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**Vintage** INTRIGUE

# **The Cradle Will Fall**

**MAGGIE PRICE**

# **Maggie Price**

## **The Cradle Will Fall**

### **Аннотация**

To: Sergeant Grace McCall-Fox  
From: Police Chief Berry  
The only daughter of our most powerful senator has recently been murdered and her newborn child kidnapped. You and FBI special agent Mark Santini will pose as a childless couple desperate to adopt and bring the suspect into custody—before another murder occurs. I realize you and Mark have a past together and that this could complicate the assignment. It is imperative that you keep up the facade of happily married lovers at all times, but be careful not to let desire cloud your senses. Close quarters could lead to shared passion and searing attraction—and greater risk to your lives.

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## CONFIDENTIAL MEMO

Badge No. 1113: Grace McCall-Fox

Rank: Sergeant

Skill/Expertise: Cool-headed while working under cover, and possesses an innate (and useful) ability to charm.

Reason Chosen for Assignment: Her serene, angelic appearance inspires trust in targeted suspects—but may also awaken the passion of her partner and ex-lover, the FBI special agent in charge of the case.

Mark Santini—Federal Bureau of Investigation

Rank: Special Agent

Skill/Expertise: Top hunter in the Bureau's Crimes Against Children Unit, a cause near to his heart.

Reason Chosen for Assignment: Legendary for his captures of child abusers and killers, and for keeping himself closed to emotion. Will partnering with his old flame lead to a change of heart?

Dear Reader,

Once again, we invite you to experience the romantic excitement that is the hallmark of Silhouette Intimate Moments. And what better way to begin than with Downright Dangerous, the newest of THE PROTECTORS, the must-read miniseries by Beverly Barton? Bad-boy-turned-bodyguard Rafe Devlin is a hero guaranteed to win heroine Elsa Leone's heart—and yours.

We have more miniseries excitement for you with Marie Ferrarella's newest CAVANAUGH JUSTICE title, Dangerous

Games, about a detective heroine joining forces with the hero to prove his younger brother's innocence, and *The Cradle Will Fall*, Maggie Price's newest **LINE OF DUTY** title, featuring ex-lovers brought back together to find a missing child. And that's not all, of course. Reader favorite Jenna Mills returns with *Crossfire*, about a case of personal protection that's very personal indeed. Nina Bruhns is back with a taste of *Sweet Suspicion*. This FBI agent hero doesn't want to fall for the one witness who can make or break his case, but his heart just isn't listening to his head. Finally, meet the Undercover Virgin who's the heroine of Becky Barker's newest novel. When a mission goes wrong and she's on the run with the hero, she may stay under cover, but as for the rest...!

Enjoy them all, and be sure to come back next month for six more of the best and most exciting romance novels around, right here in *Silhouette Intimate Moments*.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Leslie J. Wainger", with a long, sweeping horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Leslie J. Wainger  
Executive Editor

# **The Cradle Will Fall**

## **Maggie Price**



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# MAGGIE PRICE

turned to crime at the age of twenty-two. That's when she went to work at the Oklahoma City Police Department. As a civilian crime analyst, she evaluated suspects methods of operation during the commission of robberies and sex crimes, and developed profiles on those suspects. During her tenure at OCPD, Maggie stood in lineups, snagged special assignments to homicide task forces, established procedures for evidence submittal, even posed as the wife of an undercover officer in the investigation of a fortune-teller.

While at OCPD, Maggie stored up enough tales of intrigue, murder and mayhem to keep her at the keyboard for years. The first of those tales won the Romance Writers of America's Golden Heart Award for Romantic Suspense.

Maggie invites her readers to contact her at 5208 W. Reno, Suite 350, Oklahoma City, OK 73127-6317, or on the Web at <http://members.aol.com/magprice>.

To white knights...

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# Chapter 1

At five minutes to five, Sergeant Grace McCall-Fox limped into the Oklahoma City PD's Youth and Family Services squad room, feeling as old as her undercover disguise made her look. She had a jagged hole in her right support stocking, put there during the day's last arrest when she used her knee to force an uncooperative juvie to kiss pavement while she cuffed him. One pocket on the tan wool coat she'd scored at a thrift store sale had gotten ripped in the struggle and small pebbles had somehow wedged into both toes of the prison-matron-looking lace-ups she'd borrowed from her grandmother's closet. Her cheeks were chapped from the hours she'd spent trolling the frigid shopping mall parking lot; the gray streaks she'd sprayed on her raven-black hair had turned sticky the minute snow had begun falling. Her right arm ached from having been nearly jerked from its socket by several wannabe purse snatchers who thought they'd make easy prey of an elderly woman out doing her Christmas shopping.

Instead of a fragile senior citizen, they'd encountered a slim, petite, thirty-year-old cop who'd dropped them on their collective butts in one smooth move.

"McCall!"

The booming voice pulled Grace's gaze across the squad room to the tall, gray-haired man leaning out an office door.

“Sir?”

“I need to see you,” Lieutenant David Kelson said. “Now,” he added, before stepping back into his office.

Grace dropped her vinyl decoy purse on her desk, pulled off her coat and gold wire-rims with nonprescription lenses. Thinking Kelson might want to review the plan on her current undercover op, she snagged the file, then wove her way around the scattering of city-issue metal desks, mostly vacant this late in the day.

Through the wedge of the open door she saw that Kelson was now seated at his desk, his attention focused on the paper in his hand.

Gripping the file, Grace smoothed a palm down the baggy gray dress she'd bought at the same time as her coat.

“Sir?” she asked.

Kelson glanced up. “Come in, McCall.” Like everyone, he used the shortened version of her hyphenated last name. “How'd things go today at the mall?”

“The team took down four juvie purse snatchers and three auto burglars. We're hoping to nab more tomorrow.”

“That happens, it'll be without you. The FBI has asked for your assistance on a case. Consider yourself on special assignment.”

“Yes, sir.” She arched a brow. “What sort of assignment?”

Kelson rose. “I'll let the agent in charge brief you.” The drift of her lieutenant's gaze across her shoulder gave her the first indication of another presence in the office. “I understand you

two have worked together?”

“I’m looking forward to teaming with you again, Grace.”

She went utterly still at the sound of Mark Santini’s deep, rich voice coming from behind her. A voice from her past. A voice whose owner had continued to haunt her over the span of six years, even though she’d loved and married another man during that time.

Spine stiff, she forced herself to turn. And felt everything slip out of focus when her gaze met familiar eyes so deeply brown it was impossible to see a boundary between pupil and iris.

Oblivious that the earth had just tilted beneath her feet, Kelson retrieved his overcoat, then moved around the desk. “Sorry I can’t stick around, Agent Santini,” he said, offering Mark his hand. “Like I said, I’m due to meet my wife at a Christmas party.”

“No problem. I had hoped to get here earlier, but cutting through red tape to get that court order held me up. I’ll brief Sergeant McCall on the case so she and I can hit the ground running in the morning.”

“Use my office as long as you need.” The lieutenant turned to Grace. “Agent Santini has cleared your assignment through the chief’s office.” Kelson snagged the paper he’d been reading when she walked in, handed it to her. “Here’s a memo to you from the chief that makes your assignment official. Keep me updated.”

“Yes, sir.” Tucking the paper into the file folder, Grace watched her boss cross the office and walk out, closing the door behind him. Wishing she was also on the other side of that

barrier, she pulled in a breath and glanced back at Mark. A good head taller than herself, he looked down at her, his gaze slowly traveling the length of her—from gray-sprayed hair to prison-matron shoes—with a few layovers.

“Elderly is an interesting look for you, Grace.”

“It fools a lot of juvie purse snatchers,” she said, and struggled for additional words that wouldn’t come.

Physically, Special Agent Mark Santini had changed some in six years. His hair, as thick and black as her own, was still combed straight back, but it was cut shorter now, and silver had begun to salt the temples. The planes and angles of his face were leaner, sharper, and circles under his eyes evidenced lost sleep, yet the man was still down-to-the-ground gorgeous. Always a consummate clotheshorse, his black silk suit was tailored and expensive. But the coat hung somewhat loose off his broad shoulders, and the pants were a little baggy, as though he’d lost weight. Instead of making him look gaunt, however, the effect created an approachable, relaxed appearance.

Grace was anything but relaxed as she clenched the file folder against her breasts. Mark stood so close she could have reached out and touched him. Touched the man who’d swept into her life with a startling magnetism that soon had her considering giving up her cozy, settled world. And even though she hadn’t, he had remained a ghostly presence that had nearly destroyed her relationship with Ryan Fox.

She had loved Ryan with all her heart. To the depths of her

soul. Just the thought of the doubts he had suffered because of her reckless behavior over Mark had her heart shattering all over again.

She did her best to shove away the quick, instinctive tug of resentment that accompanied the thought. What had happened years ago had been her doing, not Mark's. He had no idea she'd gone temporarily insane and made the decision to toss away her lifelong dream and meld her life with his. No idea that the history they'd shared had shaken the foundation of her subsequent marriage.

"How are you, Grace?" His voice was all business, devoid of emotion.

"Fine," she said, using the same impersonal tone. "And you?" Strange, she thought, that two people who had been such passionate lovers could transform into nothing more than polite acquaintances.

"Busy. Eternally busy." He studied her with calm observation, his expression unreadable. "I was sorry to hear about your husband's death. I sent a card. I hope you got it."

"I did. Thank you." She stood perfectly still, picturing the masses of flowers and mountains of cards that had filled their home after Ryan died in the line of duty.

Deliberately she shifted to settle the file folder in a nearby visitor chair. She used the moment, a much-needed moment, while her back was to Mark to steady herself. She had no desire to revisit that time three years ago when she'd lost so much.

Schooling her expression, she turned to face him. A whiff of the familiar spicy male tang of his aftershave reached her. A quick clutching in her belly came and went. Dammit, what man wore the same aftershave six years running?

Lifting a hand to her throat, she settled her fingers against the point where her pulse hammered as if she'd just chased down a fleeing felon. Her body was simply reacting to a known stimulus, she told herself. Nothing more.

Wanting to steer the subject away from herself, she said, "I don't doubt you're busy, considering all the positive publicity you've garnered for the Bureau the past couple of years. Clearing the Boston Baby case must have made you the star of the Crimes Against Children Unit."

He slid one hand into the pocket of his trousers. As always, he looked as though he could emerge from a mass murder crime scene with an incredibly relaxed air. "Several other CACU agents also had a hand in solving that case. I'm just the one they chose to put out front at the press conferences."

No kidding, Grace thought. She felt sure he'd been assigned the spot in the limelight on that case because he fit the profile of what the media thought an FBI Special Agent should look like: tall and athletic, with a coolly handsome face and dark hair. Perfectly groomed. Santini possessed the totally centered grace of a natural-born hunter, who looked dashing both on television and in print.

And in person, she admitted grudgingly. His compelling looks

had attracted her like iron filings to a magnet when she'd first laid eyes on him six years ago. Then Mark had worked at the Bureau's Oklahoma City office. She'd just been promoted to detective and had been assigned to the same multi-agency task force as he. The respect they developed for each other's professional abilities quickly broadened to friendship, and they became lovers, drawn together by a passion that Grace had often sensed seemed stronger than both of them.

Soon after that, Mark snagged the transfer he'd coveted to the CACU, based at Quantico, Virginia. And then he was gone—a man with no roots, no ties, infinitely comfortable with his lone-wolf existence. How different her life with Ryan would have been if she'd stuck to her guns after declining Mark's offer to move to Virginia with him.

Now here was Santini, intending to work with her again. He'd do whatever job he'd come to do, then be gone. And never once look back. Like before.

This time, though, experience had taught her the value of keeping her priorities straight.

She gave her watch a meaningful look. "Mark, if you could give me a quick rundown on your case, I'd appreciate it. I have family business to take care of this evening that I can't put off."

A look crossed his face, a quick shadow that disappeared in one hammer beat of her heart. "How is your family, Grace?"

"Everyone's fine." She paused, wondering if his reaction was displeasure over her refusal to drop everything and give him more

time tonight. “Josh, Nate and Bran have all received promotions over the past two years. Morgan and Carrie are on the force now. Engaged to OCPD cops.”

His mouth curved. “Is there any member of the McCall clan who isn’t in law enforcement?”

“Mom and Gran are the holdouts.”

“They get points for marrying cops.”

“Yes.” Even as her lover, Mark had shared next to nothing about his past, saying only that his childhood had been wretched. He had never spoken of his parents. As far as she knew, he had no other family so there was no point in asking about the Santini clan. Still, things might have changed. She glanced at his left hand, saw he wore no ring. “What about you?”

He arched a dark brow. “I haven’t married a cop.”

And because she couldn’t stop herself, she countered, “Brenda wasn’t a cop.”

“Brenda.” He narrowed his eyes, as if trying to recall the blond, gorgeous, long-stemmed White House staffer Grace could still picture perfectly. “I haven’t married anyone. The job doesn’t allow much time for a personal life.”

The job, Grace thought, that he was bound to the way he would never be bound to a woman. Mark had made no secret that as far as he was concerned, his priorities lay with whatever case he was working at the time. Always the case. Because of that mind-set, she was relatively sure he considered what had happened between them water under the bridge, but for her it



had meant much more.

Just then his pager chirped. He pulled it off his belt, checked the display, then pressed his fingers to his eyes.

“Problem?” Grace asked.

“A call about a child-abduction case I’m working in California,” he said, clipping the unit back on his belt. “My gut tells me it just turned into a homicide.”

“If you’re working it, why aren’t you there?”

“Because my boss called late last night to tell me the director wanted me here. I hopped a plane from California first thing this morning.” He lifted a shoulder. “You know how it is, Grace. In law enforcement, you do what you’re told. Go where you’re sent.”

“That’s why I spent the day cruising a mall parking lot in granny garb,” she commented, then wrapped her arms around her waist. “So, why don’t you brief me on the case that prompted the director of the FBI to send you back to Oklahoma City? And why you went to my chief and specifically requested I work with you?”

“The case is a political hot potato that involves a young woman’s death. Her father has a lot of power, and he’s throwing his weight around, so here I am.” Mark eased back the starched cuff of his shirt to check his watch. “Since I need to call California and you don’t have a lot of time right now, I’ll hold off briefing you until morning. There’s nothing we can do on the case tonight, anyway. As for your other question, I contacted OCPD because I learned long ago it smoothes things considerably to

attach someone from local law enforcement to any investigation I work. The reason I requested you is simple. I need a local cop who's not only good but smart. Someone I can trust not to muck up a sensitive case."

"Nice to know you have such faith in my abilities."

"I've always had faith in you, Grace. Personally and professionally."

Since he had never opened up enough to tell her how he felt about her, that was news.

"We have a subpoena to serve at eight in the morning," he added. "We need to get together earlier so I can bring you up to speed. You can meet me at my hotel at seven, or I'll come by your place and pick you up. Your choice."

Grace slicked the tip of her tongue over her dry lips. She was a great believer that the home team held the advantage. Considering that her stomach was grinding and her nerves had settled into perpetual vibration mode, meeting in the morning on her turf was preferable.

"My home." She gave him the address, then retrieved her file folder off the chair. When she straightened and turned, Mark took a step toward her. Up close, the shadows under his eyes seemed more pronounced.

"I meant what I said, Grace."

His voice had gone as soft as a whisper on the still air. A whisper that had her pulse thudding hard and thick at the base of her throat. "About?"

“I’m looking forward to working with you again.”

She drew in a deep breath. The longer she spent in his presence, the more her unease heightened. He’d hit the target when he said cops took on whatever assignment came their way—she had no choice but to work with him.

So she would do her job. Period. Even though time had not seemed to dull the physical attraction she felt for Mark, she couldn’t let that matter. Couldn’t let him get to her again. He would be here and gone. As soon as they dealt with his case, he’d be gone.

She had once been close to falling in love with Mark Santini. Had spent years dealing with the endless cycle of guilt tied inescapably to that relationship. She’d paid her dues and wasn’t going down the same road again. The man standing only inches away was past history, and she was a completely different woman—one who was making a determined effort to get on with her life.

She would do better tomorrow, she assured herself. The shock at seeing Mark again would have worn off and she’d be back on level ground. Right now she needed to get away from him, needed time to deal with the fragments of a hundred memories she’d locked away that were now rushing to the surface.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” she said.

“Yes.”

Turning her back on him, she headed toward the door. As she moved, she felt his eyes on her, tracking her.

Time passed, she thought. When it did, events and people became larger than they were or smaller. She wanted to believe that this man who'd stepped so unexpectedly from her past into her present had become so small that he was next to invisible. A mere blip on her radar screen. Wanted to believe that Mark Santini was so inconsequential that his presence would have no effect on her future.

The way her heart was pounding had Grace very, very afraid that wouldn't be the case.

## Chapter 2

Her face had been an open book, Mark mused the following morning as he steered his rental car through Oklahoma City's snowy streets. Grace had been shocked to find him standing in her boss's office. Stunned was more like it. Understandable, considering it had been nearly six years since they'd laid eyes on each other.

Since they'd been lovers.

He tightened his jaw as the wipers slapped a steady cadence back and forth, clearing two fans on the snow-covered windshield. What bothered him—what had eaten at him most of the night—was knowing that when they faced each other, she should have been the only one caught off guard. The only one wrestling with emotion. That hadn't been the case. Hadn't at all been what he had expected.

Dammit, he had known she would walk through the door of her lieutenant's office at any minute. Had anticipated her arrival.

Yet the instant she stepped into view, he'd been hit with a jolt of electricity. He had spent a lifetime moderating his emotions, had built up a level of control so rigid that nothing or no one ever caught him off guard.

Grace McCall-Fox had. Big-time.

Knowing that just the sight of her had made his mouth go dry and his gut clench into knots did not sit well. Granted, she

was the one woman—the only woman—for whom he had felt a pull of something far beyond physical attraction. While they were lovers he had chosen not to analyze the intense, mindless emotion that had drawn him to her. It had been a huge enough step for him to acknowledge that his relationship with Grace had been the first from which he couldn't seem to make a clean break and walk away. So, when the transfer he'd coveted to the Bureau's Crimes Against Children Unit came through, he'd asked her to move back east with him.

She'd said no. Understandable, seeing as how her world revolved around her large, rowdy family. Then there had been tradition to consider—almost every McCall had served on the Oklahoma City PD. Doing so had been Grace's lifelong dream, one she found impossible to give up.

He had coolly accepted her decision. Made no effort to change her mind. Logically he knew his promotion to the CACU meant he would spend most of his time traveling, leaving Grace behind in an unfamiliar city. She'd have gotten the raw end of the deal, and he hadn't blamed her for turning him down.

So, he had walled off the regret that had washed over him, just as he had taught himself to block out all other emotion. He had put the memory of Grace McCall into the far reaches of his mind and immersed himself in his work.

It was only natural she'd crept into his thoughts now and again over the years, but he and Grace had parted on good terms and what was done was done. He wasn't the only one who had moved

on, either. Grace had married a cop—then buried him three years later.

For himself, Mark had spent the past years building his reputation in the law enforcement community, along with unused leave time. He had no roots, no family, no woman waiting for him to return. It was the lifestyle he wanted. He traveled wherever the job took him, primarily from one crime scene to another. He worked case after case, dealing with an endless cycle of abused, kidnapped and murdered children. Child after child, body after body, one malicious crime after another.

The horror he encountered in his work never surprised him. He'd grown up knowing firsthand that the devil walked the face of the earth. Knew too well the terror suffered by a child at the mercy of a monster. Years later he had learned that most of the people in the small town where he'd grown up had known about the beatings he'd endured, but had chosen to look the other way. He'd joined the FBI, vowing to hunt down as many child-preying deviants as possible.

Without warning, the fatigue that now held him constantly in its grip shuddered through him. He tightened his gloved hands on the steering wheel and attempted to twitch the weariness out of his shoulders. What he needed was a good night's sleep, but he'd long ago given up hope for that.

Over the past year—or was it two now?—he'd had a recurring dream that replayed the images of the bruised and battered victims in every case he'd worked while in the CACU. An

unending parade of child after child. Monster after monster. The dream was like acid, slowly eating away the hours he slept each night.

Now, if he got any rest at all, it was fitful. He had forgotten the last time he'd slept through an entire night. Forgotten what it was like to eat a meal and not have the lining of his stomach ignite like a blowtorch. He had dropped weight. When he ate now, it was because he had to. He moved from crime scene to crime scene, hotel room to hotel room, lying awake and alone in strange beds, sweating from the dream that plagued him.

Exhaling a curse, he reached down deep inside for the strength to fight off the draining fatigue. He couldn't stop. Couldn't back off. He had monsters to catch.

He checked the notepad on which he'd jotted the address Grace had given him, drove two more blocks and made a right turn. Dammit, he should be in California, working the kidnap case that he'd correctly guessed had turned into a homicide last night when the little girl's body had been found. Or maybe he was needed worse in New Orleans where three preteen boys had disappeared in the past month. Then there was the small town in Alaska where a killer currently preyed on young female victims.

Mark felt another tremor of fatigue. Each one of those cases had first priority; in each, time was critical. Just wanting—needing—to be somewhere else aggravated his frustration and exhaustion.

And maybe, just maybe, he wasn't totally sure he felt up to



dealing with Sergeant Grace McCall-Fox. Not after the way he'd reacted to her yesterday. He was pointedly aware that her elderly lady look had done nothing to quell the jolt he'd felt when she walked into the office. No one had to remind him about the truly fascinating body concealed beneath that baggy gray dress. Or point out it had been years since he'd felt that kind of warmth surge in his blood. He'd reacted to Grace's presence yesterday the same way he had the day he met her. Instant attraction. A burning, immediate desire to get his hands on her. Searing lust.

Now, though, he didn't feel either physically or emotionally up to dealing with that kind of response. Chances were, he'd made a huge mistake by requesting to use Grace as his contact with the OCPD. What was done was done, however, and there was no changing that.

He spotted the address, then pulled the car up to the curb in front of a two-story house painted a cool blue with gleaming white trim. Through the veil of snow, the small porch with slender ivy-wrapped columns looked inviting, with a white wicker table and chair snugged into one corner. A garland of evergreen framed the front door; a wreath adorned with a gigantic plaid bow and loaded with shiny red balls hung in its center. Four cars crowded the driveway, including an OCPD black-and-white. With so many cops in the McCall family, Mark didn't even hazard a guess on who had driven the cruiser there.

Instead of climbing out of the rental car, he left its engine idling while he gazed at the house and conjured up a picture of

Grace.

He had always found a certain fascination with her face—those carved cheekbones that rose high and taut against skin the color of gold dust, her thinly bridged nose and angular chin. Then there was her mouth—full and rich and moist. A mouth that had taken him over the edge to heaven countless times.

That was it, he reasoned, and closed his eyes against a remembered kick of lust. His response to her yesterday had been totally physical. She was, after all, a beautiful woman with whom he'd engaged in uncountable bouts of hot, steamy sex. He hadn't been with a woman at all for some time, so it was only natural he would respond to one who had once had the power to stir his blood with just a look. A touch. A moan that slid, raw and ragged, up her throat.

"Christ," he muttered when a quiet ache of longing for that part of his past rose inside him. He didn't know what the hell was going on, but whatever it was, he damn well didn't need it.

He snapped off the ignition, jerked off one glove and scrubbed a hand over his face. Judging from what he knew right now about the case he and Grace would be working, he probably wouldn't be in town long enough to do anything about this unexpected stirring in his blood. They would deal with what needed to be done, then, as always, he would move on. Which he figured was best for everyone involved.

Mark snagged a file folder off the passenger seat and stepped out of the car into the swirling snow. The frigid air stung his

cheeks, scraped his throat like little bits of ice. The cold wind blew back the flaps of his black wool coat; frozen crystals crunched beneath his shoes as he made his way up the walk and ascended the small flight of stairs.

Stamping his feet on the welcome mat, he rang the bell. When the door swung open, it took him a second to realize the sandy-haired uniformed cop whose broad shoulders nearly blocked the entire doorway was Brandon McCall.

“Well, well, the Great Santini. I hate like hell to admit it, but it’s damn good to see you.”

Mark grinned. Of Grace’s three brothers, he had taken a special liking to Bran. “Damn good to see you, too, McCall. As much as I hate to admit it.”

Chuckling, Bran swung the door open wider and Mark stepped inside. He was instantly hit with the warm aroma of cinnamon and baking bread.

“Smells good, doesn’t it?” Bran asked.

“Like heaven.” Mark tucked the file folder under one arm and pulled off his gloves. He realized with a start that his mouth had begun to water, a sensation he barely remembered. Too bad his stomach could no longer deal with anything but the blandest food.

“I about fell over when Grace mentioned you were in town.” Bran took a sip of coffee from the thick-handled mug he carried. “Didn’t think I’d ever lay eyes on your ugly face again.”

“I had to come back to Oklahoma City to see if you still lose

every game of touch football you play,” Mark countered as he shrugged out of his coat.

“Typical Fed. Got nothing stored in your head but useless information.” A smirk tipped up the right corner of Bran’s mouth as he examined Mark’s gray silk suit. “I see you’re still wearing those pretty-boy suits and ties.”

Mark sent a pointed look at Bran’s sharply pressed gray uniform shirt and navy pants. His leather gun belt had a polished gleam, and the silver lieutenant bars on his collar points shone like beacons beneath the light. “At least one of us looks good while fighting crime.”

Bran barked a laugh at the insult. “I would never try to compete with you in the clothing department, pal. Grace has coffee ready. We’ll drop off your coat in the living room on our way to the kitchen.”

“Thanks.”

Mark trailed Bran down the wood-planked hallway, noting the rooms they passed were typical of an older house—small, with high ceilings and plenty of tall, narrow windows that let in the hazy winter light.

Bran paused at an arched doorway. “Just toss your coat over the couch.”

Mark stepped into the room filled with furniture upholstered in calming neutral tones. The wood was dark and polished, the accent pieces in shades of deep rose and smoky gray. Lush green plants speared out of colorful pots that sat on tables and the

floor. Across the room a towering Christmas tree wrapped with twinkling white lights and tinsel filled one corner. Packages tied with red and gold satin ribbons pooled beneath its branches.

Mark stared at the tree. His mother had never bothered with Christmas decorations. Or presents. Not when buying them would cut into the money she spent on her precious booze. Even after he bought his condo in Virginia, he'd never once considered putting up a tree. No reason to, since he spent most Christmases at locations where crimes had occurred.

Mark laid his coat over the couch's back. Nearly a year ago, Bran had e-mailed him with news that he had eloped with a private investigator. Mark was about to ask Bran how married life was treating him when he noted the folded quilt and bed pillow sitting on one of the cushions. A paperback by an author whose books he remembered Bran liked lay on the coffee table in front of the couch. Mark narrowed his eyes, thinking back to the cars he'd seen parked in the driveway. The OCPD black-and-white had the same amount of snow covering it as the other three cars. Which meant it had been parked there all night. Since it looked as though Bran had sacked out on the couch, asking about his wife probably wasn't the smartest thing to do.

"Nice house," Mark commented instead.

"Yeah," Bran agreed. "Looking at it now, it's hard to believe it was a dump when Carrie and Morgan bought it."

"I thought this was Grace's place, too."

"Not originally. Carrie and Morgan bought it the day before

Ry got killed.” Bran angled his chin. “You ever meet Ryan Fox while you worked here?”

“No. I understand he was a good cop.”

“One of the best.” Bran’s expression darkened, his mouth tightening into a thin line. “Grace found him just seconds after that drugged-up car thief shot him. It about killed her when she lost Ry and...” He closed his eyes. “Anyway, Grace sold the house they owned, and bought into this one. Renovating the place turned into a project for the entire family. Did us all good to spend that time together.”

Family. Mark had never fully understood the depths of that kind of bond, but he’d witnessed the strength of the link that existed between the McCalls.

Bran checked his watch. “Wish I wasn’t in a rush, but I have to make lineup at eight. I want to grab one of Morgan’s cinnamon rolls to take with me.”

He led Mark past a small dining room, turned left when they reached a steep wooden staircase at the end of the hall, then stepped into the kitchen where copper pots and pans hung on a rack over a small butcher-block island. Gray slate topped the counters; small pots of what Mark guessed were herbs lined the windowsill. Beyond the wide pane of glass, powdery flakes swirled in the gray morning light.

He caught movement out of the corner of his eye and turned just as Grace stepped through a doorway on the opposite wall. She wore a snug cherry-red sweater, pegged black trousers

and practical low-heeled boots. A gold badge and holstered Smith & Wesson 9mm automatic were clipped to her waistband. Her sleek, shoulder-length hair, now devoid of yesterday's gray streaks, looked as black and shiny as the satin lapel of a tuxedo.

"Morning, Mark." Her voice sounded the way he knew her flesh felt—warm and comforting, like water over a smooth stone.

"Morning."

"Make yourself comfortable." She gestured toward the long-legged stools on one side of the island where an oversize poinsettia bloomed in a brightly painted pot. He noted that her stunned look of yesterday was gone; now she gazed at him with dark eyes as calm as a convent.

"Thanks." He settled onto a stool while Bran drained his coffee mug, then reached into a wicker basket and pulled out a cinnamon roll the size of a manhole cover.

"Want one?" he asked Mark. "They're fresh out of the oven."

"I'll pass."

"Your loss." Bran dropped a kiss on the top of Grace's head. "Thanks, sis. Tell Carrie and Morgan I'll see them later."

"Sure." When Grace looked up at her brother, Mark saw the quick shadow that passed across her face. "You'll take care of yourself?"

Bran tweaked her chin. "I promise to eat my vegetables, Mom."

"You're a good son," she said sweetly even as she jabbed an elbow into his ribs.

Grinning, Bran turned and gripped Mark's hand. "How long you planning to be here?"

"That depends on what Grace and I find out today. I'm just not sure."

"Let's try to squeeze in time to grab a beer while you're here."

"You're on," Mark said, then watched Bran head out of the kitchen. He looked back at Grace. The shadow that had crossed her face had settled in her eyes. "I get the distinct impression you're worried about your brother."

"I am. He and Tory split up before Thanksgiving. Bran puts up a good front, but inside he isn't handling things too well."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Bran sent me an e-mail to let me know he'd remarried." Mark paused, thinking about Bran's shy, unassuming first wife who'd died suddenly from a brain aneurysm. "Is Tory anything like Patience?"

"The exact opposite. Which I suspect is one of the problems with the marriage." Grace picked up a dish towel, laid it back down. "Bran rented this god-awful apartment. Has electric-blue paint on the walls, green wall-to-wall shag and day-glo orange countertops. He wakes up in that place with a hangover, the glare will kill him. The only furniture he has is a bed, a ratty recliner and a TV."

"Maybe he's hoping it's all temporary. That he and Tory will get back together soon."

"That's what we're all hoping." Grace raised a shoulder. "I keep an eye on him, try to make sure he eats right, but it's a losing



battle.”

Mark rested his forearms on the counter. “I see you’re still looking out for everyone.”

Her mouth tightened as she stared at the door through which Bran had disappeared. “Not the easiest thing to do when you’re dealing with a man who’s a blockhead.” She pulled a mug out of one of the cabinets, then looked back at Mark. “Coffee?”

“Actually, I’m more into tea these days,” he said as he reached into the inside pocket of his suit coat.

“Tea?” Grace stared at the teabag now dangling from a string clenched between his fingers as if it were an alien life form. “This coming from the man I’ve seen consume a gallon of task-force coffee without a wince.”

“I’ve turned over a new leaf. If you could nuke some water, I’d appreciate it.”

“No problem.” In minutes his tea sat steeping in front of him.

Grace refilled her coffee mug. “In addition to the cinnamon rolls, we’ve got croissants and poppy-seed muffins.”

“All baked by Morgan, I suppose.”

“Correct.” Grace carried her mug around the island and slid onto the stool beside his. “I’m going to miss her when she gets married and moves out.”

“When’s the big event?”

“Valentine’s Day. She’s marrying Alex Blade. Do you know him?”

“Blade.” Mark sipped his tea while reaching into his memory.

“When I worked here, he teamed up on a couple of undercover assignments with Sara Rackowitz, one of our female agents.” Mark paused, his mouth curving. “Are you sure Morgan’s old enough to get married? Last time I saw her, she had just gotten her driver’s license. She had a mouthful of braces.”

Grace’s eyes met his over the rim of her mug. “You’ve been gone a long time, Mark.”

“True.” So long that he couldn’t remember anymore what it felt like to go into the same office each day. Sleep in the same bed every night. He took another sip of the tea that was touted to be mild on the stomach, all the time wishing it were coffee.

Leaning in, Grace pinched an anemic-looking leaf off the otherwise thriving poinsettia.

Watching her, Mark felt memories flood over him. At the beginning of their affair, Grace had visited his apartment and been appalled at its bare-bones look. Since he spent most of his time at the office, he’d rented only the basic amount of furniture needed for one person who was rarely home. It sure as hell had never occurred to him to add accessories. Before long, Grace had brought over scented candles, woven throws and colorful pillows. Several potted plants from the landscape business her mother owned had soon followed. He could picture her in that apartment now, clipping leaves off those plants. For the first time, he understood that Grace had created a nest of contentment for him. The only one he’d ever had.

When she shifted back on her stool, the movement sent her

light, subtle scent drifting over Mark like a gentle stroke of hands. Soothing. Inviting. He closed his eyes for an instant, wishing he could lose himself in that scent. In that soft voice. In the woman.

“So, Agent Santini, ready to tell me about the case we’ll be working?”

“Ready.” He could wish for a hell of a lot of things, he thought as he opened the cover on the file folder he’d brought with him. Problem was, he’d learned a long time ago that wishes were futile. “Does the name Landon Grayson ring a bell?”

Grace’s brows shot up. “Slightly. He’s only about the most powerful man in the U.S. Senate.”

“The most powerful. Which is why I’m here. The Bureau’s annual budget is at Grayson’s mercy.”

“What would law enforcement be without politics?” Grace asked dryly. She paused. “How is he involved in this case?”

Mark flipped up a page in the file. “Grayson’s daughter died here not long after she’d given birth at a state-run medical clinic. She apparently died of complications associated with the birth.”

Grace narrowed her eyes. “If she wasn’t a victim of a violent crime, why are you here? Why not use an agent from the local office if Grayson wants the death looked into by the FBI?”

“The Bureau did that to begin with.” Mark took a minute to decide the best way to explain things. “I need to back up and walk you through this from the beginning.”

“All right.”

“From all accounts, Grayson’s daughter, Andrea, was a

headstrong and stubborn kid. One who apparently gave new meaning to the word rebel. She and the senator never got along.”

“What about her mother?”

“Died when Andrea was an infant. Over the years Andrea ran off a couple of times. The cops always found her and brought her home. By the time she was fifteen she’d figured out how not to get caught. She had a fake ID made in the name of A’lynn Jackson, her mother’s maiden name. The next time Andrea and the senator fought, she walked out of the house and vanished.”

“How long ago was that?”

“About three years.”

“And now she’s dead.”

Nodding, Mark pulled a photo from the file of a smiling girl, full of eager youth. Andrea had a pretty face framed by long auburn hair, and a tall well-shaped build. “This is the most recent picture the senator had of Andrea, taken just before she left home the last time.”

Grace studied the photo. “She looks a lot older than fifteen.”

“She drifted around the country, using her mature looks and the above-average singing voice she inherited from her mother to score gigs with bands in country-western bars. If anyone questioned her age, she had the fake ID that upped her age to legal. She also worked as a waitress in those bars, and gave dance lessons.”

“Did she have any contact with her father during that time?”

“Twice. Right after Andrea left home, Grayson hired a private

investigator to find her. Somehow the P.I. figured out she was using her mother's maiden name, and he picked up her trail in Kansas City. The report in the file doesn't say how, but Andrea got wind the guy worked for the senator. She called Daddy, told him if he didn't call off his P.I. she'd disappear from his life forever and never have anything to do with him."

"I take it the senator is the one who backed down?"

"Yes. Andrea was his only child, and he blamed himself for her rebellious streak."

"Why?"

"When his wife died, the senator dealt with his grief by burying himself in his work. He hired a series of nannies to raise Andrea."

"So she basically lost both her mother and father at the same time."

"That's the size of it," Mark agreed. "Fast forward to a month ago. The senator returned from an overseas trip to find a message from Andrea on his private answering machine. She acknowledged they'd had their differences and a lot of what she called 'bad stuff' had happened between them. Said she wanted to call a truce, then added she was pregnant and due any day. After asking if she could bring her baby home, she assured her father she would call back in two days to find out his answer." Mark took a sip of tea. "Apparently being pregnant changed the way she looked at things."

"Knowing a baby is on the way can do that."

Mark glanced up. Grace's voice had gone soft, taking on an almost elusive sadness. As had her dark eyes. "Something wrong?"

Her eyes cleared as she handed the photo back to him. "Nothing more than the fact that a young girl is dead. In the message, did Andrea say where she was?"

"No, but Grayson got the number off his phone's caller ID. She didn't call back when she said she would, so he contacted the Bureau's assistant director and asked for help in finding out where she'd called from. The number checked to a place called Usher House in Oklahoma City."

"I know it well." Grace sat her coffee mug aside. "A woman named Millie Usher established the shelter about five years ago for homeless, pregnant girls. I've dealt with several runaway juvies who've stayed there."

"The home is church funded, right?"

"Right, but Millie opens the door to girls from all faiths. Her rules are simple—no drugs, no alcohol, no men allowed." Grace propped an elbow on the counter. "I take it that's where the agent from the Bureau's local office comes in? He went to Usher House to see if Andrea was still there?"

"Yes. The agent didn't find a record of Andrea Grayson. But when he showed her picture around, several people identified her as A'lynn Jackson and said she'd lived there a short time. When our agent asked about the baby's father, two girls staying at Usher House told him Andrea didn't know the guy's name.

Just that he was some trucker passing through the city.” Mark flipped through a few pages in the file. “Millie Usher claimed that when Andrea showed up, she told Millie she had decided to give up her baby for adoption. Andrea’s decision on that was so firm, she’d already had someone at the clinic help her fill out the paperwork to legalize things.”

“She had an ID under a fake name showing she was of legal age,” Grace said. “She probably claimed she had no next of kin and signed an affidavit swearing she didn’t know the identity of the baby’s father.”

“All correct,” Mark said. “Which, according to Oklahoma’s parental consent laws, cleared the way for the state to handle the child’s adoption.”

Grace frowned. “But between the time Andrea arrived at Usher House and when she called her father, she’d changed her mind about giving up her baby.”

“That’s the logical assumption.”

“Did your agent find out what changed her mind?”

“No. Not long after Andrea phoned her father, she showed up at the clinic in labor. According to our agent, she didn’t tell anyone she’d decided to keep the child. Andrea gave birth a couple hours later to a healthy girl, then began hemorrhaging and died of the sudden blood loss.”

“What happened to the baby?”

“Per the papers Andrea had previously signed, the infant was turned over to Loving Arms Adoptions, one of the agencies that

has a contract with the state. Since A'lynn Jackson had failed to give the clinic the name and contact information for a next of kin, her body was donated to the state medical school's cadaver program."

Grace winced. "How did the senator take that news?"

"Reportedly with a lot of anger fueled by his grief."

"I can imagine." Grace pursed her mouth. "So how did Agent Santini wind up with this case in his lap?"

"Through no doing of my own," Mark returned dryly. "Grayson knew my name because I testified before a committee he chairs. He demanded the assistant director assign me to secure the release of his daughter's body and investigate the legalities of the adoption."

"He wants to raise his granddaughter?"

"Yes." Mark sent Grace a sardonic look. "Probably hoping to make up to Andrea for the crummy job he did with her."

"You don't think he's sincere?"

"Maybe he never laid a hand on Andrea, but he kept his distance for years. Abused her emotionally. That can do as much harm as repeated beatings. The damage just doesn't show on the outside. Who's to say he won't treat his granddaughter the same way?"

Without warning, Mark felt an old hurt and vicious bitterness close in on him. He tightened his grip on the mug. He made a point to keep what happened to him as a child where it belonged—in the past. Always the past. That those old emotions had just



risen to the surface left him feeling exposed, a sensation totally foreign to him.

“Mark, did you know Andrea Grayson?”

He looked up to find Grace’s eyes probing his face. She was the only person with whom he’d ever been tempted to share the details of his past. It was just as well that he’d held back. They were colleagues now, with only their jobs in common.

“No, I never met her,” he said evenly. “Why do you ask?”

“Because you sound like there’s something personal about this case.”

His jaw tightened. “I always take it personal when a young person dies. Andrea is dead, and try as he might, the senator can’t take a step back and make things right.” Mark rubbed the back of his neck in an attempt to ease the tension that had settled there. “What Grayson can do is get strings pulled and red tape cut on his behalf. Which is where I come in. And why I spent most of yesterday getting a court order for the release of his daughter’s body from the medical school’s cadaver program.”

“I hope for everyone’s sake you managed to do that.”

“Yes. The med students are out for the holidays, so the body is in the same shape now as it was when the school received it. Grayson had a private plane pick up Andrea’s body last night and fly it to D.C. Since she died with one of the clinic’s doctors in attendance, no autopsy was required. The senator wants to make sure he’s being told the truth about her death, so he hired a private company to perform an autopsy.”

“If there is something suspicious about the death, the fact the body’s already embalmed won’t help.”

Mark nodded. “I understand they’ll have to compare samples of clean embalming fluids with that in the body. Check to see if any foreign elements or compounds are present.” He glanced at the clock over the stove. “The autopsy should just now be getting underway.”

“I take it you and I will be serving the subpoena you mentioned yesterday to Loving Arms Adoptions so we can try to find Andrea’s baby?”

“That’s first on our list.”

“Suppose the autopsy doesn’t turn up anything nefarious? If the adoption records are sealed by the court, they won’t be available to us, despite your subpoena.”

“True, and it’s possible we’ll run into that kind of road block. But it’s also possible the adoption isn’t finalized and Loving Arms isn’t yet under any order by the court. If that’s the case, our subpoena requires them to let us see the records they have on Andrea Grayson’s daughter. If the infant is still under the agency’s care, the senator can send a pack of lawyers to get his granddaughter turned over to him.”

Grace stood, walked around the island and dumped the remainder of her coffee in the sink. Turning, she shook back her hair.

The gesture was so familiar that Mark felt his throat close. A picture rose inside his head of her lying in his bed, her body slick

with sweat from their lovemaking, her warm, silky legs tangled with his. They had shared some light comment that had prompted her to prop herself up on one elbow and smile down at him with a smugness that mirrored the same sated contentment he'd felt. Then she'd laughed and shaken back all that glorious hair. He'd slid his fingers into the dark fall, tumbled her onto her back and lost himself in her again.

"So," Grace began, "if everything goes smooth, your work here might not take long."

He kept his eyes steady on hers, fighting back both the vision and the erotic sweep of memories that accompanied it. He had been with other women since her, but the relationships had been scattershot with no emotional bonds forged. No other woman had brought him the same sense of completeness as Grace. Had never even gotten close.

"Right," he agreed, shifting gears smoothly even as remnants of an age-old need clawed in his stomach. "With luck, we could have everything tied up fast."

He noted her fingers fisting against her thighs, then flexing. "And then you'll be gone."

"That's my plan."

"Well, Santini, you always did have a plan. And the willpower to stick to it."

"Things work better that way, McCall."

"Don't I know it," she agreed as she turned and flipped off the light over the sink.

He rose off the stool. “Ready to serve that subpoena?”

“I’ll get my purse and coat, then meet you at the front door.”

“Fine.” Standing there with warm, homey scents hanging in the air, Mark watched her go. As he listened to her footsteps tap against the hallway’s wooden floor, he realized he still wanted her. Mindlessly.

Which was his tough luck.

## Chapter 3

Grace didn't want to think about how natural it had felt to have Mark Santini in her kitchen again. Of how just sitting on the stool beside his had seemed so achingly familiar. Of how empty she'd felt when he acknowledged he would leave.

Again.

Of course Mark would leave. That was what he did. He jumped from city to city, case to case, then he moved on.

She had spent most of the previous night tossing and turning, reminding herself of his gypsy lifestyle. Reminding herself that no matter where he was, Special Agent Santini was on the road to somewhere else. His whereabouts were at the whim of the FBI, and that's the way he liked things.

Now, as she walked beside him through fluffy, spiraling snowflakes toward the building that housed Loving Arms Adoptions, Grace shoved her gloved hands into the pockets of her coat, then fisted them. She was not going to do this again. Not going to let her crazy hormonal reaction to this hotshot cop with a killer face and fancy suits guide her like she had six years ago. She was smarter, wiser and had received enough hard knocks to know she couldn't have everything she wanted.

Which didn't really matter, since she no longer wanted Mark Santini.

Didn't want any man at the moment. She readily admitted that

the black, vicious grief she'd felt over losing Ryan—and later the child she carried—had sent her burrowing into a numbing emotional cocoon. If she ever got brave enough to peel off the protective layers and look for another man, she would set her sights on someone like Ryan. Her husband had been easygoing, as dependable as the sunrise. Mr. White Picket Fence who'd wanted to settle down and raise a bushel of kids. Again, she felt the bitter, dragging regret. She had never once thought of Ryan as a rebound love. Yet, when he overheard a conversation after he and Grace married about the reason she'd made the visit to Virginia to see Mark, that's exactly how Ryan had viewed himself—as the man she'd turned to on the rebound. The man she'd settled for.

She and Ryan had barely started dating when she'd made that trip. She'd recognized something special about him, yet even then she'd known she couldn't move on until she resolved things with Mark. So she'd gone to Virginia on the chance she and Mark might somehow be able to meld their lifestyles. There she discovered he'd already moved on with the leggy White House staffer.

She would regret for the rest of her life Ryan's overhearing that conversation. Regret how deeply he'd been hurt. He had been dead nearly three years, yet the regret continued to hang over her like clogging, black smoke. What she did not need—did not intend to create—were additional regrets over Mark Santini.

So she would ignore the unrelenting, maddening chemistry

that pulled her toward him, and do her job. Then watch him leave.

Again.

“Here’s hoping this goes smooth,” Mark said as he pulled the building’s front door open for her.

Nodding, Grace stepped past him into the lobby, an arty rectangle decorated in soft hues. She knew he wanted things to go without a hitch because the smoother they went, the sooner he could head to his next assignment. Unbuttoning her coat, she blamed the dry ache that settled in her throat on the sudden transition between the frigid outdoors and the warmth inside.

Loving Arms Adoptions was located in a multiroom suite with coral carpets and leather furnishings. A thin, fortyish woman in a gray suit sat at a well-organized desk, typing on a computer. She looked up when Mark and Grace walked in, turned from her computer and gave them a mild smile.

“Can I help you?”

They displayed their badges, then Mark asked to speak to the agency’s director.

“Do you have an appointment with Mrs. Quinton?”

“No, we have a subpoena,” he said politely. “If your boss is too busy to see us, we’ll serve the subpoena to you.”

“Wait here.” The woman popped out of her chair like a cork from a champagne bottle and hustled down a carpeted hallway.

Grace slid Mark a look. “You always did have a knack for getting a woman’s attention, Santini.”

He gave her a quick, smug grin. "It's a gift."

Grace tried to ignore the instant hot ball of awareness that all-too-familiar grin lodged in her belly. Dammit, the man was like a force field, hauling her closer, when all she wanted was to keep her distance.

Just then the receptionist reappeared and escorted them into a large office. Centered in the room was a dark wooden desk behind which a gray-haired woman with vivid blue eyes sat, taking them in.

"I'm Patsy Quinton," she said, gesturing them to chairs in front of the desk. "Now that you've put my secretary in a tizzy, officers, what can I do for you?"

"We're looking for a baby," Mark said.

The woman nodded. "Most people who come to Loving Arms are."

"A girl," he continued, then gave the date Andrea Grayson had given birth. While he explained the facts of the case, Grace handed Mrs. Quinton a copy of the form Andrea had signed at the clinic authorizing her daughter's adoption. "If the infant has already been adopted, we'd like to know by whom," Mark finished.

The woman studied the form, her eyes sharpening after a moment. "I need to check something," she said, then turned to her computer and began tapping keys. After a moment she eased out a breath. "I can't help you."

"We have a subpoena for your records on the child,"



Mark said. "Also the written approval of the infant's natural grandfather to view those records. If necessary, Sergeant McCall can contact a judge who will authorize a warrant for us to search your files for the information we need."

Mrs. Quinton didn't look impressed. "You and Sergeant McCall can serve me with a hundred legal documents, Agent Santini, but they won't get you the information you're looking for. We simply have no record on that infant."

Grace leaned forward. "You mean the adoption is finalized and the record is sealed?"

"I mean we don't have a record. That particular adoption was not handled by Loving Arms."

Mark gestured to the copy of the form Quinton had previously scanned. "The form filled out at the clinic where the child was born states the adoption was handled by your agency."

"Their paperwork is in error," Mrs. Quinton said, concern clouding her blue eyes. "In more than one area, I'm afraid."

Grace felt her shoulders tighten as her cop instinct clicked in. Something was wrong. Very wrong. "What areas?" she asked quietly.

"As I stated, Loving Arms did not handle the placement of this child. And there's a problem with the signature at the bottom of the form. It can't be right."

Shifting forward, Mark studied the woman, his eyes giving nothing away. "There are two signatures on the bottom of the form," he said. "The doctor who treated Andrea Grayson and the

social worker from children's services who picked up the infant from the clinic. Which signature can't be right?"

"The social worker's," Patsy Quinton replied. "The woman whose signature is on that form quit her job about two years ago and moved out of state."

Hours later Mark sat beside Grace in yet another office while warning blips pinged in his brain. He had learned long ago to listen to his instincts. They were currently sending the message that it wasn't a paperwork snafu that had caused Andrea Grayson's baby to seemingly disappear off the face of the earth.

The infant was gone.

Her mother dead.

Coincidence?

Mark checked the clock that hung on the wall of the small, cramped office. He needed to call D.C. to find out if the autopsy on Andrea Grayson's body had been performed as scheduled. If so, he had some pointed questions for the pathologist. Right now, though, he wanted some answers from the doctor who'd delivered Andrea's child.

"I don't know how this could be." Dr. Thomas Odgers sat behind a desk inches deep in paper, staring down in disbelief at the contents of a file folder. He was a balding, bearded man in his sixties with a baritone voice and wire-rim glasses.

At present, his face was as pale as his starched white lab coat. "I just... I simply don't understand."

Mark started to speak, but held back when Grace rose and

moved to the desk. “How about I tell you what I understand, Dr. Odgers?” she asked in a mild voice. “You delivered a baby girl at this clinic whose mother subsequently died under your care. This clinic—of which you are the director—has paperwork stating the baby was picked up by a caseworker from children’s services for an adoption to be handled by the Loving Arms Agency.”

“Yes.” Adjusting his glasses, Odgers glanced down at the paperwork, then looked back up. “That’s correct.”

“One thing that is not correct is the caseworker’s signature,” Grace continued, gesturing at the form.

“Are you sure of that, Detective McCall?”

“Sergeant McCall, and I’m positive. Agent Santini and I spent quite a lot of time this morning at the adoption agency and then at the state’s children’s services office. Someone at this clinic forged the name of a caseworker who quit her job two years ago.”

“Dear God.”

“Another thing that isn’t correct on your form is the name of the agency slated to handle the adoption. Loving Arms has no record of this infant.”

His fingers steepled in front of his chin, Mark kept his eyes on Grace. They’d met while working on the Midnight Slasher task force, investigating the murders of a series of teenage prostitutes. He and Grace had teamed up to conduct interviews with several subjects. Mark had been impressed with her intuitive, no-nonsense interrogation skills and an intense passion to get to the truth. He was still impressed.

Just as he still felt the pull that had always existed between them. Would forever feel it, he supposed.

Six years was a long time, and he knew there was no sense in dredging up the past when the present demanded all his energy and attention. Yet, watching Grace, he wondered what their lives would be like now if she had moved to Virginia with him. If he'd had something more to offer her than just shreds of time.

"The state has contracts with three different adoption agencies," Odgers pointed out nervously. "I feel certain our listing Loving Arms on the form was a clerical error. We named the wrong agency, that's all."

"That's not all," Grace persisted. "Agent Santini and I have checked with the other two adoption agencies that have contracts with the state. None of them handled this child."

"I...don't know what to think." Odgers slicked a palm over his nearly bald head, now glistening with sweat. "I don't know."

Mark rose and moved to the side of the desk opposite Grace, a symbolic closing in on their quarry. "I suggest you come up with something, Doctor," he said quietly. "As Sergeant McCall pointed out, the trail to Andrea Grayson's infant starts and ends here."

"I can only tell you what I know. I delivered the baby, then examined her again just before the social worker was due to pick her up." Odgers looked back at the file, and Mark saw the face of a man whose mind was racing to find an explanation. "That's the last time I laid eyes on that infant. I swear."

Grace gazed down at him. “Did you see who picked up the baby?”

“No, but it’s rare I ever see the social workers. I’m either in exam rooms with patients or in here dealing with paperwork.” He held out a hand, palm up. “I’m sure there’s some logical explanation for the child’s whereabouts.”

Mark leaned in. “I hope so, Doctor.” He waited a beat, watching the man sweat. “If a social worker walked into the clinic right now to pick up a baby, who would that person deal with?”

“Today it would be Yolanda.”

“Today?” Grace asked.

“That’s because Iris is off. Iris Davenport. Her sister had surgery, so she’s staying with her during her recuperation. Iris usually deals with paperwork on all adoptions.” Odgers rechecked the form. “I remember now. Iris assisted with the birth of the child in question.”

Grace frowned. “You had a clerk assist you during a delivery?”

“No.” Odgers blinked several times. “Heavens, no. Iris is an RN, a very good one. The office staff is buried in Medicare, insurance and numerous other forms, not to mention patient records. Iris takes care of the adoption forms, and the office staff is glad to have her help.”

Wanting a clear view of the man’s face, Mark returned to his chair. “Doctor, if you know what happened to Andrea Grayson’s child, you’d better tell us now.”

“I don’t know.” The man’s hands fisted. “I felt awful when the

mother died. The delivery had been an easy one, and she seemed fine. Minutes later, she began hemorrhaging. I tried to save her. I've been a doctor for forty years. I'm in the business of keeping people alive." He pulled off his glasses, his eyes locked on Mark's as if he were his only lifeline. "I don't know what happened to the infant, but it's crucial she be found. You have my full cooperation in this matter."

Mark intended to run a thorough background check on the doctor, even though his gut told him the man was telling the truth. And his instincts were usually on target. He exchanged a look with Grace, and he could tell she agreed with him. He shifted his attention back to Odgers.

"Doctor, have there been similar deaths here?"

Odgers's already-pale face turned gray. "Surely you're not suggesting..."

"I'm not suggesting anything," Mark said. "I'm asking a question, one of many you'll have to answer. Have any other women hemorrhaged to death after giving birth here?"

"One. Nearly a year ago, I think. The young woman wasn't my patient, so I'm hazy on details. I do know she'd been seeing Dr. Normandy. Frank Normandy. The patient delivered a healthy baby, then later bled to death."

"What happened to her baby?" Grace asked.

"I...have no idea. I'll have to pull the file."

"Do that," Mark said. "We'll want to see Dr. Normandy."

"He quit some time ago. Took a hospital job in Chicago to be

closer to his wife's family."

"We need his personnel file." Mark paused. "What nurse assisted Normandy when the woman died after delivery?"

"I'll have to check." Odgers swiveled in his chair toward his computer. Using his index fingers, he tapped on the keyboard. A moment later, he closed his eyes. "Iris," he said quietly. "Iris Davenport assisted during that birth, too."

"You didn't get your wish," Grace said as Mark followed her across her house's shadowy front porch. The early-evening gloom was quickly transforming into a frigid darkness, so she had to squint to get her key into the lock. Neither Morgan nor Carrie had made it home yet, so no one had turned on the porch light.

"What wish?" Mark asked, his breath a gray puff on the freezing air.

"This morning you said you hoped things went smooth." She caught the fresh pine scent of the Christmas wreath as she pushed open the door and stepped into the warm, inviting hallway.

"We definitely didn't get smooth," he agreed, his voice grave as he closed the door behind him.

The sense of dread that Grace had first felt during their interview at the adoption agency had intensified throughout the day and now felt like an anvil in her chest. "What we got were too many questions that no one seems to have the answers to."

"Someone always has the answers." Mark slid his gloves into the pockets of his black wool coat. "We just have to figure out who that someone is, then go after them."

“You’re right.” She pulled off her gloves and coat, then opened the door to the small closet near the front door. “I’ve worked child abduction cases, but they were mostly one parent snatching a child from the other. Even though the child was missing, I was pretty sure he or she was safe. Being cared for.”

Mark gazed down at her, his face somber. “That’s not the type of child abduction case I get called to. There are a lot of sick scum out there.”

Saying nothing, Grace hung up their coats. She and Mark had been cops a long time and they’d seen too much evil. Still, she always hoped for a happy ending. Considering the nature of his job, she doubted Mark ever expected a rosy outcome.

When she turned, she saw he had moved a few steps down the hall and now stood at the arched entrance to the living room, the file folder he’d carried in from the car clutched in his hand.

“Is this where you want us to work?” he asked.

Stepping beside him, she reached for a wall switch, flipped it on. The lights on the Christmas tree winked on, looking like tiny white stars trapped in its limbs. What they’d found out today had left her in no mood for holiday cheer.

“No, not here.”

“Where, then?”

“Until the information we requested starts coming in, all we can do is brainstorm. Right?”

“Right.”

“Let’s do that in the kitchen while we eat. I’m starving and you



should be, too, since you hardly ate anything at lunch.”

“I had soup.”

“Broth. You had broth, Santini.” She headed down the hallway, crooking a finger at him. “Follow me, and I’ll show you the difference between broth and soup.”

Twenty minutes later they sat side by side at the butcher-block island, steaming bowls in front of them.

Mark slid her a look. “So, this is soup,” he said, spooning up another bite.

“Didn’t take long for a sharp guy like you to spot the homemade noodles, chunks of chicken and other nutritious stuff.”

He nodded gravely. “I’m a professional investigator. I sleuthed out the nutritious stuff right off.”

“Atta boy, Santini.”

He’d taken off his suit coat, loosened his crimson tie and unbuttoned the neck of his starched white shirt. Grace knew this was the first time she’d let herself relax since they walked into the adoption agency that morning, and she sensed the same went for Mark.

Sensed, too, that she had probably been nuts to bring him back to her house since she intended to keep their relationship on a professional level. The smart thing would have been to go along with Mark’s suggestion to wait at her office for the information they’d requested. It was just that the more time she’d spent in his presence, the deeper the lines of exhaustion in his face seemed

to be etched.

So, why did she care if he looked tired? she wondered. Why give special consideration to a man who'd walked away so effortlessly six years ago?

With no answers to those questions forthcoming, she slid a hand into the wicker basket next to her plate, tore off two pieces of the crusty French bread she'd heated and handed one to Mark. "Butter?"

"No, thanks." His gaze swept the kitchen. "Bran mentioned the remodeling of this place was a McCall family project. From what I've seen, you did a great job."

"We think so."

"How long did the entire project take?"

"A couple of months," Grace answered. "Granddad and Gran oversaw things. They doled out assignments like they were drill sergeants. Everyone pitched in, carried their weight, except for..."

Mark gave her a puzzled look when her voice trailed off. "Except for?"

"It was right after Ryan died. Then I got sick...the flu." And with her system so vulnerable, her resistance so weakened, she'd lost their baby, her final physical link with Ryan.

"Grace—"

"Anyway, I love this house," she said, determined to force back the memories. "So do Carrie and Morgan. Having had the family's help in breathing life back into the place makes it even

more special.”

Her appetite gone, Grace set her bowl aside and squared her shoulders. “Ready to brainstorm our case?”

Mark watched her for a beat, then pushed his bowl out of the way. “Ready,” he said, while opening the file folder. “Here’s what we know so far. Nearly a year ago a fifteen-year-old girl named DeeDee Wyman gave birth to a son. The birth was without complications, the baby healthy. Wyman suddenly began hemorrhaging and died. Six months later, Andrea Grayson walked into the same clinic and became a carbon copy of Wyman, with the exception that she had a different doctor and gave birth to a daughter.”

Grace nodded. “From our checks with all three adoption agencies that have contracts with the clinic, we know none of them handled either infant, although the clinic’s records show differently.”

“Records filled out by Iris Davenport, the nurse in attendance during both births,” Mark added. “Records with the same forged signature of a former child services caseworker.”

“At this point, Iris Davenport—presently in Kansas City taking care of her ill sister—seems to be the solid link between both deaths,” Grace said. “And the two babies who have seemingly dropped off the face of the earth.”

“They’re somewhere,” Mark stated, checking his watch. “The background checks we requested on Davenport and Dr. Odgers should come through on your fax soon. And I ought to hear back

anytime from the pathologist with the tox results of Grayson's autopsy."

"So we wait." Grace gathered up their dishes, then headed to the sink. She rinsed the bowls, turned and ran into a wall of solid muscle.

"Sorry," Mark said, gripping her upper arm to steady her.

"I...didn't hear you behind me."

"Just doing my part to help clean up." He sat the wicker bread basket beside the sink, but made no move to put space between them.

Grace caught the faint whiff of his familiar spicy cologne, and felt her insides tighten. "Always...nice to have a helper in the kitchen," she managed. Knowing she was between two seemingly immovable forces of granite-topped counter and muscled male had her skin heating.

Mark gazed down at her with concerned intensity. "Grace, I didn't mean to upset you before. Mentioning the house. Bran told me Morgan and Carrie bought it about the same time Ryan was killed. I just didn't think before I brought up the subject. I'm sorry."

"It's...okay."

"From the look I saw in your eyes, it clearly isn't okay. Ryan Fox was a lucky man to have found you."

"I'm the lucky one," she said, her voice an unsteady whisper. She had forgotten how easily Mark's voice could take on that soft intimate tone. They were talking about her husband's death, yet

her blood was heating over her ex-lover's voice.

The knowledge of how quickly memories of the way she used to feel for Mark consumed her had panic flaring in her stomach. It was almost as if they weren't memories at all.

That jolting revelation had her taking a step sideways. Then another. Good Lord, what if he touched her? Was she sure—absolutely sure—she could resist him?

His eyes stayed locked with hers. "I'm sure the past three years have been hard for you. There's nothing more difficult than to lose people you love and need."

As she stared up at him, it occurred to her she had no idea if he was speaking in generalities or making a personal observation. How could she know? They'd been lovers for months, yet Mark Santini had never opened up enough to tell her about his background. His family. Never once told her how he felt about her. About them.

Which, she conceded, hadn't mattered at the time. Mark hadn't needed to tell her anything in order to keep her in his bed.

But now, for some reason she couldn't explain, it mattered very much.

She wrapped her arms around her waist. "Tell me something, Mark. How do you know losing someone is difficult?"

His dark eyes narrowed on her face. "What?"

"Have you lost someone? Someone you loved and needed? I have to ask, since you've never mentioned your family to me. I don't know anything about you. I never knew anything about

you.”

“You’re wrong, Grace. You knew me better than anyone.”

What she knew was that his first and only love was, and always would be, the job. She didn’t bother to point that out. Pointing it out wouldn’t change the past, alter the present or impact the future.

Just then a telephone rang in the distance.

“The fax machine,” Grace said, glancing toward the hallway. “That should be the background information on Odgers and Davenport.” She’d no sooner gotten the words out than Mark’s cell phone chimed.

He unclipped the phone off his belt as Grace headed out of the kitchen into the hallway. She stepped into the small, cozy room she and her sisters had converted into an office. The fax machine was humming, rolling out pages.

When she returned to the kitchen, Mark was still on the phone. She knew instantly from his comments and questions that his caller was the pathologist who’d performed the autopsy on Andrea Grayson. Grace slid onto a stool at the island and separated the pages on Dr. Odgers’s background from those on Iris Davenport. While Grace scanned the info on the nurse, she was aware that Mark’s expression grew grimmer with each passing minute.

When he clicked off the phone, his shoulders were stiff beneath his white dress shirt.

“Bad news?” she asked.

“The pathologist found traces of an anticoagulant drug in tissue samples taken from Andrea Grayson. It wasn’t a fluke she bled to death. Someone wanted her dead.”

“So they could take her baby,” Grace theorized. “Mark, I’ve got a bad feeling DeeDee Wyman was injected with the same drug. Murdered for her child.”

“I’m thinking the same, which solidly makes Davenport our prime suspect since she was present at both births.” Mark moved to peer over her shoulder. “Anything interesting on her?”

“She got a parking-trespass violation for leaving her car in a fire zone.”

“How is that interesting?”

“The address on the citation is Remington Park Racetrack.”

“Okay, so Davenport likes to play the ponies. That takes money.”

Grace continued to scan the pages. “She lied to Dr. Odgers when she told him she’d be in Kansas City taking care of her ill sister. That would be hard to do, since Iris doesn’t have a sister.”

“Did the credit card trace get a hit on where she is?”

“Las Vegas,” Grace answered, thumbing through the pages. “Iris checked into the Gold Palace a couple of days ago. Looks like she’s planning to stay at least another week.”

“The Gold Palace is one of the high-dollar places on the strip. Betting on horses,” Mark murmured. “Casino gambling. All takes money.”

“Interesting that a nurse working at a state-run clinic has the

means to fund a ritzy vacation.” Grace continued shuffling the faxed pages. “It’s going to take us time to go through this, but it looks like she was drowning in debt up until about a year ago. Then she came into some money. She took a trip to Tahoe. Stayed at a resort hotel-casino.”

“That was right after DeeDee Wyman died and her baby went missing. Then Andrea Grayson dies, her baby disappears, and Nurse Nancy takes another trip to a city where she can gamble.”

Grace looked up. “I imagine we’re thinking the same thing. Davenport kills pregnant runaways no one is likely to miss, then sells their babies to fund those trips.”

Mark settled onto the stool beside Grace’s. “Too bad we can’t prove any of that. Dr. Odgers said all clinic personnel have access to the delivery room. And the newborns.”

“And where the paperwork’s concerned, Davenport can say someone using the name of the former social worker showed up with the right credentials and took each baby. That’s stretching it, but it’ll be up to us to prove otherwise. Right now we can’t.”

“First thing we need to do is find out what happened to DeeDee Wyman,” Mark said. “If her body wasn’t cremated or donated to the cadaver program like Andrea Grayson’s, we’ll need an exhumation order and a fast autopsy. If we get the body, I have a feeling we’ll find traces of the same anticoagulant drug in her.”

“Even if we can’t get Davenport on the murders, she’d be nuts to confess to taking the infants. Each kidnap would be a long-



term felony charge. If she keeps her mouth shut, we might never find those babies. Or Davenport's accomplices, if they exist."

"You're right." Mark pursed his mouth. "So, at this point, we don't approach Davenport as cops."

Grace frowned. "Too bad that's what we are."

"Davenport doesn't know that. And it's the last thing she'd suspect if we meet her by chance in Vegas."

"In Vegas?" Grace asked carefully. She could almost see Mark's mind working in the dark depths of his eyes.

"We hook up with Davenport, presenting ourselves as a well-to-do married couple. A couple desperate to have a child."

Just the thought of parading as Mark's wife, sharing a hotel room with him, tightened the knots already in Grace's stomach.

"Aren't you a little too high profile to work undercover?"

"I'm known in law enforcement circles. But as a precaution, I'll change my hair color. Make my brows straighter."

"Since you prefer to work with local law enforcement, maybe you'd better contact the Las Vegas PD," Grace persisted. "Make arrangements for one of their female cops to work with you while you're there. Meantime, I can stay here, dig through the background info on Odgers and Davenport."

"No. If we charge either of them, they'll be filed on and tried here, the jurisdiction where the crimes were committed." Mark paused. He might as well have been sitting at a poker table for all Grace could tell from his expression. "You have a problem working with me, say so. I'll arrange to have another female

OCPD cop assigned to the case.”

“I like to finish what I start.” With stubbornness stiffening her neck, Grace stared at the faxed pages. “I want to find those babies. They were kidnapped out of the womb. I want to make sure they’re safe.”

“Then you’ll have to work the case, start to finish. Your choice, Grace. In or out?”

The fist of tension she didn’t want to acknowledge held firm in the pit of her stomach. She had thought she was over him. Over the hurt she had harbored over his keeping a part of his life closed off to her. The way she’d reacted a few minutes ago proved that was still an issue. She hated knowing that, despite the passage of six years, this man could make her feel like a jumbled mess on the inside.

And now she was going to Vegas to parade as his wife!

It was the goal that was important, she reminded herself. Find the babies. She had worked undercover numerous times. It was all pretense. Acting. This assignment would be no different. As long as she kept her mind on the job, the goal, she could handle working with Mark.

Handle it when he walked away.

Again.

“I’m in,” she said quietly.

# Chapter 4

Rarely had Mark seen an investigation involving multiple law enforcement agencies, shifts in geographical locations and the planning and financing of an elaborate undercover op move with such smooth swiftness.

He knew the efficient slicing of red tape by all involved parties was not because traces of the same anticoagulant drug discovered in Andrea Grayson's body had been found in DeeDee Wyman's hurriedly exhumed remains. Granted, two young women murdered right after giving birth at the same state-run clinic was cause for an intense investigation. As was the fact the infant born to each young woman had seemingly disappeared off the face of the earth. Further, the prime suspect was the nurse who assisted in both deliveries. Those basic details, however, were not the reason the case had been tagged a red ball—cop lingo for the homicide of a prominent official or celebrity. This time, one of the victims was the daughter of a rich, powerful man.

Mark could almost feel the strings being pulled all the way from Washington, D.C., by Senator Landon Grayson. His only child had been murdered, his granddaughter kidnapped. Grayson chaired the committee that controlled the Bureau's funding. Every citizen was deemed to be equal under the law; in truth, though, due process came swifter to the rich and powerful.

Which was why, barely two days after Mark and Grace got

their first whiff that their case was a homicide and their prime suspect was in Las Vegas, they were on a plane. A short limo ride later, they checked in to the luxury suite that had been reserved in their undercover names.

Now, standing in the living room of that elegant suite, Mark slipped a folded bill to the bellman who had over-seen the delivery of their luggage.

“Thank you, Mr. Calhoun.” The fifty-something attendant, dressed in the Gold Palace’s spotless amber-colored uniform coat and black trousers, was too experienced to even glance at the bill before pocketing it.

Mark settled his briefcase on an end table polished to a mirrorlike finish. He knew that gamblers on hot streaks gave heart-stopping tips to staff members of the hotels in which they stayed. But the undercover persona the FBI had created for him was not one of a high-rolling risk taker. Anyone running a background check on Mark Calhoun would discover the Houston, Texas, native held major interests in a number of profitable oil and gas companies and the burgeoning field of wind energy production.

Despite his substantial wealth, the fictional Mark Calhoun was not a man who tossed chips into the center of a green felt-covered table, crossed his fingers, then rolled the dice. When he did splurge, it was on homes, vehicles and vacations that provided diversions from the stresses and disappointments of everyday life. This trip was intended to be one of those diversions to help

buoy up the fictional Calhouns who had received word that their third attempt at in-vitro fertilization had failed.

“There’s an ice machine in the minibar,” the bellman said, nodding toward the glossy black wet bar on the far side of the suite. “We’ve stocked the refrigerator and cabinets according to the preferences your assistant faxed to our concierge.”

“Good.” In truth, Grace had compiled the list, which, Mark had noted, contained several boxes of the stomach-soothing tea he habitually consumed. Even in undercover mode, she saw to the comfort of those around her.

As if checking for any small detail left undone, the bellman swept his circumspect gaze around the spacious living room done in sapphires and emeralds, accented with mahogany wood and lush arrangements of flowers. “Is there anything else you or Mrs. Calhoun require at the moment?”

“Where is the safe?”

The bellman inclined his head toward the alcove arranged into an office area with a dark wood desk inlaid with intricate marquetry. Behind the desk sat a trim, matching console. “The safe is in the closet beside the console. You create the combination you desire, then clear it on your final use.”

“Fine.” Mark slipped his key card into the inside pocket of his black suit coat. The safe would be used to store his and Grace’s law enforcement credentials and weapons during their stay. As an extra level of security, Mark would attach a small device that required the entering of three separate combinations before the

safe's door would open.

Catching movement out of the corner of his eye, he glanced sideways as Grace stepped out of the double-wide doors that led to the bedroom.

“Darling,” he said. Sending her a husband’s intimate smile, he extended a hand her way. “Do the other rooms meet with your satisfaction?”

Mark studied Grace as she crossed the ocean of Oriental carpet that separated them. Just as he had done by a subtle change to his hair color and brows, she, too, had altered her appearance. Instead of the sweaters and man-tailored slacks she favored, she now wore a figure-skimming silver silk pantsuit and matching high-heeled boots. Her hair, usually clipped back, hung loose, falling like soft, black rain to her shoulders. She’d shaded her brown eyes with copper highlights that lent them a slightly exotic look and applied a darker blush, emphasizing her fine-boned cheeks. A slick of coral covered her lips, making her mouth look glossy and luminous and far too tempting to a man who knew exactly how that mouth tasted.

A man who was well aware that her new look in no way made her a different person from the woman he’d known so intimately. She had merely transformed herself into a different type of person on the surface.

Just as he had the day he watched her walk into her boss’s office after a separation of six years, Mark felt something stir deep inside him. Something no other woman had ever been able

to touch.

Even as her hand slid into his, he reminded himself that, although he and Grace had shared something special, they had chosen to walk away and let it die. The logical part of Mark's brain theorized that whatever it was that now moved inside him was merely an echo of the searing need and passion he had once felt for Grace.

And regret, he conceded.

How many times over the years had he replayed their relationship in his mind, adjusting the elemental needs and desires they both felt in order to get a different outcome? More times than he would like to admit.

Since it appeared their basic needs had not changed, Mark knew he should have the good sense to leave well enough alone. But at this instant, standing beside her with his hand circling hers and the warmth of her flesh seeping into his, temptation lured him like a seductive smile. And the force of the regret he still carried for what might have been nudged him from behind.

"The bedroom and bath are fine." Grace gave the bellman a polite, polished smile. "I had asked for a schedule for the health spa."

"Yes, Mrs. Calhoun, it's on the desk. Once you decide when you want to visit the spa, the concierge will take care of the scheduling."

"Thank you," Grace said. "I think that's all for now."

"Yes, ma'am."

Mark breathed in Grace's soft, subtle scent while they stood side by side, tracking the bellman's progress across the suite. When the door clicked closed behind the man, Mark sensed her shoulders stiffening, felt the tenseness settle into her fingers, still wrapped in his hand. He knew he should ease his grip, release her. Yet, he held on while memories he'd locked away rushed to the surface. Memories of the feel of her soft hands against his heated flesh. The warmth of her body, the comfort she had offered that no one else had ever given him.

When she tugged her hand from his, he felt the scrape of the stunning diamond she now wore in the guise of Mrs. Mark Calhoun.

With his mind snapping back to thoughts of the job, Mark turned to the table where he'd left his briefcase. While he input the combination and unsnapped the locks, he felt the familiar shudder of the fatigue that lately seemed to reach to the marrow of his bones. That sense of weariness reminded him Grace McCall-Fox wasn't the only thing he had to regret. There were the cases he had failed to solve, the trials lost. The child molesters and killers who had slipped through his fingers, the dream that almost nightly had him seeing again each of those victims, reliving every failure. He carried each regret like a stone around his shoulders. With all that weight, he shouldn't feel so hollow on the inside, but he did.

"Mark?"

He looked up, met Grace's waiting gaze and saw the



puzzlement in her dark eyes. They'd spent the past two days formulating their ops plan for this assignment, and he knew what she was waiting for. Knew, too, she was wondering if there was some reason he'd stood staring like an idiot into his briefcase.

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