always stood together.

Only now they were standing on opposite sides of a prison wall.

As he waited for the door of his cell to open, he forced that thought from his mind.

Because he knew that Alicia couldn't love Joey and Lia any more if they were her own children and would protect them as if they were her own, he felt some measure of comfort.

He also felt guilt. Because although he'd trusted her with his children, he hadn't trusted her with the one thing she'd been asking for since his arrest.

The truth.

Chapter Four

Scott wasn't the type of man to be preoccupied by thoughts of a woman. But as he made his way toward CRDC through Friday afternoon traffic to visit Joe Juarez, he found himself thinking about Alicia instead of the job she'd hired him to do.

His mind circled back to the one thought that had plagued him throughout the day: he shouldn't have stayed for dinner.

There was a part of him that doubted the wisdom of accepting her as a client, but he knew the real problem was his inability to remember she was a client.

When he'd left the police force and been offered a position at his friend's investigation firm, he'd chosen to specialize in surveillance because it was a job that didn't require much interaction with others and afforded even less opportunity for small talk. In his work, a client was a name on a contract and a corresponding number on a file. A client was not—or at least never had been before—a stunningly attractive woman with fathom-less dark eyes, temptingly full lips, shapely mouthwatering curves and the soft and lyrical voice of an angel.

Yeah, dinner had definitely been a mistake.

And then he'd compounded the error by staying to help with dishes and drink coffee. The next thing he knew it was after ten o'clock, Alicia was trying to stifle a yawn, and he was thinking that he needed to go so she could get to bed. Except that thinking

about Alicia in bed was another mistake, because he could all too easily picture himself right there with her.

Maybe it wasn't so surprising that he was attracted to her. After all, he was a man and she was…a goddess, he decided, for lack of a better description.

And if he'd met her at a different time and under different circumstances, he might have been tempted to test the attraction he felt, see if it was reciprocated, maybe indulge in the kind of steamy affair Darlene had recommended. But circumstances weren't different, and right now Alicia Juarez probably wasn't looking to further complicate her already complicated life.

Which was a damn shame.

In any event, she'd hired him to do a job and he needed to focus his efforts on doing that job.

But what would happen if he uncovered evidence that incriminated rather than exculpated her brother?

He frowned as he steered into the parking lot of Columbia River Detention Center, certain that such a result would ensure he never saw the inside of Alicia's bedroom.

Although he was inclined to believe that Joe Juarez was somehow involved in the crime of which he'd been convicted, he was keeping an open mind until he had solid evidence that pointed in one direction or the other. In the meantime, he was very interested in hearing what the man himself had to say about the events that had put him behind bars.

He was surprised when the first thing Joe said, after

the introductions had been made, was, “You must be well-connected.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I barely finished filling out the paperwork to add your name to my visitor list, and here you are.”

Scott shrugged. “I called the superintendent to inquire if the documentation had been filed and he expedited the process.”

“The superintendent?” Joe whistled in mock incredulity.

“Well, I see your son comes by his attitude honestly enough.”

The other man’s eyes narrowed. “You know Joey?”

“We met last night.”

“Ali didn’t mention that.”

“No?”

Joe just watched him for a long moment before asking, “How do you know Jordan Hall?”

“His sister is married to my cousin.”

Joe snorted. “Is that supposed to be a recommendation?”

“Take it any way you want.”

“I want to know if you’re any good or if my sister wasted her money hiring you.”

“Which possibility bothers you more?” Scott asked.

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