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FOR THE CHILDREN

Margaret Watson

Contents:

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Chapter 1

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If the purple dinosaur hadn't stopped singing, Abby Markham would never have heard the glass breaking. Just as the song ended, she caught the muffled tinkling coming from the basement.

Her hands tightened on the book she was reading, and she automatically looked at her two nieces. The girls hadn't noticed a thing. Two blond heads stared at the television, enthralled by the antics on the popular children's program.

Abby swallowed once, then dropped the book and went to stand by the closed basement door.

Straining to bear over the exuberant shouts of children's voices coming from the television, she wanted to think that it was her imagination. That there was nothing wrong in the basement. But she remembered the man who'd sat in his car outside of her house for so long last night, and the hair rose on the back of her neck.

She had almost managed to convince herself that the sound had come from somewhere outside the house when a dull thud vibrated up from the basement. Almost, she thought, as if something had fallen onto the floor.

Or someone had jumped onto the floor from one of the windows.

Fear twisted inside her as she looked over at her twin nieces. Casey and Maggie had scooted closer to the television, completely mesmerized by the program she'd taped for them to watch. They hadn't even bothered to look over at her when she went to stand by the basement door. Whatever she did, she couldn't alarm them.

Pressing the button that locked the basement door, she hurried over to the two girls, wrapped one arm around each tiny waist and lifted them into the air. "Are you guys ready for some ice cream?" she

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whispered.

Both girls snuggled closer and shouted, "Yes!" Casey leaned back and looked at her, asking, "Why are you whispering, Aunt Abby?"

"Because that's the only way you'll hear me. Barney's being too loud."

Maggie giggled. "You're joking me, Aunt Abby. You have to talk loud if you want someone to hear you."

"You heard me, didn't you?" Abby answered as she nuzzled Maggie's fragrant hair. Tightening her arms around the girls, she started up the stairs to the kitchen of the split-level house. Every step she took made her heart pound faster as the fear expanded in her chest. The simple lock was no protection against someone determined to get in the house. At best it would delay an intruder for a few minutes. She expected to hear the basement door slam open any second.

When she reached the kitchen she didn't stop, grabbing her purse and keys off the counter and practically running across the floor to the door leading to the garage.

"Where are we going, Aunt Abby?" Casey asked, her arms tightening around Abby's neck.

"To get ice cream, remember?" Abby kissed her cheek quickly and fumbled for the door handle.

"There's ice cream here." Literal Maggie pointed, then reached for the freezer door.

"We'll have our choice of flavors." Abby scrambled desperately to turn the key in the door while balancing both girls in her arms. Nothing in the world could force her to set one of them on the floor. She would hold on to them

until they were out of danger, strapped into the car and backing down the driveway.

The key finally turned the lock with a click, and she threw open the door and ran into the garage. The light from the kitchen was a golden wedge in the darkness, outlining the shape of the car. Wrenching open the car door, she strapped the girls into their car seats with shaking hands and then got into the front seat. Drawing a deep breath, she managed to put the key in the ignition after only two tries. She started the engine at the same time as she pressed the garage-door opener.

Hands gripping the steering wheel, she waited while the garage door slowly opened. Every second that passed was an eternity as she waited for someone to appear in the light from the kitchen door.

The garage door was barely halfway open when she shifted into reverse and backed out. The roof of her car skimmed the rising door, and then she was free. Gunning the car engine, she squealed the tires as she hit the street, then squealed them again as she shifted gears and sped out of the quiet, dark subdivision in a suburb of Las Vegas.

"Why are we going so fast, Aunt Abby?" asked Maggie.

"We don't want the ice cream to melt before we get there, do we, honey?" Abby forced her mouth into what would have to pass for a cheerful smile as she glanced over her shoulder at the twins in the back seat.

When they saw her smile, they relaxed and giggled. "You're silly, Aunt Abby," came the chorus from the back seat, and Abby felt some of the tension dissipate.

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Her sister Janna had called five days ago, asking if Abby could watch the twins while she went on a business trip. Janna had been frantic. Her boss had told her that afternoon that they had to go away immediately. They couldn't even wait until the next day. Since Abby didn't teach during the

summer, she hadn't hesitated. She had been thrilled to have her nieces stay with her, but almost as soon as her sister left she had realized something was wrong with the twins.

Normally cheerful and outgoing Casey had been quiet and withdrawn. Maggie, the more thoughtful twin, had alternated between clinging to Abby and clinging to her sister. And both of the girls had had nightmares. Abby had been so disturbed that she'd tried to contact Janna. Every time she'd called, the hotel could only tell her that Janna wasn't in her room.

Abby looked in the rearview mirror and listened to the pair chattering about which flavor of ice cream they wanted and felt herself relax a little. It had probably been her imagination that had made her think something was wrong with the girls. Right now they looked like typical five-year-olds.

But it hadn't been her imagination back at the house. There had been someone in the basement, and she had to call the police. It was only a few more blocks to the ice-cream store and the public phone that stood outside it.

Five minutes later, as the girls sat in chairs and slurped their icecream, she picked up the phone and dialed the police.

Giving her name and address, she gripped the receiver as she told the police officer what had happened.

"Are you still in the house?" he asked sharply.

"No. I'm at the Happy Dairy Ice Cream Store."

She heard paper shuffling, then a long pause. He cleared his throat and asked, "You called us about someone sitting in a car outside your house lastnight, didn't you?"

"Yes. Two officers came out to the house, but the man was gone by the time they arrived."

He hesitated, then asked, "You told the officers that you had two children in the house last night. Are they still with you?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" She gripped the phone more tightly, wondering what was going on.

"I ah, just want to ascertain that everyone is out of the house."

"Of course we're all out of the house! Do you think I'd run off and leave my nieces?"

"Of course not, Ms. Markham." He was speaking too quickly. "Ma'am, I want you to stay at the ice-cream store. Someone will meet you there. In the meantime I'll send a patrol car to your house. You just stay where you are."

"Thank you," Abby said, but the phone was already dead. Hanging it up slowly, she walked into the store and sat down next to Casey. She had to resist the urge to gather both girls into her arms and escape out the door. Something was wrong. The tone of the policeman's voice as he asked her if they

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were all out of the house vibrated in her head, and a sick feeling began to gather in her gut. A man had sat in a car outside her house for hours last night, and someone had broken into the house tonight.

Something was very wrong.

Maggie offered her cone to Casey for a taste, and a bead of melting ice cream rolled down the side of the cone and fell to the floor. Gripped by a sudden panic, Abby turned to her nieces.

"Finish up your ice cream, girls. We need to go."

"I don't want to go to bed, Aunt Abby," twin voices wailed. Swallowing around the lump of fear in her throat, Abby saw a flash out of the corner of her eye and looked for the telltale lights that would warn her that the police

had arrived. Reassured when she saw only a nondescript black sedan pull into the parking lot, she turned back to Casey and Maggie.

"How about we have an adventure tonight, then?"

Both girls stared at her, cones forgotten and dripping onto the floor. "What kind of 'venture?" they asked eagerly.

She thought quickly. They would be safe in a motel tonight. They could blend into the Las Vegas crowds and be completely anonymous. Maybe the police would find something at her house, some reason they were being targeted.

"How about we spend the night at a motel?"

Casey furled her forehead. "Why?"

"Just because it would be fun." Abby heard the desperation in her voice and tried to calm down. "That's what aunts are for, remember? To have fun."

Casey thought about it for a moment. "Okay," she said, finishing the rest of her ice-cream cone.

Maggie's lip trembled. "I need my white blanket."

"You can sleep with me tonight, Mags. Then you won't need to cuddle with your blanket." Abby grabbed a handful of napkins and began to scrub the girls' hands. "How would that be?"

Maggie shook her head, tears glinting in her eyes. "I have to have my white blanket."

The door to the ice-cream store opened, but Abby didn't even bother to look up. "Just for tonight, Maggie?" she pleaded. "We'll get it tomorrow."

Maggie grabbed Abby's skirt and pressed her face into the material. "I need it." Her voice was muffled, and Abby bent down to pick her up.

"I know," she whispered into the blond head buried in her neck. "But we can't get it tonight, honey. I promise we'll get it tomorrow."

Grabbing Casey's hand, she headed for the door, panic and fear swirling together in her head. She had it halfway open when the voice spoke from behind her.

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"Going somewhere, Ms. Markham?"

Abby's heart slammed against her chest. Spinning around, she saw a tall figure in black leaning against the wall, watching her and the twins. The man seemed to tower above her, his black turtleneck and jeans only emphasizing his broad shoulders and long, lean length.

Holding Maggie and Casey more tightly, she said, "Who are you?"

He pushed away from the wall and held out his hand. "Damien Kane. The Las Vegas police sent me here."

Abby shook his hand reluctantly, unable to look away from his dark eyes. "I'm Abby Markham." She pulled her hand away from his quickly, uncomfortable with his regard and his closeness.

"Why don't you get in my car, Ms. Markham, and we'll go back to your house?"

Abby backed up another step and pulled Casey behind her. "I don't think so, Mr. Kane. I'm not accustomed to getting into strangers' cars. In fact, I don't think you showed me any identification."

A quick flash of what might have been approval passed through Damien Kane's eyes. Then they were flat and unreadable again. Without a word he pulled a wallet out of his pocket and flipped it open, handing it to her. The light from the ice-cream store gleamed dully on the badge.

Abby's hands tightened on the wallet as she looked back up at him, fear rolling over her in waves. "This says you're an FBI agent. Why is the FBI interested in a simple break-in? What's going on?"

"I'd rather not discuss it here, Ms. Markham." The agent looked at the girl behind the ice-cream counter, who was watching them avidly. "Why don't we go back to your house and talk?"

One of the plastic chairs that lined the wall pressed into the backs of her knees, reminding her that she couldn't retreat any farther. Damien Kane blocked the exit from the store. Her body hummed with the need to protect her nieces. She stared at Kane, trying to decide what to do.

"If you try to run, I'll just follow you." He spoke almost casually, watching her with his obsidian eyes. As she continued to stare at him, frantically trying to think of what to do next, he stepped closer.

"Come on, Ms. Markham, you called the police." There was a hint of impatience in his voice. "Don't you want to find out if they caught the person in your house?"

"I have to take care of my nieces," she said almost desperately. "I have to make sure they're safe. I'm taking them to a motel for the night."

"I'll help you find one after we talk." His gaze slid over the girls and back to her.

Abby stared at him, mesmerized by his dark eyes and hard face. He wasn't going to take no for an answer, she realized. He'd stand there all night until she agreed to talk to him.

"All right," she said abruptly. "I must admit, I'm curious about why the FBI is interested in us. Let's go."

Damien Kane stepped back, and she walked out the door, holding tightly to Maggie and Casey. As she

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headed to her car, she could feel Kane's gaze on her back. It burned through her sweatshirt and bored into her chest, adding another layer to the fear already there.

"Are we still going to have a 'venture, Aunt Abby?" Casey asked.

"You bet, sweetheart." Abby forced another smile onto her lips as she eased Maggie into the car and reached for Casey. "But Mr. Kane wants us to go back to the house first."

"He must have heard me say I needed my white blanket." Maggie's voice, sleepy and smug, came from the other side of the back seat. "He's a nice man."

A nice man was the last way she would describe Damien Kane, Abby thought as she drove slowly toward her house a few minutes later. His headlights never wavered in her rearview mirror, and she had no doubt that if she tried to bolt he'd be right behind her.

No, *unsettling* was the way she'd describe him. Her gaze drifted back to the reflection of his headlights in her mirror as she thought about his steady, unreadable gaze and the still, silent way he held himself as he'd confronted her back at the ice-cream store. She sensed that Damien Kane was not a man you crossed.

So she'd tell him what happened before she left for the motel. Twisting around, she glanced quickly at the twins in the back seat. Their eyes were beginning to glaze, and she knew they were ready for bed.

How long could it take to tell Mr. Kane about what had happened tonight and last night? In a half hour at the most they would be on their way to a safe, impersonal motel somewhere in the vast sea of people that was Las Vegas.

When she pulled up in front of her house, she parked behind the two police cars that sat in the street with their lights flashing. Lights blazed in every room in her house. Just seeing the yellow glow streaming out of the windows made her feel better, and she hurried to get Maggie and Casey out of the car.

The girls' eyes were closed, so she picked them up and carried them toward the house, one on each arm. It wouldn't be too much longer, she thought with a pang, before they would be too heavy to be carried like that.

Damien Kane appeared suddenly and opened the door for them. "Thank you," she murmured, glancing at him then looking away. As she walked through the door, she was careful not to brush against him. She wanted no part of the coiled power that seemed to emanate from him.

"Why don't you put them to bed?" he said in a level voice while his gaze scanned the living room. "I'll wait."

"We're not staying here tonight. I thought I made that clear."

"They're already sleeping," he said, still not looking at her. "If you decide to go somewhere, you can move them later."

Maggie and Casey were becoming deadweight on her shoulders. "All right," she said, shifting them on her chest. "I'll be right down." She heard the murmurs of men talking in her kitchen as she walked up the stairs, and out of the corner of her eye she saw two policemen. Obviously there was no intruder in the house now. Even without the reassuring presence of the police, the sense of menace she'd felt in the house earlier had disappeared. Whoever had been here was long gone.

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Lowering both girls to one of the twin beds in the room they used, she removed their shoes and pulled the quilt over them, then tucked Maggie's security blanket beside her. After she flicked off the light, she knelt down

next to the bed and smoothed the hair away from their cheeks, kissing both of them softly.

Nothing would hurt the girls while she was watching them, she vowed fiercely.

As she slowly walked downstairs, she heard the murmur of low voices in the kitchen. When she walked into the room, all three of the men were abruptly silent. Damien stood in the darkest part of the kitchen, blending into the shadows.

Beating down the frisson of uneasiness that shivered through her, she looked at the uniformed officers.

"Did you find anything?"

"The basement window is broken, but we didn't find your intruder. He was gone before we got here,"

one young policeman said. "Probably ran off into the scrub back there." He nodded at the hillside covered with mesquite and cactus behind her house. "If it was daylight we might have a chance at flushing him out, but not in the darkness."

"The only thing we could find disturbed was some luggage in the basement. It looks like the intruder went through a couple of small suitcases that were sitting on a table." The other policeman spoke up.

"You'll have to look around, but that was all we found other than the broken window."

Abby looked around her kitchen. Nothing was disturbed, as far as she could tell. Hope rose in her chest. Maybe she had just overreacted. Maybe there hadn't been anyone in the house after all.

"Are you sure someone actually broke in, then? Maybe it was just an animal that broke the window."

"Someone was here, all right." It was the first officer. "No animal opened those suitcases. There were muddy footprints on the basement floor and leading up the stairs, and the lock on the basement door is broken. No, Ms. Markham, you were right to get out and call us like you did."

Abby glanced over at Kane, then back at the two policemen. "Then what's the FBI doing here?"

Both of the young officers shuffled their feet and looked uncomfortable. "If you don't know, ma'am, maybe Mr. Kane should be the one to tell you." It was the first officer who spoke again.

Abby turned to Kane. "Well, Mr. Kane?"

He ignored her. "Are you two finished here?" he asked the police officers.

"Yes, sir. We just have to fill out a report, and we can do that in the car." They turned to Abby again.

"You'll want to put something over that broken window tonight. If you hear anything else, you just call.

Good night, Ms. Markham, Mr. Kane."

The two officers walked out the front door, closing it gently behind them. Damien turned to her. "Why don't we sit down? It may take a while to explain what's going on."

"What do you mean, it might take a while?" Abby's fear came rushing back. The sense of something wrong, which had been hanging over her head ever since her sister had dropped off the twins, blossomed into a sick feeling of dread in the pit of her stomach.

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Damien stood in the middle of her living room, watching her. "How much notice did your sister give you when she asked you to watch her daughters?"

"She called in the afternoon, as soon as her boss told her about the trip, and brought them over in the evening." Abby swallowed, trying to dislodge the lump of fear sticking in her throat. She couldn't look away from the man standing in front of her. He seemed to fill the room with his presence.

"How long had she known about this business trip?"

"She called me as soon as she found out. She was angry that her boss hadn't given her any notice."

"Does this happen often?"

"What does my sister have to do with a prowler?" Abby felt her fear growing, swelling inside her until it swallowed everything else.

"I'll tell you in a moment. Does she have to go away on short notice very often?"

Slowly Abby shook her head. "She has to go on business trips once in a while, but she usually has several days' notice. Her boss knows she has children and has to make arrangements for them."

"What about their father?"

She tightened her mouth. "He isn't a part of their lives. He hasn't been since before they were born."

"Would her boss know she'd leave her children with you?" Abby nodded. "I always take care of them when she has to go away."

He watched her carefully. "Did your sister talk about anything unusual that might have happened at work that day?" His eyes hardened, and for an instant he was an implacable foe.

She shook her head. "No. She was worried about the twins and leaving them on such short notice. She barely had time to get them over to me before she had to catch her plane."

He turned away, but not before she saw the frustration on his face. "A man was murdered at the construction site where your sister works. We think it happened on the day she left on the business trip, but the body wasn't found for another day. So she probably didn't even know about it."

Taking a deep breath, he continued, "Apparently your nieces were with their mother the day it happened. Other people who work at the site say the girls sometimes play just outside the office. It's possible they saw it happen."

"Murder?" she whispered, appalled. "I haven't heard about a murder around here. Are you sure that Maggie and Casey might have seen someone murdered?" She wrapped her arms around her waist and stared at the man watching her.

He nodded grimly. "We haven't released the information yet. And I find it very suspicious that your sister was whisked away on a business trip right after Joey was murdered. It looks to me like someone deliberately separated her from her children before the girls would have a chance to tell her what they saw."

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His gaze bored into her. "Have you ever had a problem with prowlers before this?"

"No." She shook her head numbly.

"I didn't think so. I think that the people who killed Joey Stefanetto know your nieces saw something.

And they're trying to make sure they don't tell what they know."

"You don't know for sure that they saw this murder," she whispered. "They haven't said anything to me."

"That's possible." She thought his eyes softened just a little. "I hope, for their sakes, that they didn't see Joey killed. But until we know for sure, I'm

going to assume that they did."

A suffocating cloud of horror seemed to surround Abby. "Maggie has crawled into bed with me every night, saying she was having a bad dream," she whispered. "I just assumed it was because her mother left so abruptly."

His lips thinned. "I think there's more to it than that. We've been looking for your nieces for the past five days, Ms. Markham. I was afraid they were with your sister."

"How did you find them?" Abby asked.

"One of your sister's co-workers told me this afternoon that the girls might be with you. Then this evening I saw your police report from last night and realized the girls were indeed with you. I was on my way to your house when the police called me to tell me about the prowler." His eyes hardened. "I've been checking every police report from the greaterLas Vegasarea since the day your sister left town. I was beginning to think that I wouldn't find her daughters alive."

Abby's head spun and her stomach roiled. "Why wouldn't my nieces be alive, Mr. Kane? What's going on?"

"The man who was killed was a witness in a federal racketeering case that's almost ready to go to trial.

He was a member of the Mob, and he was prepared to testify against the people who paid him." His mouth tightened. "So if there are witnesses who saw who killed him, they would be in great danger."

"Why are you involved?" she asked.

His eyes looked like black stones, hard and implacable. "This was my case. I spent a lot of time putting it together, and it's a big blow to lose our star witness. I need to know who killed him."

She was horribly afraid she did understand. "And you think my nieces can tell you who did it."

"I'm not sure, no. But I think there's a good chance. And now that I've found them, I have no intention of letting them out of my sight until they tell me what they know."

"They may not know anything, Mr. Kane," she said, praying that it was true. "And even if they did see this man killed, they're just little girls. They wouldn't understand what had happened."

"It's my job to find out what they did see. If they weren't anywhere around when Joey was murdered, fine." He stared at her with his disturbing eyes, dark and compelling. "But if they didn't see anything, why are they having nightmares, Ms. Markham?" His voice was soft and relentless.

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Please, God, let this not be true, she prayed. "Casey and Maggie are five years old," she said, desperation tinging her voice. "They miss their mother. Maybe that's all it is."

"Maybe." She knew from his tone he didn't think that was the reason for the nightmares.

"How long did your sister say she would be gone?" He sat down across from her, and some of his intensity seemed to ease. It was almost as if they were carrying on a normal conversation.

"Janna didn't know." She looked at him as the horror of what had happened grew. "She's in danger, too, isn't she?"

"I'm afraid so." His eyes softened again. "She probably doesn't know anything about the murder. And as long as she doesn't, she should be safe."

"She would never have left the girls if she thought something was wrong." Abby's voice was low and passionate.

"You're probably right. Everything I've found out about her indicates that she's a devoted mother." He watched her carefully. "Do you know where

she is?"

"She's in Mexico." Abby hurried into the kitchen and gave him the piece of paper that listed her sister's hotel and her phone number. "Didn't anyone at her office know where she'd gone?"

His lips tightened. "Apparently the trip was so spur-of-the-moment that no one thought to tell her co-workers where she'd be." He studied the piece of paper she'd handed him then folded it into his pocket. "We'll get someone down there immediately. And now you're involved, too." He studied her.

"Isn't it hard on you, taking care of two children and not knowing how long it would be?"

"I don't consider it a hardship to take care of my nieces," she declared, eyes blazing at him. "I'm thrilled at the opportunity to spend time with them."

"Who watches them while you work?"

"No one. I'm a teacher. I teach elementary school, and since this is the summer, I'm not working."

He stood up and paced around her living room. His long, lean body, dressed all in black, seemed to send out waves of energy, filling the space and making the room seem small and too crowded. She wanted to step outside, to take a deep breath, but all she could do was watch him pace.

"I'll need to talk to the girls in the morning," he finally said. "I need to find out what they saw, as soon as possible."

"They must have been so frightened," she whispered. "Maybe they've already forgotten all about it. If you question them, maybe it will only force them to remember something they need to forget."

"That's not the way it works, Ms. Markham." She saw pain sear his eyes for a moment, then it was gone.

"It doesn't do any good to bury it. It'll only fester somewhere deep down inside of them."

"We'll leave town," she said, desperate to protect the twins from the pain of remembering. "We'll go away until the person who killed your Joey is caught."

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He shook his head. "You can't run away. Your nieces won't be safe until they've told someone what they know. As long as the killer thinks your nieces are witnesses, he won't stop until he silences them.

One of my sources has told me that men are searching for your nieces. There's a lot at stake for a number of people, and those girls won't be safe until the murderer is caught."

"I'm not running away," she said, fear overwhelming her. "I just want to protect them."

"Believe me, I want the same thing. But running isn't going to do it."

"All right, I'll think about it."

"You do that and we'll discuss it in the morning." Pain flashed in his eyes again. "I'm certainly not going to wake them up to talk to them now."

"Give me your card," she said, standing up. "I'll call you in the morning."

He gave her an incredulous look. "I'm not going anywhere. Your nieces are important witnesses to a serious crime, and they are very likely in danger. I'm going to stay right here."

"You can't stay in my house tonight!"

"Why not?" He gave her a level look.

"Because ... because." She couldn't tell him the truth, that he disturbed her at a very basic level. She was too aware of him, but this wasn't about her. It was about Maggie and Casey and their safety.

"Fine," she said, too sharply.

As she turned away, a high, thin wail pierced the air. The sound made the hair rise on the back of her neck. It came from the room where the twins were sleeping. Taking the steps two at a time, she reached the door just as Maggie stumbled into the hallway.

Her eyes were closed and her blanket was clutched tightly in one hand. Abby sank to the floor and scooped her up, holding her close and rocking her. When she turned her head to kiss the girl's cheek, she found it wet with tears.

"What is it, honey?" she whispered. "What's wrong, Maggie?"

Maggie curled her anus around Abby's neck and buried her face in her throat. "There's something wrong with my white blanket, Aunt Abby. Look at it," she sobbed. "It's all red."

Abby glanced down at the blanket, tucked between their bodies. It looked the same as it had when she'd tucked it next to Maggie, a tattered grayish white. There wasn't a spot of color on it.

When she raised her head, she met Damien Kane's eyes as he crouched on the stairs behind her, his gun drawn.

Chapter 2

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Damien watched Abby Markham rock the little girl, murmuring soothing words and stroking her hair.

Her arms were wrapped tightly around the child, shielding her from whatever horrors she'd faced in her sleep. Abby reminded him of a lioness, protecting one of her cubs from a threatening world.

Her eyes met his across the top of the small blond head. In them he saw pain and fear for the girl, but there was a challenge in their hazel depths that surprised him. She was questioning his ability to protect the child, he realized with a deep jolt of surprise. It wasn't often that anyone challenged Damien Kane.

And it wasn't often that he noticed the color of a woman's eyes, either. Uncomfortable with his reaction, he turned and walked down the stairs, holstering his gun at the same time. He didn't want to know any more about Abby Markham than how to persuade her to let him talk to her nieces. He wanted no part of her or her hazel eyes.

Walking into the kitchen, he studied the neat counters, trying to block out the pain he'd heard in the child's voice. He didn't want to feel it. He couldn't bear to feel it. All he wanted to do was find out who had killed Joey Stefanetto.

It seemed like a long time before Abby came back down the stairs. She walked into the kitchen, looking at everything but him

"She's finally back to sleep," she murmured with a weary sigh.

He didn't want to hear that weariness, either. "Are you convinced I need to talk to them?" he found himself asking.

She looked at him then. "You know how to attack when a person is vulnerable, don't you?"

"I'm just doing my job. And trying to protect your nieces."

"You're not going to take no for an answer, are you, Mr. Kane?"

He looked into her eyes, now a muddy brown with fatigue and worry. "No, I'm not. Not when it's my job."

"I'm not part of your job, Mr. Kane. And neither are Maggie and Casey," she snapped at him, her sudden anger making her eyes glow with a greenish light.

He couldn't bring himself to look away. Her eyes were pools of emotion, drawing him in. It had been a long time since he'd allowed himself to feel anything, and for a moment the lure of her gaze was too potent to resist.

Then he turned away, his will reasserting itself. Some things were better left alone. "Whether you want to be or not, both you and your nieces are involved in my case, Ms. Markham. Have you forgotten that someone broke into your home tonight?"

"You have no way of knowing that had anything to do with Maggie and Casey." She waved her hand in the air. "It could just as easily be a kid, looking for something to steal."

He looked at her somberly. "I hope, for your sake, that's all it is. But can you afford to take that kind of chance with those two girls?"

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Her face tightened, and for a split second he saw the fear. Then she managed to control it and force it back into hiding. "If it wasn't just an ordinary burglary, then going away tomorrow will take care of it."

We'll take a vacation, just disappear. The girls will be safe once we're out of Las Vegas."

It was false bravado, and he knew it. He pressed his advantage. "How long can you stay away? Sooner or later you'll have to come back to Las Vegas. And what if the men searching for your nieces find you before then?"

"If you've done your job and caught the person who killed this Joey, then we'll have nothing to worry about, will we?" she said coolly.

The glimmer of admiration he felt for her surprised him. He should be furious with her for not listening to him. Her stubbornness was only going to make his job more difficult, and would ultimately put her and her nieces in more danger.

"It'll be easier for me to do my job if I get a little cooperation from you," he said, speaking in a low voice.

"I'll tell you anything you want to know." She lifted her chin a fraction higher.

Pushing away from the counter, he shoved his hands into his pockets and stared out the blackened-glass door that led outside. Something moved inside him at the way she stepped up to protect the two little girls, something he didn't want to feel. "I doubt very much there's anything you could tell me. But I think you should let your nieces talk to one of our psychologists."

When she didn't answer immediately, he turned around to look at her. Abby had her arms clutched around her stomach again, as if trying to ward off a blow. "Ms. Markham?" he said, alarmed.

"They must be so scared," she whispered. "So confused. Would they think it was somehow their fault?"

How do you explain murder to a five-year-old child?"

He didn't want to think about those two little girls, asleep upstairs. He'd avoided children for the past three years, tried to block out any memories, bad or good. If he thought about those children and their nightmares, the pain would be unendurable.

He'd dreaded this moment for the past five days, dreaded the time he'd have to confront the girls and ask them what they'd seen, But it had been his fault that Joey got away. He should have checked the guards more carefully. Now Joey was dead, and it was his job to catch his killer. Even if it involved something as painful as connecting with, a child again.

But right now the children were asleep, and they were safe.

And so was he.

So he focused on their aunt instead. "You don't know what, if anything, they saw. And until you do, you can't explain anything to them. Let them talk to a psychologist, Abby. At least know for sure if they're involved."

She looked at him, and this time there was only uncertainty in her eyes. That, and a deep, abiding fear he didn't understand. "I don't know," she whispered. "I'm not sure what Janna would want. I'll have to think

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about it."

"You do that. In the meantime are you going to go to a motel or are you going to stay here tonight?"

She looked around her kitchen as if she were surveying a foreign land she'd never seen before. "I suppose it doesn't make any difference, since you refuse to leave," she said finally. Looking over at him, she managed a wan half smile. "To tell you the truth, I'm glad that I won't be alone. Even in a motel I probably wouldn't have been able to sleep."

Deep purple smudges ringed her eyes, and her face suddenly looked pinched. He'd succeeded too well in scaring her. A faint twinge of guilt flickered across his conscience, and he immediately dismissed it.

Solving this case was far too important to worry about bruising the sensibilities of a stubborn, illogical woman.

In the morning she'd agree to let the kids talk to a psychologist, he'd arrange police protection for them while he went after the murderer and that would be the end of it. He wouldn't have to think about Abby Markham and her hazel eyes and fiercely protective heart again. And he wouldn't have to spend any more time around the two girls, children who were a constant reminder of his own loss.

He turned to ask her where she wanted him to sleep when something thumped against the glass in front of him. He flashed into action, automatically drawing his gun as he stared at the blackness on the other side of the window. Nothing moved in the night darkness. He couldn't see a thing.

Apparently Abby did, because she walked over to the door and began to unlock it. Before she could open the door, he was beside her, his hand on her wrist.

She looked at him, surprised. "What's wrong?"

The skin of her arm was cool and smooth, sliding under his fingers like the glassy surface of a lake in the summer. He didn't want to notice how she felt, but his hand tightened as he drew her away from the door.

"Don't open the door until you know what's out there. For God's sake, it's late at night and someone tried to break into your house earlier," he said harshly. "What are you thinking of?"

"I know what's out there," she murmured. She didn't seem to be able to stop staring at him, and he realized he was still holding her arm. Awareness of him slowly flickered to life in her eyes, then she hastily looked away.

Pulling gently away from him, she backed up a step and turned around, reaching for the door handle. "It's only Angus."

"Who the hell is Angus?" His voice was grim, he realized, and laced with anger at himself. He had no business noticing anything about this woman that wasn't relevant to his job.

She slid open the glassdoor, and an enormous black animal strolled in. When he rubbed his huge head against her knee, Damien realized it was a cat, the biggest damn cat he'd ever seen.

"My God. What is that, a cat or a mountain lion?"

Bending over to scratch the animal's head, she looked up and gave him a quick smile. "He's just an alley cat. I think."

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The cat purred so loudly that Damien could almost feel the floor rumbling under his feet. Suddenly Angus jumped up on one of the kitchen chairs and sat down, watching him with an unnerving, unblinking yellow stare. Damien noticed that half of one of his ears was missing and there was a huge bald spot on the side of his neck.

"It looks like he's had a rough life," he said, watching the way Abby's hand seemed to hover over the cat's head. It looked as if she was shielding the cat from his criticism.

"I suspect he has," she agreed, petting Angus again. "He showed up at the patio door one day, thumping to get in like he did just now. He sauntered in like he belonged here, and the rest is history."

"Do you take in strays often?"

She straightened. "Only when they need me." Her voice softened, and as she ran her hand down the animal's back, he arched up to meet her. Then he jumped off the chair and wandered off.

"Any other animals out there you're expecting tonight?" he asked, nodding toward the darkness.

"No, just Angus." She turned around and locked the door, then looked at him again with what almost seemed like nervousness. "I have a spare bedroom, if you want to sleep there."

"I'd rather stay down here. It'll be easier to hear anything unusual."

Licking her lips, she stared at him for a moment. She was trying desperately to hide her fear, and he wondered uneasily why it was so easy for him to see her vulnerability. "The police are out in front, aren't they?"

"They're supposed to be."

"So why would you think something is going to happen tonight?"

"I don't." He kept his voice patient. "But I'm not about to take any chances. I'll stay down here."

"All right. I'll get you a pillow and some blankets." She turned and walked upstairs, returning in a few minutes with a stack of linens. Automatically checking the doors to make sure they were locked, she paused in the kitchen doorway. "We'll talk in the morning," she said, then disappeared. A moment later he heard a door closing softly above him.

He rechecked all the doors, then went down to the basement and covered the broken window with some pieces of wood he found stacked in a corner. Once upstairs again, he spread out the sheets and blanket on the couch, turned off the lights and lay down.

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he listened to the night sounds. In order to hear any movement outside, he'd left a window open. The quiet of the desert drifted in, the rasp of an insect loud in the silence.

Inside the house was another matter. A sliver of yellow light shone from upstairs. He could hear Abby moving around, could hear the rustle of bed linens being drawn back. Finally the light disappeared and the noises

stopped. He heard the door open a crack, and he heard her walk across the floor again.

She wanted to hear her nieces if they woke again, he realized. Staring at the stairs, he punched his pillow

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and twisted on the narrow couch. As he strained to listen, he imagined the faint rustling that drifted down to him was the sound of her turning over in her bed. When he realized his whole body was tense from the effort of trying to hear her, he excoriated himself with a vicious oath and rolled over, shutting his eyes. But it was a long time before he slept.

* * *

Abby opened her eyes the next morning and stretched, smiling lazily at the ribbon of sunlight streaming in through the crack in the curtain. Rolling over, she bumped into something soft and warm lying cuddled next to her.

She rose up onto one elbow and brushed the tangled blond hair out of the girl's face. Maggie. Lowering herself back down onto the mattress, she sighed as she pulled the sleeping child closer. She should have known. Maggie was a restless sleeper anyway, and after the nightmare she'd had the evening before, it wasn't surprising that she'd wandered into Abby's bed during the night.

Her arm tightened around Maggie as she remembered the dark, quiet man who slept on her couch downstairs. What should she do? All her instincts screamed at her to take the girls and run, as fast and as far as possible.

Where would they go? According to Damien, men were looking for them. Men who wanted to hurt Maggie and Casey. Could she go far enough to get away from them?

Maybe he's right, a small voice murmured inside her. Maybe the twins did see something horrible happen, and they needed to talk about it. Maybe the

best way she could protect them was to do what Damien wanted and encourage them to talk about what they'd seen.

An unfamiliar hopeless, frightened feeling surrounded her and settled on her chest, weighing down on her relentlessly. She was a teacher, used to being in charge in her classroom, just as she was in charge of her life. Where Maggie and Casey were concerned, she wasn't about to relinquish her authority to anyone else, even the FBI. Once she let the authorities intervene, would she set in motion a series of irrevocable events? Would the FBI try to take over, try to take charge of Maggie and Casey, determined to solve this case regardless of the trauma to the two children involved?

She drew a deep, trembling breath. In Janna's absence, she was responsible for the girls. Would she be able to protect them if she gave in to Damien Kane and allowed his psychologist to interview them?

Leaning over to kiss the still-sleeping Maggie, she slid out of bed and padded into the bathroom. She turned on the water and watched it running, strong and cold, over her hands. She had to think rationally, she told herself desperately. What she wanted might not necessarily be what was best for the girls.

Whatever else happened, she had to do the right thing for her innocent nieces.

* * *

Damien sat at the kitchen table, reading the newspaper he'd found on the driveway. Although it was early, the sky was a brilliant blue, and sunlight streamed through the glass doors in front of him. The huge black cat sat on one of the chairs across from him, lazily cleaning himself and keeping a watchful eye on the stranger in the house.

Abby had woken up a few minutes ago. Somehow he'd heard the tiny squeak of the bed springs when she'd turned over, and now all he could think about was what she would look like, tousled and warm

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from sleep.

Slamming the newspaper to the table, he shoved the chair backward and went over to stand by the patio door. One complication he sure as hell didn't need was to be attracted to the woman whose nieces might hold the key to Joey's killing. And the very last thing he wanted was anything to do with a woman like Abby Markham.

Abby wasn't a 'slam, bam, thank you Ma'am' type of woman. Not that he'd had much interest in them, either, the past three years, he thought sourly. But a woman like Abby threatened the fragile world he'd built for himself, slowly and painfully, since the accident. A woman like Abby could rip away all his defenses. She could uncover all the pain he'd so carefully hidden, make him remember it all over again.

Abby Markham could make him want all those things he'd vowed he'd never want again.

And what made her even more intriguing were the secrets he sensed behind her hazel eyes. Painful memories lingered there, memories she tried very hard to keep hidden. Abby Markham was dangerous to him, dangerous to his peace of mind. Though it was a fragile peace, he couldn't allow her to disrupt it.

Her footsteps echoed over his head, and a few seconds later he heard the water running upstairs. He deliberately blocked his mental picture of her dressed for bed, concentrating on his job instead.

What would she say this morning? Would she have come to her senses, realized that it was in her nieces'

best interest to find out what they saw? Or would that overprotectiveness he'd seen the night before have taken over, convincing her to run with her nieces, making him follow her to God knew where?

Something shook the floor beside him, and he looked down to see the black cat, Angus, standing next to him, looking expectantly at the door.

"Forget it, buddy," he said to the animal. "I'm not opening that door for you."

Looking offended, the cat sat down and stared at him. Hell, Damien thought with a ripple of amusement, Angus was the right name for him. He was just about half as big as a cow.

Just as he sat back down and picked up his newspaper, he heard her on the stairs. His hands tightened on the newspaper, then he deliberately relaxed them and set the paper down.

"Good morning, Mr. Kane." She stood in the kitchen door, almost as if she was reluctant to come any closer. Her voice was low-pitched this morning, and sounded strained.

"Good morning." He forced himself to look over at her. "Any problems during the night?"

She shook her head, and her chestnut hair rippled over her shoulders. "I didn't hear a thing." It looked like her mouth trembled for a moment, then she looked away. "Maggie came to sleep with me again. But I suppose that isn't so unusual, after a nightmare like she had."

"Any more nightmares?"

She shook her head again. "No." Advancing into the kitchen, she avoided his gaze as she walked over to the counter. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Thank you."

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She busied herself with measuring water and coffee, keeping her back turned to him. He found himself wondering what color her eyes were this

morning, whether the sunlight would turn her hair to gold and what she would look like if she really smiled.

He tried to force his gaze from her back to his newspaper, but he couldn't look away. As if she could sense his eyes on her, the atmosphere in the kitchen thickened, tension radiating from her rigid back and seeping into the air.

When the coffee started to spill into the glass carafe, hitting the hot glass with a sizzle, she slowly turned around. He looked away then, but not before he'd seen the awareness, and the fear, in her eyes.

"Was everything calm down here last night?" She sounded breathless, as if she'd been running.

"Fine," he answered shortly. He had lain on her couch, sleepless, until the moon had set and the night had become utterly black. He wanted nothing to do with this woman or these children, and he cursed the fate that had involved them in Joey's death. He wanted to shout it at her, to tell her that he couldn't bear to be around her or her nieces. Instead, he forced himself to look at her again, to concentrate on the business between them.

"Have you made any decisions? Are you going to let your nieces talk to the psychologist?" He made himself watch her, waiting for her answer.

"I don't want to do it," she said, an edge of desperation in her voice. "I'm afraid that they'll be hurt, or scared." She looked away and opened a cupboard, taking down two mugs. As he watched her, he saw her draw a ragged breath. "But you may be right. And I can't take the chance that you're not."

She turned to face him again, holding the two mugs in front of her like a shield. "So we'll go today, this morning. Your psychologist can talk to them, try to find out what they know. But I insist on being there."

"Of course, Ms. Markham." Thank God, he thought fervently. By this afternoon it would be over. He'd have the information he needed, and Abby Markham and her disturbing presence would be out of his life.

Not to mention the two girls who made his heart contract with pain every time he looked at them.

He stood up. "If I could use the phone, I'll arrange it right now."

"It's over there."

He could feel her eyes on him as he walked across the kitchen. And when she looked away, he knew the instant she did. Disturbed and angry with himself, he punched in the numbers with more force than necessary. Holding tightly to the receiver, he stared out the window at the black-and-white squad car parked by the curb.

"Good morning, Federal Bureau of Investigation," the voice said pleasantly in his ear, and he thankfully reined in his wandering thoughts.

"This is Kane. Put me through to Frank."

A few minutes later he hung up the phone and turned back to Abby. "It's all set. We have a branch office about a half hour from here, and I've set up an appointment for ten o'clock. I'll drive you and the girls there."

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"Thank you," she murmured. She couldn't keep the fear out of her voice, although he was sure she'd tried.

The need to comfort her rose in him, and he spoke without thinking. "It'll be all right. I've asked for Mary Williams. She's the best there is when it comes to interviewing children. The last thing she'd do is allow them to become upset."

Abby looked over at him, her eyes softening. "Thank you. It was kind of you to go to the trouble."

He shrugged, shoving his hands into the pockets of his black jeans, uncomfortable with her gaze on him.

"I want the information they might have. It just makes sense to use the person who would be best at getting it."

She looked at him, the softness disappearing from around her eyes. "I see. Thank you for spelling that out for me. For a moment there I was beginning to think you might be human, after all." Snapping her mug down onto the counter, she rummaged in a cabinet, keeping her back to him again.

"Don't make that mistake again, Ms. Markham. You were right the first time." He swallowed the rest of the hot coffee in one gulp, then set his mug carefully on the counter. "I'm going to tell the officers in the squad car what the plan is for today. There's no reason for them to hang around."

* * *

Two hours later Abby turned around to look at Maggie and Casey in the back seat of Damien's car.

They'd each brought a doll, and they were so busy with one of their pretend games that they barely noticed they weren't in her car. Anxiety clawed at her. Had she made the right decision? Was this what was best for the girls?

"Don't second-guess yourself."

The words, and Damien's soft voice, were totally unexpected. She swiveled to look at him. "How did you know what I was thinking?"

His mouth curved up in a half smile. It was gone in an instant, but she blinked at the momentary transformation. For that brief second, he had looked not only approachable but downright friendly.

"You don't have what I would call a poker face, Ms. Markham. It wasn't too hard to figure out that you were wondering if you and your nieces could jump out of the car at the next stoplight."

Glancing at the back seat again, she saw that the twins were still engrossed in their game. "You're right,"

she admitted. "I'm having a hard time with this. If this makes them more scared or upset, I'll never forgive myself."

He looked over at her, surprise in his eyes. "Isn't that a bit extreme, Ms. Markham? You can't protect them from every blow life will dish out to them."

"I can try," she answered fiercely. "At least while they're with me."

After a long time he said, "You may not be doing them any favors. You know that, don't you?"

"They're only five years old, Mr. Kane. I don't think they have to face harsh reality yet."

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He took his eyes off the road and looked over at her for a moment. "How old were you when you faced harsh reality, Ms. Markham?"

He knew, she thought, horror tightening like a fist in her chest. She was so shocked that she could only stare at him, feeling the fear and shame gnaw a hole in her middle.

"What do you mean?" she finally managed to whisper. He shrugged, as if revelations like these were casual, everyday occurrences for him. "It's pretty obvious that something must have happened to you at some point. Talking to Mary Williams this morning isn't going to be that bad. I've already told you that she's great with kids and she'll make sure they don't get upset. So why are you so worried, unless something happened to you sometime in the past?"

He didn't know. She slumped back into the seat. He could suspect all he liked, but he didn't know for sure. And he never would know, she vowed. Only she and Janna knew what had happened that day, and neither of them was going to tell.

"Don't you think it's just remotely possible that I care about my nieces and don't want them to get hurt?"

She tried to lift her chin and stare him down, but wasn't able to do it. After glancing his way, she looked out the window.

"I believe you do care about your nieces and want what's best for them. If you didn't, I know you wouldn't have agreed to let them talk to Mary this morning," he said bluntly.

She could feel his eyes on her, but she couldn't turn her head to look back at him.

"It's all right to have secrets," he said, his voice surprisingly gentle. "We all do. I'm not asking you to bare your soul-I'm just trying to tell you that I know how hard this is for you and I appreciate what you're doing."

"I'm not doing it for you, Mr. Kane. Don't kid yourself. If I didn't think that it might help Maggie and Casey, I wouldn't be here and neither would they."

There was that faint smile again, only this time it was bitter and self-mocking. "You don't know how relieved I am to hear you say that, Ms. Markham." Before she could ask him what that was supposed to mean, he swung the car sharply to the right and said, "Here we are."

The building was one of several in a small, nondescript office park. Both the buildings and the cars parked in front of them were bland and undistinguished. It wasn't at all the kind of place she imagined the FBI having an office.

"You look surprised," he said, pulling into a parking space.

"It's not what I expected," she admitted.

This time there was genuine amusement in his eyes. "You thought maybe there would be a big sign saying Criminals Beware, or men with guns hanging out in the parking lot?"

Blushing, she got out of the car and opened the rear door, helping Maggie and Casey unbuckle their seat belts. "I'm not sure what I expected, but it wasn't a building that shared offices with Echo Toy Imports and Mountain Adventures, Inc."

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"We try to blend in."

Holding Maggie and Casey by the hands, she followed Damien into the building. When they got into the elevator, Casey asked, "Why are we here, Aunt Abby?"

Abby glanced over at Damien, who gave her a quick nod. Squatting down, she drew the two girls in front of her and gave them both a hug.

"We're going to talk to a nice woman who wants to ask you some questions. Okay?"

"What kind of questions, Aunt Abby? Does she want to know about my doll?" Casey clutched her tattered doll closer and watched her aunt.

Swallowing around the lump in her throat, Abby nodded. "I'm sure she'll ask about Toby. And Jackie, too," she said to Maggie. "But there will be other things she might want to know."

"Like what?" Maggie asked.

Abby swallowed again. "She might ask some questions about your mommy's work."

Both twins stared at her for a moment. They clutched their dolls more tightly as fear flashed over their faces.

Oh, God, she thought with despair. Damien was right. They did see something. Giving them another hug, she slowly stood up.

Damien was watching all of them with somber eyes. She was sure he hadn't missed the look in the girls'

eyes when she'd mentioned Janna's work.

The elevator door opened with a whoosh and a quiet ping, and they stepped out into a corridor that was a duplicate of every office building in the world. They followed Damien down the hall to a door with small lettering on the door that said Federal Bureau of Investigation.

When they stepped into the office, a pleasant woman at a desk looked up. Seeing Damien, she frowned.

"There's a problem, Mr. Kane," she began, but before she could continue, a man stepped out of an inner office.

"Mary couldn't get here." He didn't even bother with a greeting, but Damien didn't seem to expect one.

"We've got a hostage situation on the Strip and we had to send her there. Johnson is the only other psychologist we could find on such short notice."

Abby could see Damien's lips tighten, but after a moment he nodded shortly and turned to her. "You heard what he said. Johnson's not the man I would have picked, but now that we're here and you already told the girls what to expect, I think we better go ahead. If we wait until Mary's free, your nieces might get more anxious."

Abby looked down at the two worried faces standing close to her and wondered what to do. Damien was probably right, she thought reluctantly. If they left now and came back later, Maggie and Casey would have too much time to think about what was going to happen. And too much time to worry about it.

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"All right. If you think they'll be okay with this Johnson."

"I'll make sure they are." He disappeared into a room, and Abby sat down in a chair and pulled the girls onto her lap. After a few minutes he and another man emerged from the office.

"Jim Johnson, Ms. Markham." A burly older man held out his hand, and Abby shook it briefly. "Kane has briefed me about the situation with the kids, and I'll be careful." In a softer voice he continued. "I won't treat them like little criminals, believe me."

He bent over Maggie and Casey. "You must be the little ladies with the interesting story to tell me. Why don't you come with me and we'll talk?" His voice was loud and a little too hearty.

The girls looked at Abby, and she nodded her head. Sliding off her lap, they followed Jim Johnson toward the office. Abby began to follow them, but Damien stopped her.

"Give them a minute to settle in with Johnson. He'll try to get them to relax and get comfortable with him.

Once he's done that, you can go on m. If you're there from the beginning, they may not feel comfortable with him."

She narrowed her eyes. "You told me I could stay with them the whole time."

"You can, Ms. Markham. Just give Jim a chance to establish a relationship with them."

Listening to the psychologist's voice booming through the closed door, she opened her mouth to tell Damien they didn't need a relationship with Jim Johnson to tell him what they knew. But before she could speak, she heard sobs coming from behind the closed office door.

"Aunt Abby! Aunt Abby! I want Aunt Abby!"

Chapter 3

«^»

Abby vaulted from her chair and leaped at the closed office door, wrenching it open. Maggie and Casey sat huddled in two enormous chairs, cowering away from the man who stood over them. When they turned and saw her standing in the room, their lips trembled and tears rolled down their cheeks.

Jim Johnson glanced over at her with a puzzled expression, running his hand through his hair. "I don't know what's wrong, Ms. Markham. They just started crying."

"You frightened them," she said coldly.

"I didn't do a thing," he protested. "I barely even said two words to them."

Abby shouldered him aside and scooped up Maggie and Casey. Hugging her nieces close, she turned to face the psychologist. "Wouldn't you be frightened if someone four times bigger than you stood over you, speaking so loudly it hurt your ears?" she asked fiercely.

Johnson began to answer, then closed his mouth and sighed. "Sorry I frightened them," he said wearily.

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"Let's try again, shall we?"

"What do you think, girls?" Abby asked as her nieces' arms tightened around her neck. "Do you want to talk to Mr. Johnson if I stay in here with you?"

Both girls whispered, "No," burying their faces in her neck. Abby turned back to the psychologist

"I think we've had enough for today, Mr. Johnson. Sorry it didn't work out."

As she turned to leave the room, Damien said from the doorway, "Just a minute, Ms. Markham."

She stopped and waited, shifting her grip on Maggie and Casey so she held them more securely. "Yes?"

He watched her for a moment, no expression in his eyes. Then he said, "Will you wait a few minutes for me? I want to talk to Johnson."

"Considering that we came in your car, I don't have much choice, do I?" Without waiting for an answer, she brushed past him and made her way to a couch in the other room.

The door closed behind her with a soft click, and she could hear the murmur of voices in the room behind them. As the voices rose, Maggie tightened her grip on Abby's neck and Abby could feel her shivering.

"Nobody's going to hurt you, honey," she whispered. "Mr. Johnson was a little loud, but that's just the way he talks." Abby wondered uneasily what experience had led to the twins' fear of the loud Johnson.

As if she could read her aunt's mind, Casey explained, "The man at Mommy's work yells like that sometimes. Me and Maggie don't like yelling."

Abby turned to look at her and saw the fear trembling in her eyes. "Did someone at your mommy's work yell at you?" she asked softly, trying to hide the fear building inside her.

Slowly Casey shook her head. "We heard him yelling, though."

"He wasn't trying to frighten you," Abby told her gently. "He didn't know you could hear him." She wondered if the man who was yelling had anything to do with the murder.

Hooking one arm around each of their shoulders, Abby gathered Casey and Maggie closer. She smoothed out their dolls' dresses and forced a smile onto

her face. "Tell me about the game you were playing with Toby and Jackie in the car."

After a moment both girls began talking at once. Abby leaned back on the couch and allowed herself to relax as she listened to them chatter about their dolls.

* * *

"They know something, Kane. I'm sure of it." Damien looked at the psychologist. "I'd already figured that out. Tell me something I don't know, Johnson, like what the hell you did to staff them screaming like that."

"I didn't do a thing! I simply told them my name, and said we were going to have a nice talk. That's when

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they started bawling."

"Real smooth, Johnson," Damien said, his voice filled with disgust. "Don't you realize that those two kids are the only possible witnesses we have to Stefanetto's murder? Couldn't you have been a little more subtle?"

"How was I supposed to know they'd start bawling at the drop of a hat? For that matter, why couldn't you get their aunt out of here? If she hadn't come bursting into the room, they would have settled down and answered my questions."

"I had a hard enough time convincing her to let you question them at all," he answered coldly. "If I had suggested that we leave, she would have hit the ceiling."

Johnson shrugged. "So we'll try again. But maybe we should wait until Mary Williams gets back. She's a lot better with kids than me."

Damien shook his head, trying to control the anger uncurling inside him. He couldn't afford to let any emotions loose. "Abby Markham's not going to let

us anywhere near those kids. Not now."

The other man shrugged again. "So you question them. You're not going to let them out of your sight until you get some answers. I know that much about you, Kane." He waited for Damien to answer, but when he just stared at him the psychologist continued, "Hell, they'll trust you after a while. Find out what they know."

"I'm not a shrink, Johnson."

"You don't have to be a shrink. You just have to talk to them. You should know how to do that. After all, you had a kid..."

He let his voice trail away as Damien fixed him with a lethally cold stare. Johnson had the grace to redden as he turned away.

"Dammit, Kane, I'm sorry. I didn't think."

"That seems to be a habit with you today," Damien replied, no expression in his voice. He clamped his jaws together and tried to ignore the pain twisting his heart.

"I'm sorry," the other man said again, quietly. "I know I shouldn't have brought that up. But you don't have a choice. If you want answers and the kids won't talk to me or Mary, you've got to get the information yourself."

Tension swirled in the room. "Those kids aren't going to talk to me. They don't trust me," Damien finally said. And if he had any choice, they never would. He couldn't bear to get close enough to them for that.

"Make them trust you." Johnson's voice was flat. "If you want to solve this case, you damn well better make all three of them trust you. Hell, their aunt looked at us just now like we were a couple of serial killers. If you want answers, you're going to have to change that."

"I don't care what Abby Markham thinks of me as long as she lets me talk to her nieces," Damien said in a hard voice, trying unsuccessfully to block her picture from his mind. But the image of her holding the two girls and

facing him down was uncomfortably vivid. He had no doubts she would do whatever she

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thought necessary to protect the twins.

"If she doesn't trust you, she's not going to let you near those kids," Johnson warned.

"She's a rational woman," he answered coldly. "She'll understand that they'll be safer if they've told what they know."

"Where are you going to go?" Johnson asked.

"You know they'll be safer if no one knows that," Damien answered.

When he finally spoke, Johnson's voice was filled with resignation. "I hope you know what you're doing, Kane. You have Mary Williams's home phone number in case you need it?"

Kane nodded and turned to the door. "I'll check in when I can."

"You do that," Johnson answered.

When he walked into the reception area, he saw Abby sitting on a couch with the two girls in her lap. All three of them were playing with the rag dolls the girls had brought with them. At the sound of the door opening, Abby looked up. When she saw him, something shifted in her eyes. The softness disappeared, replaced by a wary caution.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked.

She nodded and turned to the girls. "Maggie, Casey, it's time to go home."

The two children immediately slid off her lap and stood next to her, clutching her hands. Shepherding them out the door in front of her, she

didn't let go of them until they'd gotten to the car and the twins were safely buckled into the back seat.

As the car pulled out into traffic, Damien said softly, "I apologize for what happened back there."

She didn't say anything for a long time. Finally she answered, "It wasn't your fault. I never should have agreed to bring them here."

Slanting her a look, he said, "You're wrong. It was the right thing to do. We just ended up with the wrong person."

She turned away and stared out the window. "I'm not sure the other psychologist would have made any difference. Didn't you see how scared the girls were when I told them we were going to talk about their mother's work? I think we should just forget about it."

"That's exactly why we shouldn't. If they're scared, there must be a reason. Don't you want to find out what it is?"

"Yes, I do," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "But not if it's going to make it worse for them."

"It won't, Abby." Somehow her name just slipped out. He wasn't sure what upset him more, the fact that he'd called her by her first name or the fact that he liked doing so.

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"You can't know that."

"The things we try to bury are the ones that come back to haunt us." He took his eyes off the road to glance over at her. "We talked about this earlier. Your nieces won't be safe until they've told us what they know and we've caught the person responsible for the murder."

"They were upset and scared today," she said stubbornly. "It would only be worse if I took them back to that office."

"All right," he said, his gut churning. "They can talk to me." Even though he kept his eyes on the road, he could feel her steady gaze on him. "We're leaving Las Vegas. I'll call you if they say anything to me."

"You're not going anywhere without me."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

He spared her a sharp look. "You have two choices here, Abby. You and the girls can go to a safe house, where you'll be guarded around the clock, or you can put yourself in my hands." Anger speared through him as he thought about the last person he'd left at a safe house. "Personally I don't recommend the safe house. It didn't save Joey Stefanetto."

"Are you saying we don't have a choice?" Abby shifted in her seat and glanced back at the girls, then looked down at her hands.

The tension in the front seat cranked up another notch, and for a moment Damien felt a flash of guilt for upsetting her. Then he forced himself to ignore Abby Markham and remember what was at stake. For all of them.

"You're involved in this case whether you want to be or not," he said, trying to make his voice even.

"And so are your nieces. You can make it easy, or you can make it hard. But whichever you choose, I'm going to be with you."

The silence in the front seat of the car stretched taut, vibrating in the still air. Then Abby said in a low voice, "You don't leave me much choice, do you?"

"I'm only trying to protect your nieces."

"You're trying to solve your case," she retorted. "At least be honest about that."

The faint flutter of shame in his chest startled him. It had been a long time since he'd felt ashamed of anything he did. And there was no reason for it now, he told himself harshly. He did want to protect the two little girls.

But only so you can solve this case, a quiet little voice reminded him. He didn't want to be around Abby Markham's nieces, he didn't want to talk to them, he didn't want to look at them. He wanted this case over so he wouldn't have to think about them ever again.

"The two things go hand in hand," he said finally. "If I solve this case, they won't need to be protected."

She shifted in her seat to face him, but he didn't look at her. He didn't want to see the scorn he knew would be in her eyes. "How long are you going to be with us?"

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"As long as it takes. I need to know what the girls saw, and if they can tell me who murdered Joey, I need to arrest that person. Then they'll be safe."

"Until they can tell you what they know, you're going to be a part of our lives."

"That's right."

She was silent for a long time. Then she said abruptly, "If you scare Maggie or Casey, or step out of line in any way, you're gone. Do you understand that?"

"Believe me, the last thing I want to do is scare either of your nieces. And I don't want to interfere in your lives. I'll be as unobtrusive as possible." His hands tightened on the steering wheel as he thought about living in the same house as Abby Markham and the two little girls. It would be a daily hell, torture of the cruelest kind. If only she knew how much he didn't want to be there.

Turning onto her street in the quiet subdivision, he pulled into her driveway and stopped the car. "Go ahead and pack," he said quietly. "I'm going to look around one more time."

Abby made no move to get out of the car. "Where are we going? Or is it a secret from me, too?"

He felt a faint heat in his cheeks. "We're going up to Utah. I know some people in the small town of Cameron. Two of my friends have a cabin in the mountains, on their mach. It's isolated and well hidden.

And I know I can trust Devlin McAllister and his sister, Shea, not to say anything to anyone."

As Abby stared at him, he saw the fear and uncertainty in her eyes. He was asking her to leave her home and go to an unknown destination with a total stranger. "It'll be all right, Abby," he said, his voice softer. "No one knows about my connection with Cameron. And Devlin is the sheriff. We'll be as safe there as we would be anywhere."

Abby stared at him for a moment longer, then turned to look at the twins in the back seat. "I'm responsible for their safety," she said quietly. "It's up to me to keep them safe. But I guess I need help now." She turned to look at him. "I'm going to have to mist you, Damien. I don't want to go away with you, but you and the men looking for Maggie and Casey haven't given me any choice."

She looked back at the children, and he saw her force a smile onto her face. "How would you like to go on a vacation, girls?"

"Yes!" Two pairs of shining eyes beamed at them, and Damien felt his heart twist again. Abby might think it was going to be hard to spend several days cooped up with him, but it was going to be nothing but torture for Damien. And being back in Cameron would only compound the agony.

He had no choice. The twins needed protection, and he needed to know what they'd seen. And they all needed a safe place to stay. So he was going to have to learn to live with the pain.

* * *

Two hours later, driving on the interstate toward Utah, Abby turned around and saw that Maggie and Casey had fallen asleep curled into one another. Their dolls dangled from their hands, and Maggie had her white blanket bundled against her chest.

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Abby's heart expanded as she watched them sleep. Would they be safe in Utah? she wondered. Damien had promised that they would, that no one knew about his connection with the small town of Cameron.

They would stay in his friend's cabin, and Maggie and Casey would eventually tell Damien what they'd seen.

Damien, the stranger who was going to live with them. She sneaked a glance over at the FBI agent and found him staring out the windshield of the car as he drove. Besides an occasional searching glance in the rearview mirror, he focused on the task with complete concentration, blocking everything else out. After a moment she looked back at the road in front of her, disturbed by her insight. Already she knew that a tightly reined intensity controlled everything Damien did.

She wondered if he made love with the same passion. Her hands trembled in her lap as she flinched away from the thought. Where had it come from? The last thing she was interested in was getting involved with this FBI agent who was clearly uncomfortable around children.

His long, lean body might be the stuff of a woman's fantasies, but he was a dangerous man. Dangerous to her, because he made her forget the lessons of the past. No, if she was interested in getting involved with a man, he was the last one she'd pick.

To distract her thoughts, she said to him in a low voice, glancing back at the sleeping children, "What are you watching so carefully?"

Without taking his eyes off the road, he said, "There's a dark green car about one hundred feet behind us. I'm keeping an eye on it."

Abby's gaze shifted to the rearview mirror, searching for the car. She spotted it easily in the lane next to hers, several cars back. "There are a lot of cars behind us. What is it about that one that's so intriguing?"

He shifted in his seat and turned to face her, a flash of impatience in his eyes. "I think it's following us."

A whisper of fear trailed down her spine. "How can you tell something like that? There must be hundreds of cars on this expressway, all going the same way at the same speed."

"I've stayed in the far right lane and I'm going slower than most of the traffic. The majority of the cars are going five to ten miles an hour faster than us, and they swing around and pass. But that car is going the same speed as we are, and it hasn't budged for the last half hour."

The fear intensified, even as she told herself that Damien Kane was so used to trouble that he saw it everywhere. "Maybe they have kids in the car, too, and they're trying to be careful." She couldn't stop herself from glancing in the rearview mirror again.

"There's only one man in the car. And he has a car phone that he's been using."

"So do half the other people on the road," she retorted. "That doesn't mean anything."

"We'll see."

Abby drew a deep, shaky breath. "How could anyone have followed us? I thought no one knew we were leaving?"

"No one did. That doesn't mean that someone wasn't watching your house. When they saw us put

suitcases in the car, they would have known we were running. It would make sense to follow us."

"A lot of people drive from Las Vegas to Utah. He's probably another tourist."

He glanced over at her, and she saw his lips curve up in a faint, cynical smile. "If the guy behind us in the green car is just a tourist, then I'm the Easter Bunny." He looked back at the mirror again. "Don't worry.

He won't find out where we're going."

She sat stiffly, her hands clenched in her lap and her gaze drifting too often to the car's side mirror. The green car didn't get any closer, but it didn't drop back, either. It just stayed behind them, keeping a strict distance between them, as if the two vehicles were somehow attached and moving together. In spite of what she'd said to Damien, butterflies of anxiety fluttered in her stomach.

Neither of them spoke for the next twenty miles. Every time Abby glanced in the mirror, she saw the green car behind them and fear crept higher in her throat. Damien drove silently. She saw his eyes flicker to the rearview mirror every few seconds.

He glanced over at her then, and a moment later he surprised her by saying, "We should probably call each other by our first names. It will make your nieces feel more comfortable about having me around."

His perception disturbed her, somewhere deep in her soul. The jaws of a trap hovered in the distance, ready to snap closed around her if she wasn't wary. She chose her words carefully. "You're probably right. If we're going to be staying in the same house, it doesn't make sense to be so formal."

"You can tell your nieces the same thing when they wake up." He turned and looked out the window as he spoke.

"They have names, you know," she said, trying to force a ripple into his still, silent composure.

"I know." He didn't turn to look at her.

He didn't speak again, and as he drove north, heading into southern Utah's beautiful red mountains, she found herself studying the car that trailed behind them. Was it really following them? Would it get off at the same exit as they did? And if it did, how on earth would they manage to lose him on the narrow, winding back roads of Utah?

"Don't worry about it," Damien said suddenly.

"Worry about what?"

"The car behind us. I'm going to get off before our exit, and I'll be able to lose him."

"Are you sure?" she demanded.

"It's what I do, Abby." He shot her an amused look.

"According to you, these people are professionals, too," she retorted, her fear chilling her. "Why would they let you lose them?"

"They're not going to have a choice. They won't know we're anywhere near Cameron. Utah is a big state, and they'll probably assume we're hiding in a big city. We'll be well hidden."

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"Is this where I'm supposed to be grateful that we went with you?" she asked, hating the petulance in her voice but unable to control it.

"This is where you're supposed to see that it was necessary." There was no censure in his voice, just a quiet finality.

The tires hummed on the pavement, and the mountains blocked the sun for a moment. Damien's face was in the shadows, unreadable.

"I'm sorry, Damien," she said quietly. His name rolled off her tongue too readily, dark and seductive, and she wanted to call it back. "I've been so concerned about Maggie and Casey that maybe I haven't been fair."

"You don't have to apologize. I would probably have done the same thing in your position." His words were so low that she had to strain to hear them. "Just remember that I'm not your enemy here."

"As long as you don't try to interfere with the girls, we won't have a problem."

Damien leaned back in his seat and stared at the bleak beauty of the mountains they drove past. "Don't worry," he said shortly.

Interfering with those two children was the last thing he intended to do. He would get the information he needed, make sure they were out of danger, and he would be gone so fast he'd leave a vapor trail behind him. He had no intention of getting entangled in their lives in any way.

Or their aunt's life, either. He glanced over and saw her chestnut hair gleaming golden in the light pouring through the car window. The simple T-shirt and cutoff shorts she wore showed a lot of smooth, pale skin, and his hand tingled as he remembered how she'd felt the night before.

No, Abby might be an attractive woman, but he intended to give her a very wide berth. The woman reeked of home, nurturing and nesting, all the things he'd vowed to avoid in his life. And seeing the way she was with her nieces, she probably wanted children of her own. She was everything he couldn't bear to be around.

He swung the car abruptly toward an exit ramp and turned onto a two-lane road. The green car drove past the exit, slowing briefly then speeding up again. In a few minutes they were driving through the canyons, the road rising and then falling in front of them. There was no one behind them.

"Maybe that car wasn't following us after all."

He heard the hope in Abby's voice and hated to be the one to dash it. So he merely said, "No one's following us now."

"How long before we get to Cameron?" she asked.

Cameron. Damien looked at his hands, clamped on the steering wheel, and deliberately relaxed them.

"It'll be a couple of hours. Long enough to make sure there's no one behind us."

"Aunt Abby?"

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The tiny voice came from the back seat, and Damien involuntarily tensed again. He sat very still, waiting for Abby to respond to the girl.

"What is it, honey?" Abby twisted around in her seat to flash one of the twins a bright smile.

"Are we there yet?" the girl asked in a plaintive voice.

"Not yet, but it won't be long," Abby assured her.

"I'm hungry, Aunt Abby." That was a different voice, although it was equally cranky. So both of them must be awake. The big cat in the carrier next to them let out a low yowl, adding his voice to the chorus of complaints.

Instinctively Damien scanned the road in front of them, an ingrained response from his days of traveling with a young child. Then he caught himself. Even if there were a place to stop, he wouldn't allow it.

"They'll have to wait," he said to Abby in a gruff voice. "I don't want to stop now."

Abby shook her head. "I know. I just want to get to the house as fast as we can."

Damien heard a rustling sound from the back seat, then the second voice whined, "Casey took my blanket, Aunt Abby."

"I did not. She dropped it on the floor."

"She threw it on the floor."

"That's enough, girls," Abby said firmly. She turned to look at Damien, an apologetic look in her eyes.

"I've got some books in that bag on the floor in back. Would you mind if I read to them for a while? It'll keep them quiet until we get to the house."

"Of course not." He spoke quickly, hoping his voice didn't betray the panic he felt. Listening to her read to the two girls was a small thing, but it was too intimate. Memories crashed in on him, of all the times he'd read to his son, all the times he'd listened to his wife read. He would be forced to relive every second of the past three years, when he would have given anything to be able to read to his son one last time.

She leaned closer to him as she turned to the twins in the back seat. The heat from her body curled around him, startling him with its softness. A whisper of her scent lingered in the air. He shifted away from her.

The air in the car was suddenly too warm. He wondered if she'd leave her scent behind long after she was gone, if he'd smell her every time he got into his car. His body tightened as a white-hot flash of desire surged through him. Startled, he looked over at her and saw her stretched out across the seat, groping for something on the floor behind her.

"I can get that for you," he said, reaching for the cloth bag she was trying to grab. They both leaned toward the bag at the same instant, and the inside of his arm brushed against her breasts.

They both froze, and for just a moment he felt her nipples tighten against his arm. As she stared at him, her eyes dark green in the mottled light, he saw desire shimmering beneath the shock.

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Then he snatched his arm away and gripped the steering wheel, staring fixedly at the road in front of him.

But the sound of her too rapid breathing suddenly filled the quiet car. And the skin on his upper arm burned with the memory of her touch.

As the air quivered between them, Abby twisted on the seat and grabbed the bag from the floor. Pulling out a picture book, she opened it and began reading. Her voice, low and strained, rubbed against his nerves like sandpaper. Every husky note curled around him, digging its talons into his belly and burning all the way down to his groin. By the time her voice steadied and strengthened, it was too late. He wanted her with a fierceness he almost couldn't control.

Concentrating on subduing the beast inside him, he drove grimly on toward the hell that would be his destination. Even one afternoon spent in the same house as Abby Markham and her two nieces would be more than he could bear. And he would be there for a hell of a lot longer than one afternoon.

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Chapter 4

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An hour and a half later Damien pulled off the two-lane highway onto a gravel road. The road curled around a cliff, then straightened once more and headed for a beautiful white house nestled at the base of the cliff.

"Welcome to the Red Rock Ranch," he said as Abby stared out the window.

"I thought we were going to the town of Cameron."

"Cameron is on the other side of the ranch. It's about five miles farther down the road."

The twins stirred in the back seat. After Abby read to them for what seemed like forever, they'd begun playing some game with their dolls. The sound of their voices, giggling in the back seat, had stirred painful memories, but he'd done his best to ignore them.

He stopped outside the house and heard the girls snap to attention. "Is this where we're staying, Aunt Abby?" one of them asked.

"No, honey. We're just stopping here for a moment." She turned to him. "Are they expecting us?" she asked in a low voice.

"I called Shea this morning from the office. She said she'd be around."

Shea walked out of the house as he spoke, wearing jeans and a T-shirt. Her long, curly blond hair was pulled back into a ragged ponytail. Weariness was etched on her face, but it lit with a smile when she saw him.

"Damien!" She hurried around the car to reach in and give him a kiss. "It's so good to see you."

"You, too, Shea." He held her hand for a moment, studying her. Hard work had stamped the weariness on her face, but beneath the exhaustion she

hummed with contentment. "How is everything going on the ranch?"

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Her smile turned rueful. "As well as we could expect. Dev and I knew things would be rocky for a while, but we're muddling by."

"Shea, this is Abby Markham and her nieces, Maggie and Casey. Abby, this is Shea McAllister. She and her brother, Devlin, own the Red Rock Ranch."

Abby's smile was cautious. "It's nice to meet you, Ms. McAllister."

"Please, call me Shea." She studied Abby with sympathy. "Damien told me a little about your situation when he called. I'm delighted he thought of our cabin. There's no one around for miles, and no one but Dev and I and the boys who work here will know you're there." She flashed a quick smile. "I stocked the cabin with some groceries earlier. I'd invite you to stay for dinner, but I suspect Damien would say no."

"You suspect correctly," he said, his voice grim. "Thanks for everything, Shea."

"I'm glad I could help." She studied him, making him squirm. She might be only twenty-five, but Shea McAllister was wise beyond her years. Finally she said, "You might want to leave that car here and take Devlin's Bronco. You'll have trouble getting to the cabin with that city car."

"I can't take your brother's truck," he protested.

She grinned. "He'll thank you for airing it out. He never drives anything but that police car of his anymore."

It took Damien only a moment to accept her offer. "Thanks, Shea. I hadn't thought about how we were going to get to the cabin."

"There's a road, but it's pretty primitive. And if it rains, you'd never make it with that sedan. Let me help you transfer your stuff."

Damien watched as Abby got Maggie and Casey out of the car and set the carrier holding Angus on the porch. A shaggy yellow dog came bounding over to sniff at the case. When Angus growled, the dog leaped high in the air, then edged backward.

Maggie and Casey giggled, and Shea turned around and grinned at them. "Buster is a big baby, isn't he?"

Go ahead and pet him. He loves little girls."

In a moment the dog was rolling on his back, and the twins were patting his chest. They looked up at Abby, their eyes shining. "Can we come back and play with Buster?"

"We'll see," she said, looking at Damien. He turned away, but he suspected it was too late. Abby saw far too much.

He'd known coming back to Cameron wouldn't be easy, but he hadn't been prepared for this particular ambush. Memories of his son playing with Buster exploded in his heart. Blindly grabbing the last suitcases, he set them on the porch and slammed the trunk.

Minutes later they had moved the car seats and their luggage into Devlin's truck, and began the drive along a bumpy dirt road. The ranch house disappeared quickly, hidden by rock and pine trees. By the time they reached a small meadow, the road had become two deep ruts in the sparse grass.

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The cabin was tucked into a corner on one edge of the meadow, surrounded by pine and aspen trees.

Damien remembered a small lake behind the cabin, hidden now by the trees. Under other circumstances he'd welcome the chance to spend time in such a beautiful, peaceful spot. Now all he felt was dread.

He let the Bronco roll to a stop next to the cabin, and for a moment the only sound was the intense quiet of the mountains. Then one of the twins said, "Are we here?"

"This is it." Damien wished his voice didn't sound so grim.

"Can we get out of the truck, Aunt Abby?" Maggie said .

"Sure, Maggie. Go ahead. Just stay where I can see you."

"Stop them," Damien ordered sharply as the two girls scampered away.

"They need to stretch their legs."

"They can stretch all they want in a minute. I need to check things out first."

"Maggie, Casey." Abby stepped out of the truck and called to them, but they merely turned around and waved at her.

Damien tensed for a moment, then slammed his door and began running after the girls. They were almost out of the trees, where they would be visible to anyone nearby. He caught up with them just as they reached the edge of the woods.

"Girls, wait," he barked.

They skidded to a halt and turned around. For a moment they looked at him with the same expression he'd seen on their faces that morning, after Johnson had frightened them. Damien felt something twist painfully inside him. He didn't want to be around these children, but he didn't want to scare them, either.

"Wait a minute, girls," he said more softly. "Your aunt Abby needs you to help her carry things into the house before you play."

"She said we could leave," Casey said. She seemed to be the more confident one.

Maggie nodded vigorously. "Mommy and Aunt Abby always say that if they can see us, it's okay." She clutched a tattered gray heap of fuzz to her chest and watched him with huge hazel eyes. They were the same color as her aunt's, he realized suddenly. For some reason the thought made his chest tighten.

He forced himself to squat down so he was at face level with them. "How about helping me take a look around the house, then? It's been a long time since I was here. I might get lost if I don't have some help."

Casey giggled. "You're silly. You can't get lost in a house."

As he looked from one of the twins to the other, his soul bled a little more. His own son had laughed in just the same way at his father's jokes. Closing his eyes to block out the memory in front of him, he stood up and looked back toward the house. "You'd better come with me to make sure." His voice was more gruff than he'd intended, but neither of the girls seemed to notice. He turned away abruptly and headed for the house.

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"Do we all get our own rooms?" Casey asked as she skipped along next to him.

Damien glanced down at her, then quickly away. The child's vibrant enthusiasm swirled around him, taunting him with the memory of another child's zest for life. Her bright eyes and engaging grin made his heart contract painfully. "I don't know. We'll let your aunt Abby decide where everyone will sleep."

It was the wrong thing to say. The child's innocent question and his own careless answer conjured up sudden, disturbing images that sent a shaft of white-hot heat through him.

"Maybe you and Aunt Abby will have to share a room, like me and Maggie," the child confided. Damien closed his eyes, trying to block the tantalizing vision of Abby's bed from his mind as the girl chattered on.

"Maggie and I always sleep in the same room. At home we have bunk beds."

Forcing the image of Abby out of his mind, Damien glanced down at the girl next to him. The sooner he got these kids to confide in him, the sooner he could get out of this unbearable situation. And before he could inspire their trust, he'd better try to be a little friendlier.

"Well, Casey," he forced himself to ask, "why don't we check out the room situation and figure out where everyone will sleep? And we'll need you to help, Maggie," he said with a glance at the quiet girl walking next to her sister.

"Sure." Casey's voice and smile were as bright as the sunlight reflecting off the lake. When she flashed her grin at him, it felt like he'd taken a blow to the stomach.

"Aunt Abby looks scared," Maggie said as they walked toward the house. Abby did look frightened, standing and watching as they walked toward her. He tried to reassure the child. "She's probably scared she's going to be stuck carrying all those suitcases into the house by herself," he said lightly, not daring to look at Maggie's solemn eyes. "What do you say we give her a hand?"

The two girls rushed toward their aunt, and Damien saw her struggle to hide her fear under a wide smile.

As he grabbed suitcases out of the back of the truck, he met her questioning eyes over the two blond heads.

Giving an almost imperceptible shake of his head, he motioned them to wait while he walked up the stairs and onto the small porch of the house.

"Girls, let's get the suitcases organized while Damien opens the house," she said.

He turned around to find her watching as he unlocked the door to the cabin. Giving her a small nod, he walked into the cabin.

A few moments later he emerged onto the porch. "Who wants to see the house?" he called.

"I do! I do!" The twins raced up the stairs and through the open door, followed by their aunt.

"Is everything all right?" Abby asked in a low voice as she stopped on the porch.

"Everything is fine. Shea was here this morning. She left food and cleaned the place. There's no evidence that anyone else has been here, but I wasn't expecting any. I just didn't want to take any chances. And I didn't want the girls running down to the lake before I'd had a chance to look things over."

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Abby watched as the girls scampered through the house, giggling and laughing, then turned to him.

"Thank you for doing it without scaring them."

Her eyes glowed at him, their green depths shining. His hand tightened on the doorknob, and he yanked on the flimsy screen door, hurrying into the muted light inside the cabin. "There's no reason to scare them.

They'll be more willing to talk to me if they're comfortable around me."

The glow in Abby's eyes dimmed as she followed him inside. "They're nothing but business for you, aren't they, Mr. Kane?"

"That's the way it has to be." His voice was harsher than he meant it to be. "I'm here to get answers from them and protect all three of you. Don't try to make me into their best friend."

"I wouldn't dream of it." Her voice was cool as she turned to her nieces. "Girls, let's get everything put away before we play."

Damien watched the three of them as they walked to the pile of luggage and bags he had brought in.

Abby looked at the small cabin and checked out the two identical bedrooms. Both had a set of bunk beds and another single bed. "Do you care which bedroom we take?" she asked, her voice polite but distant.

"It doesn't matter."

She sent the girls into the bedroom on the right, and they began to put away their clothes. Abby went into the kitchen and unpacked the groceries she'd brought with her. The three of them looked like a family, performing familiar and comfortable routines.

Damien was the outsider in the family picture, and suddenly he felt more alone than he had in the past three years. Turning abruptly, he walked out of the cabin. After making sure everything was out of the truck, he turned and headed toward the small lake.

The water glittered a deep blue and reflected the red cliffs that soared above it. They were high enough in the mountains to escape the oppressive heat of the desert, but it was the middle of the summer and it was still warm. Shoving his hands in the pockets of his jeans, he stared out over the calm surface of the lake and wondered what the hell they were doing here.

He knew this was the safest place for them to stay. He knew there was little chance of anyone finding them here. But what if he was wrong? What if someone did find them? What choice would they have?

They'd have to go into the town of Cameron. His hands tightened into fists in his pockets. They'd have to go to his house, a house that held nothing but pain and bitter memories. He'd have no choice, because if someone found the cabin, it was the only place left.

He heard Abby's soft footsteps behind him, but he didn't turn around. She stopped next to him, and out of the corner of his eye he saw how she examined the view in front of her.

"It feels like we're so isolated," she said in a low voice.

"That's the idea. We're probably three or four miles from the ranch house. No one comes up here but the McAllisters and the people who work for them."

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"I guess we don't want people around."

"No one but us," he murmured, watching her in spite of himself. The wind lifted strands of her golden brown hair off her shoulders, blowing them around her face. In the sunlight it sparkled like filaments of blown glass. Her fingers combed through it, slipping through the heavy mass as she shoved it away from her face. He curled his own fingers into fists to stop himself from reaching out to touch it.

She took a deep breath and turned to him, her brown-green eyes steady. "I want to apologize for what I said inside."

"There's nothing to apologize for."

"I think there is. I tried to make you feel guilty for not being as concerned about Maggie and Casey as I am, and that wasn't fair to you."

"There's a lot that isn't fair in life, Abby. I learned that a long time ago. You can't change the way you feel." He told himself to look away, but he couldn't do it. Standing on the beach, her hair lifting in the breeze, the sun kissing her bare shoulders and legs, she was everything he couldn't have, and everything he wanted.

Suddenly he wanted her more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life. It didn't matter that she was everything that was wrong for him. It made no difference that wanting a woman like Abby would do nothing but dredge up remembered pain. All of it faded into insignificance as he watched her glow in the sunlight. He saw nothing but the softness in her eyes and the goodness of her heart, and the strength that lay underneath both.

"Abby," he murmured, reaching for her almost against his will.

His hands closed around her shoulders. Her skin was cool satin against his hot fingers, smooth and incredibly soft. As he drew her closer, he felt her instinctive resistance. Ignoring it, he lowered his mouth to hers.

She flinched in surprise, and then she began to tremble. Her mouth softened under his, answering the rough pressure of his kiss with tiny, subtle movements of her lips as her mouth adjusted to his. Heat surged through him, pooling deep in his groin, and he pulled her closer. He needed to feel her body pressed against his, hip to hip, chest to chest, leg to leg.

He let go of her shoulders slowly, allowing his fingers to linger on her soft skin before sliding his hands down her back. His palms slipped over the delicate indentations of her spine, traced the gentle flare of her hips, then finally cupped her buttocks and fitted her more perfectly against him.

Her mouth clung to his, and when he touched her lips with his tongue she opened to him readily. He swept into the dark, seductive velvet of her mouth, greedy for the taste of her. Holding her tightly, he rocked against her, testing his hardness against her giving softness. Need consumed him, sweeping away all other thought.

Suddenly her hands were against his chest, pushing him away. He opened his eyes slowly, drugged by the taste and feel of Abby, and looked down at her. Desire raged with fear in her eyes, and he slid his hands back up to her shoulders and held her as he stepped away.

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Closing his eyes, he took a deep, ragged breath and fought for control, unable to break the contact with her. When he felt her muscles tensing under his hands, he forced himself to look at her. Seeing her effort to both crush the desire and hide the fear, he tightened his hands on her shoulders for a moment, then let her go.

"I'm sorry. That was unforgivable." His hands shook, and he shoved them into his pockets before he turned away. "I promise you it won't happen again."

"I ... that would be best." Her voice was so low he could barely hear her. "Nothing could be more important to me than Maggie and Casey's safety."

Her softness, her sweet responsiveness in the moments before she'd stopped to think, had touched a place deep inside him that he'd sworn was forever dead. For just a moment he'd allowed himself to feel something. He needed to crush that tiny blossom of hope back into oblivion.

"And nothing is more important to me than this case. Nothing." His voice was flat and expressionless, and he turned away. "You and your nieces are a means to an end for me, and that's all. I apologize again for stepping over the line."

"Apology accepted."

She didn't say anything more, but she didn't move. Her presence throbbed in the air behind him, growing and swelling until he could swear he heard her heartbeat on the wind. Finally he turned around to look at her. He couldn't help it.

She stood staring out over the lake, her arms wrapped around herself as if to ward off a chill. When she finally turned to face him, she smiled but it didn't reach as far as her eyes. They stared at him with the blank, unfocused look of someone in shock.

"The girls are going to have the cabin torn apart if I don't get back to supervise them." She lifted one hand away from herself and gestured around the lake, looking across the glittering water. "I'm glad there's no one else around. It makes me feel a lot better."

As she turned to walk away, he saw the place on her arm where she'd been clutching herself. Her fingerprints stood out in a row of angry red spots, silent witnesses to the desperation of her grip. He stared at her arm as he watched her leave, and cursed himself.

Abby hurried away from the beach, conscious of Damien's gaze on her back. Straightening her spine, she swore that he would see none of the mix of emotions churning in her gut. She wouldn't give him a hint of how his rejection stung, or the embarrassment of having to look at him afterward, or the shock of her own response.

Her whole body trembled with the memory. Never would he even suspect what his casual kiss had done to her, she vowed fiercely. If he could dismiss it so casually, then so could she.

She paused at the door of the cabin, unable to stop herself from looking back at him. He stood on the beach, looking out over the lake, his hands jammed into the pockets of his black jeans. He was no more than fifty feet away from her, but it might as well have been five thousand.

As she listened to the twins giggling on the other side of the screen door, she kept her gaze on the solitary man on the beach. He wrapped himself in a cloak of isolation, drawing it more tightly around him

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whenever someone threatened to snatch it away. Her gaze lingered on him, absorbing the taut way he held himself, his unnatural stillness as he stared out over the lake. She could almost feel the tension radiating off his hard, lean body.

She'd never seen anyone as solitary as Damien Kane. Even surrounded by other people, he was alone.

Something stirred inside her, a feeling she recognized with astonishment as sympathy. No one should have to endure that kind of soul-numbing isolation.

What had happened in Damien's life that had forced him to build that wall around himself, the wall that imprisoned him just as surely as it kept out the rest of the world? Abby watched him for a while, then jumped when a small hand pressed against the screen door in front of her.

"We're finished with our chores, Aunt Abby," two voices chorused. "Can we go down to the lake?"

Abby looked at the man standing on the sand one more time, then turned to the two expectant faces on the other side of the door. "Let me finish my chores, then I'll go with you." Stepping into the cabin, she let the door close gently behind her, shutting out the sight of Damien alone on the beach.

* * *

Less than twelve hours later, Abby tossed restlessly on her bed, thinking about the uncomfortable evening that had just passed. Damien had made an effort to be pleasant to the girls, asking them questions and listening politely to their endless chatter. But she could feel the strain behind his voice. His tension had been so palpable she'd felt like she could almost reach out and touch it.

Luckily neither Maggie nor Casey had seemed to notice. Maggie had been her usual reserved self around Damien, but she wasn't afraid of him. And Casey had talked constantly, oblivious to Damien's increasing discomfort.

But she had noticed it. She had also noticed the way Damien braced himself whenever one of the twins came too close, as if preparing himself for a hurtful blow. And she hadn't missed the flash of longing, so intense it was like a physical pain, that filled his eyes when he looked up and saw the twins unexpectedly.

What haunted this man? she wondered as she kicked the sheets away from her legs. What had put that pain in his eyes? As she lay in the darkness, she told herself that it didn't matter, that it was none of her business.

Just a little more than twelve hours ago she would have agreed and rolled over and fallen asleep. This morning she wouldn't have lost any sleep at all over it. But Damien's kiss had changed things. He'd made her feel like a woman, desired and desirable. He'd managed to touch a part of her that she'd thought was completely hidden away, carefully protected from the world. After her disastrous experience with her fiancé, she'd sworn she wouldn't risk her heart again.

Now she felt exposed and vulnerable, and she didn't like it. Rolling over again, she punched her pillow once more and closed her eyes, determined to put Damien Kane and his problems out of her mind for good.

The ceiling fan whirred quietly above her in the silence, and she listened to the other night noises as she tried to relax. No sounds came from the inside of the house. Maggie and Casey were sound asleep in the bunk beds on the other side of the room and had been for hours. Damien, presumably, slept in the bedroom on the other side of the twins. Allowing the drone of the fan to relax her, she was almost asleep

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when she heard the sound from outside her window.

Heart pounding, she was instantly awake and alert. What had made that noise? To her sensitive ears it sounded like a gunshot in the trees beyond her window, but as she struggled to sit up she realized it was no more than branches cracking underfoot.

It was just an animal, she told herself as the blood roared in her ears. It was nothing more than a creature of the night going about its business. Lying back down, she tried to close her eyes and sleep, but it was impossible. Finally giving in to the inevitable, she slipped out of bed.

As she stepped out of their room, a dark shadow materialized in front of her and grabbed her wrist.

Before she could speak, it said, "It's me, Abby."

Damien's hand shifted on her wrist, holding her more gently. His fingers barely touched her, but the imprint of his fingertips burned themselves into her skin.

"What are you doing?" she said, trying to draw her arm away from him.

"Shh." His whisper was no more than a tiny puff that disturbed the air in the heavy darkness. Drawing her closer, he bent down and murmured into her ear, "There's something outside. Did you hear it a few minutes ago?"

His warm breath stirred the hair on her neck and sent shivers rippling across her skin in places that had never been particularly sensitive before tonight. She nodded mutely as the heat of his body shimmered around her, filling her senses with the nighttime scent of him.

"I'm going to take a look." Even his low whisper couldn't hide the grim resolve in his voice. When he raised his right hand, the huge black gun he held gleamed dully in the dim light.

"Wait!" Abby reached out and grasped his forearm. "It's probably just an animal out there."

Damien froze, staring down at her hand on his arm. Suddenly Abby was aware of the feel of his skin under her fingers, hot and pulsing with life. Her hand tightened involuntarily around the hardness of his muscle and the springy coarseness of the hairs on his arm.

As she stared at him, she realized that he wore only a pair of boxer shorts and nothing else. She stood too close to his chest, her face only inches away from the lean planes of carved muscle and the mat of black hair that covered them.

He stood utterly still until she let go of him and backed up a step. "It's probably just a coyote," she repeated, her voice breathless in the warm night air.

"Is your cat outside?" he asked, looking down at her. His obsidian eyes were unreadable in the darkness.

"No. I keep him inside at night."

Damien nodded once, then turned and headed for the door. Abby wanted to call him back, to tell him he didn't need a gun to chase away a coyote, but she couldn't get any sounds past her throat. She watched him as he stood on

the porch, the moonlight gleaming on his bare shoulders before he disappeared into the night.

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She strained to hear him outside, but it was as if he'd vanished into the night mists that rose off the lake.

Nothing moved beyond her window but the wind, murmuring through the trees. There were no sounds of an animal pushing through the underbrush, no noises from the man who pursued it.

Abby stood in the kitchen of the cabin, straining to hear something from the woods outside the door.

Nothing reached her ears except a silence heavy with expectation, as if all the creatures of the night held their breath and waited.

Something was wrong. Fear blossomed inside her like a malignancy, growing and spreading too quickly to be contained. Opening a kitchen drawer with shaking hands, she grabbed a knife, not caring that its razor-sharp edge sliced into her finger. Holding it in front of her stiffly, she hurried into the twins' room and lowered herself to the floor next to their bed.

Maggie and Casey slept peacefully, unaware of their aunt crouching beside them or the man who hunted in the woods beyond their window. Abby watched them for a moment, trying to calm her racing heart.

They were safe, she repeated to herself, No one knew about this cabin, or that they were here. Damien was chasing some nocturnal animal through the woods, and he would return in a few minutes.

But the minutes seemed like hours in the silent stillness of the twins' room. Damien had been gone too long, she thought, straining to hear some sound that would assure her he was all right. He should have been back by now.

Something brushed against the side of the cabin, near the back door, and Abby struggled to her feet.

Shifting the knife to her right hand, she crept through the kitchen toward the door, trying to hear over the pounding of her heart.

The door opened silently, and Damien slipped into the room. He stopped abruptly when he saw Abby approaching him. "It's me, Abby," he said, speaking in a low voice.

Damien's gaze was fixed on her hand. Looking down, she realized she held the knife extended in front of her, pointing at him. Lowering her arm, she said, "I wanted to be prepared."

"For one of those coyotes to come bursting into the house?" he said in a mild voice.

She hid the knife behind her leg and continued to watch him. "For whatever came through that door. I couldn't hear a thing when you were outside."

"You weren't supposed to hear anything."

"What did you find?"

"Nothing." He turned away, and she saw the gun shoved into the waistband of his shorts at the small of his back. In the faint moonlight from the door, she could see his shorts were red, faded almost to pink, and thin from many washings.

"Where are you going?" she asked sharply as he headed for his room.

Slowly he turned back to her. "I'm going to bed, and you should, too. I didn't find a thing outside."

Anger swept away the last of her fear. "You mean it really was an animal out there? That all this

melodrama was for some poor beast looking for a meal?"

"I didn't say that," he answered, his voice steady. "I said I didn't find anything."

She stared down at the knife in her hand. "Then what do you think it was out there, Damien? Was it just an animal, or was there someone in the woods?"

He moved so quietly that she didn't realize how close he was until he gently removed the knife from her hand. Setting it on the counter next to her, he shifted her hand in his and looked down at it, as if studying the lines in her palm.

After a moment he said quietly, "You've cut yourself." She looked down at the small cut on her index finger. Damien traced the wound with one fingertip, barely touching her skin. She watched his fingers in the dappled moonlight, moving over her hand, and heard her breathing quicken.

His finger stilled over hers, then his hand tightened for a moment before he let her go. "You should put something on this. You don't want it to get infected."

Curling her fingers into a ball, the places where he'd touched her still throbbing, she nodded. "I will."

Damien looked up at her, but she couldn't read his expression.

Even in the darkness he was closed and shuttered. "Go to bed, Abby. There's nothing outside now."

She realized he hadn't answered her earlier question. "What was out there earlier?"

He was silent for so long that she didn't think he was going to answer. Finally he said, "You don't give up, do you?" She could hear the grudging respect in his voice.

"No, I don't. What was out there?"

"I told you the truth. I didn't see anyone or anything. Not even an animal."

"What do you think was out there?"

He watched her for a moment, then turned away. "It could have been anything, Abby. Anything at all."

He headed for his bedroom, and as he passed the screen door she saw the dark red marks on his back.

"Damien, stop," she said, and he turned instantly, pulling the gun out of his waistband in one smooth motion.

"What is it?"

"Put the gun away," she said in a low voice. "There's something on your back."

Holding the gun pointed toward the floor, he craned his neck and peered over his shoulder. "I don't see anything."

"Come over here." Abby turned on the kitchen light, squinting at the sudden brightness. Turning him around, trying to ignore the feel of his hot skin on her hand, she tightened her fingers on his shoulder as she stared at his back.

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"You're covered with scratches," she whispered, appalled. Some of them had oozed blood, and it had dried in swirls and smears over his skin. "What were you doing out there, Damien?"

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Chapter 5

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" Nothing happened, Abby." His voice was even as he turned to face her. "I looked through the woods, I didn't find anything and I came back here."

"Didn't you feel the bushes scratching you?" She could hear the incredulous note in her rising voice, and forced herself to speak more softly. She didn't want to wake the twins. "Didn't you care that you were hurting yourself?"

"No." The single word fell into the space between them, its sound as hard as Damien's eyes. "Not noticing things like that is part of my job."

As she stared at him and he stared back, she saw the hard, distant look in his eyes softening just a little.

Unable to look away, she whispered, "I don't want you to get hurt because of us. You should have been more careful."

"I didn't have time to be careful," he replied, finally looking away from her. "I did what needed to be done. Don't worry about it, Abby. I'll survive. It's only a few scratches."

When he turned and headed back toward his bedroom, she said, "Wait a minute. Aren't you going to clean those cuts? Some of them look pretty deep."

Without turning around, he shrugged. The gesture was too casual. "They can wait until morning. I don't feel like taking a shower right now."

With a flash of insight she knew exactly why. "You're afraid something will happen and you won't hear if you're in the shower, aren't you?" she whispered.

He paused, and his stillness filled the room. When he answered, his voice strummed across her nerve endings like rough velvet. "Don't conjure up

bogeymen that aren't there, Abby. I told you I didn't see anything."

Reaching the door to his room, he turned around and looked at her. "Go to bed, Abby. Forget whatever it was that you heard outside."

Before he could vanish into the darkness of the bedroom, she said, "At least let me clean those scratches for you. They'll feel a lot better if you take care of them tonight."

"You don't have to do that."

She flushed. "I know I don't have to. I don't have to do anything," she retorted. "But I want to."

Damien shrugged and walked back into the room. "I suppose it's a good idea. We don't want to get blood all over the sheets."

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She opened her mouth to tell him that had nothing to do with it, then bit off the words. She wasn't sure she wanted to think too much about her impulsive offer, an offer she was already beginning to regret.

"Come on into the bathroom," she said in what she hoped was a businesslike tone. "I'll get the first-aid supplies."

When she followed him into the bathroom, she realized immediately that she'd made a mistake. The room was the size of a telephone booth. Damien turned around to look at her, raising his eyebrows slightly in question. She gestured to the medicine cabinet, on the wall behind him.

"I need to get the peroxide and the antibiotic lotion out of there."

He obligingly moved aside, but she had to brush against him when she reached to open the cabinet door.

His skin was warm and his muscles hard against her arm and leg. His scent swirled around her, hot and potent on the still air. She tried to avoid looking

at him, but it was impossible.

She never knew that muscles could actually ripple underneath a man's skin when he moved, or that a man's broad chest and sinewy arms could look so inviting. Damien's tanned skin slid over muscles that looked hardened by physical labor, and Abby suddenly wanted to reach out and touch him.

Curling her hands around the peroxide bottle, she blindly grabbed for a handful of gauze pads and closed the cabinet door. "Turn around and let me see your scratches," she said, annoyed at the breathless sound of her voice.

Damien turned around without a word, and she surveyed the damage to his back. Angry red welts crisscrossed his skin, but fortunately only a few of them were deep enough to have bled. "It's not as bad as it looks," she said, forcing a cheerful note into her voice. "Once I get the blood cleaned up, it won't look nearly as ugly."

"There's not much worse than an ugly back," Damien said in a solemn voice. Abby clutched the peroxide more tightly and looked at him in astonishment.

"What did you say?"

"You're taking this too seriously, Abby," he said impatiently. "It's just a few scratches."

"Thank goodness," she said, swabbing his back with a peroxide-soaked gauze pad. "For a moment there I actually thought you made a joke."

He turned to look at her, and her hand faltered in midair. "I don't joke about my job. Ever."

"I guess we should consider ourselves fortunate, then," she said lightly. "None of those coyotes are going to get within fifty feet of this house."

Damien took her wrist and held her hand suspended over his back. "What would you prefer, that I don't do anything and let someone with a gun come strolling through your door?"

Abby was sure he could feel her pulse pounding underneath his fingers. Under the harsh fluorescent light of the bathroom, his dark eyes were hard and unwavering. She could feel the flush creeping up her cheeks as she battled the urge to lay her palm flat against his chest and absorb his strength.

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"I would prefer that you tell me the truth. I don't want it sugarcoated. I want to know what or who you thought was outside tonight, and why you're so reluctant to tell me."

The moment stretched tighter and tighter as he held her wrist in his fingers and stared at her. Then suddenly he dropped her hand and turned his back to her. "Finish what you're doing and we'll talk."

Her hands trembled as she carefully cleaned his back. Talking to him distracted her and made it easier to pretend she hadn't noticed the feel of him under her fingers. It was easier to ignore his smooth, firm skin as they bickered, but now in the silence of the tiny bathroom she was overwhelmed once again by the sensual appeal of the enigmatic man so close to her.

When all the blood had been cleaned away and antibiotic lotion covered the deeper scratches, she shoved the bottles back in the medicine cabinet and washed her hands to disguise the fact that they were shaking. Finally she turned to him and said, "Why don't we go back into the other room?"

Without a word he let her precede him out of the bathroom. When she leaned against the counter in the kitchen, he stood and stared out the kitchen window at the smooth, quiet lake.

"I didn't see anyone out there tonight, Abby. I didn't hear anyone, either, after that first noise you heard.

But I'm pretty sure there was a person out there, and not just an animal."

"How can you tell?" she whispered.

He shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe I caught a scent of him, maybe I heard something I wasn't consciously aware of. I have no idea. It was probably someone from a neighboring ranch who knows about the cabin and needed a place to stay for the night, someone who got caught out here after dark.

But I can't afford to assume things like that."

"No one followed us here," she whispered. She wasn't sure if she was trying to persuade herself or Damien.

"No." he agreed. "No one followed us."

"So it must have been someone who knows the McAllisters."

"I agree. Now, why don't you try to get some sleep?"

She paused for a moment, looking at Damien in the moonlight. With his dark eyes hidden by the night and his bare chest dappled in the faint light, he looked unearthly and faintly dangerous, like an avenging angel who had suddenly appeared in her kitchen. "You try to get some sleep yourself, Damien," she said, then she turned and hurried into her room.

The bed in the other room creaked a moment later, but she wasn't fooled. She would have bet everything she owned that Damien wouldn't sleep any more this night. When the bed creaked again a few moments later, she pictured him propping the pillow behind him and pulling himself to a sitting position on the bed. The image of his bare chest leaning against the wall and his long legs stretched out in front of him danced in front of her eyes in the heat and the darkness. Finally, as the first birds began to sing, she fell into a light, restless sleep.

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The tentative fingers of dawn were lightening the sky over the lake when Damien slipped into the kitchen and filled the kettle with water. He was

going to need coffee, and plenty of it, to get through this day. As he leaned against the counter and waited for the water to boil, he looked at the darkened doorway of Abby's room and scowled.

Why did Abby have to be such a light sleeper? It would have been infinitely easier if he'd been able to slip outside last night without anyone noticing he was gone, then come back in the same way. It wasn't going to make his job any simpler to have Abby watching every move he made, wondering about his motives and insisting on an explanation.

And it didn't make life any easier to have her treating the scratches on his back, either. He could still feel her soft touch on his stinging skin, cleaning away the smears of blood with gentle fingers, then carefully applying lotion to the cuts. Beneath her hands he'd felt precious, as if someone really cared about what happened to him.

That was a dangerous direction for his mind to take. Turning around, he switched off the gas on the stove before the kettle could sing and wake everyone in the house. He tried to switch off the direction of his thoughts at the same time, but he found that Abby wasn't as easily dismissed.

Mixing a cup of coffee, he took a sip of the hot liquid, trying to burn the memory of her taste out of his mouth. The scene on the beach yesterday had haunted him all night. Even if he'd wanted to sleep, her taste and her touch would have reverberated through him in the darkness, keeping him awake.

It was the forbidden-fruit syndrome, he told himself. Abby was everything that he couldn't allow himself to care about, everything he didn't want in his life. If he was fool enough to be infatuated by a pair of caring eyes and a generous heart, he deserved all the sleepless nights he got.

"You're up early this morning."

He spun around to see Abby standing in the doorway of her bedroom. She wore a pair of long, baggy yellow shorts and a white T-shirt, both of them obviously in the category of favorite old clothes. Her hair fell to her shoulders in golden brown waves, and she watched him with uncertain eyes.

"I like watching the sunrise," he lied.

She smiled then. "Me, too. It's one of the best things about being in the mountains." She moved toward him, and he instinctively backed away. "I'll bet the best view is from the porch."

She nodded in the direction of the narrow platform outside the front door of the cabin. Damien watched her as she made herself a cup of coffee, pouring in at least as much powdered cream as coffee. He told himself to leave, to find something else to do, but he couldn't force himself to look away. As she padded off in the direction of the porch, he found himself following her. He told himself he was merely finding a better vantage point for watching the house.

Abby settled in one of the rickety chairs and stared out over the lake. She didn't seem to notice him when he walked out of the house and took the chair next to her. After a few minutes he allowed himself to relax and follow her gaze out over the lake.

The rosy sky reflected off the glass-smooth surface of the lake in front of them. Streaks of lighter pink smeared across the sky, turning the spires of the mountains into a dark ocher. It was a beautiful, peaceful scene, and for a moment he allowed himself to believe it was his only reason for sitting on this porch with

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this woman.

"Did you sleep well last night?" Abby's low voice pierced his bubble of fantasy, and he reminded himself fiercely about why he was here.

"I slept fine." His voice was terse. "How about you?"

"Great. It's much cooler up here than in Las Vegas, and the sound of the lake is very relaxing."

Now, why did he think she was lying? Was it because of the delicate pink color that washed her cheeks? Rather than call her on it, he turned his attention back to the lake. And froze in his chair.

A thin stream of smoke curled up into the brightening sky. It was so faint that it was almost invisible against the sky. In a few more minutes it would have been impossible to see it.

"What do you see?" Her low voice held a trace of fear, but he didn't turn and look at her. He concentrated on finding the source of the smoke.

"I see what looks like campfire smoke."

"Wouldn't it be from whoever was around the cabin last night?"

"Probably." He stood up and leaned over the railing, scanning the area. "Would you get me the binoculars from my duffel bag?" he asked.

She walked into his room, returning in a few moments with the black pouch that held the binoculars. He aimed them at the wisp of smoke and tried to focus in on it.

The silence hummed with tension as he scanned the area for signs of a human presence. After a few moments Abby said, "Can you see anything?"

"There are too many trees and rocks." Without taking his eyes off the area he was trying to focus on, he moved to the side to avoid the trees. He felt his leg skim Abby's as she scrambled to avoid him, and the touch of her skin against his sent a familiar shock thrumming across his nerves. It was the same sensation he'd felt the night before in the bathroom, when she'd brushed against him reaching for the medicine cabinet.

Slowly he lowered the binoculars to his side and turned to face Abby. She was backing away from him, her cheeks flushed and her chest fluttering from her rapid breathing. "I'm sorry," she said, her words tripping over themselves. "I didn't realize you were going to move over. I hope you didn't lose your focus on the smoke because you bumped into me."

He'd lost his focus, all right, and it had everything to do with touching her. The smoke in the distance and its possible implications faded from his consciousness, and all he could think about was Abby. The first rays of the sun rising over the lake bathed her in a golden glow, surrounding her with a halo of light. She shimmered in front of him, close enough that he could feel the heat from her red face, close enough to watch the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed too rapidly.

"Abby," he muttered, and took another step closer. She took a tentative step toward him and stumbled over the chair between them, pushing it into him.

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He reached out to help her steady the chair and brushed against her hand. It shook beneath his as she stepped away, out of his reach. "I'm sorry," she said in a low voice. "I didn't mean to bump into you like that."

"Don't worry about it." He watched her for a moment before he turned away and raised the binoculars to his eyes again, disturbed to find his hand not as steady as it was earlier. Damn Abby Markham and the effect she had on him, and damn his own lack of self-control. The smoke rose lazily into the air, tantalizing him just like the clean scent of Abby drifting around him. He tried to force himself to notice nothing but the smoke, to concentrate on the location so he could check on it later, but Abby was standing too close to him.

He seemed to have developed an internal radar as far as Abby was concerned. Even without looking, he knew where she stood, knew that she was looking out over the lake rather than at him. His hands tightened around the binoculars, and he finally lowered them and looked over at her.

"Why don't you go check on your nieces, make sure that I didn't wake them up?"

It was a flimsy excuse, but she seemed just as eager to go back into the cabin as he was to have her gone. "That's probably a good idea," she said, avoiding his gaze. She sounded subdued, and he had to force himself to turn

back to the scenery in front of him rather than watch her leave. He waited until the door closed softly behind her, then he raised the binoculars again.

The smoke curled slowly into the air for another minute, and he tried to memorize the landmarks around it. Then a final puff of smoke rose and disappeared. Someone had just put out the campfire.

Hearing Abby step back onto the porch, he lowered the binoculars. "Are they still asleep?" he asked.

"Maggie and Casey are fine," she answered. Her slight emphasis on the girls' names might have been unintentional, but Damien shifted uncomfortably as he turned away. Abby had made it plain more than once that she knew he avoided calling the twins by name. He was going to have to be more careful.

"Have you seen anything besides the smoke?" she continued, staring out at the horizon.

"They just put out the campfire. Take a look."

Abby took the binoculars from him, being careful to avoid his hand. For what seemed like a long time, she stared at the area where the smoke had been, then finally lowered the glasses and looked at him. He could see the uncertainty in her eyes.

"Wouldn't Shea have told us if there was someone else up here?" she asked.

"Probably." He glanced away, the stricken look on her face stirring something hidden deep in his heart.

He didn't want to destroy her fragile illusion of safety here in the mountains. He didn't want her to worry.

But he wanted her to be aware that they could take nothing for granted.

"You were probably right last night. Someone from the area got caught up in the mountains after dark and remembered this cabin. When they found out it was occupied, they probably went off and camped somewhere. The

smoke will turn out to be nothing more serious than some cold cowboy who needed to warm up."

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He should be giving her the worst possible interpretation, reminding her they weren't safe until the murderer had been arrested, pressuring her to get her nieces to tell him what they knew. But all he could see was the fear on her face and the worry in her eyes. All he could feel was the need to ease that fear and worry. "It's probably nothing, Abby."

Remembering the noise outside the cabin during the night, he felt the hair on his neck rising. He'd never believed in coincidence. And having someone anxious to use the cabin on the same night they arrived was too coincidental for his liking.

"You don't believe that." Abby's low voice pierced his concentration, and he looked over at her with a start.

"It's my job to be suspicious. I can't afford to take anything at face value."

"I don't want you sugarcoating the truth for me, Damien," she said fiercely. "I want to know what's going on. Maggie and Casey are my responsibility, and I need to know all the facts so I can make responsible decisions. I don't want bland reassurances from you. I want the truth."

So much for chivalrous impulses. "All right, I think anything's possible. I can't tell you absolutely that no one knows we're here. I don't think it's likely, but I'm not making any promises." His voice was flat and hard. "If you want to do what's best for your nieces, get them to talk to me."

Abby looked away, toward the mountains. Her hands clenched the material of her shorts, crushing it in her palms. "I'll talk to them this morning, after breakfast." Her voice was so quiet he could barely hear her. "I'll try to get them to tell you about that day at the construction site with their mother."

Damien let his gaze linger on her for a moment, then he looked back at the lake. He should be relieved.

With any luck they would all be leaving this cabin later today. He would have the information he needed, and the protection of Abby and her nieces could be left to someone else. Someone who didn't cringe inside every time he got near a child. Someone who hadn't fallen under the spell of Abby Markham.

Someone who wouldn't protect them half as well as he could.

Lowering the binoculars; he gripped them tightly then turned and walked back into the house. He cursed fate for giving him the Stefanetto case in the first place, and cursed Abby for being involved in it.

He wished he hadn't insisted on finding Joey's murderer. If he had, he wouldn't be fantasizing about a woman who scared him to death; he was afraid to stay with her and afraid to leave her protection to anyone else. He wouldn't feel like he was being torn in two every time one of those little girls smiled at him.

Placing the binoculars on the counter, he walked into his room, gently closing the door behind him. He needed to be alone for a while, to try and regain some of his detachment. He needed to stop thinking about Abby and start worrying about what to do with this case. Curling his hands into fists, he stared out the window, battling to smother painfully awakening emotions, to crush them beneath the weight of his responsibilities.

* * *

Abby heard every footstep Damien took as he walked away from her. She heard the quiet click as his door shut, and she was sure she could hear him walking around in his room. She listened for a few

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moments, then slowly turned back and looked out at the lake and the surrounding mountains.

The scenery was so beautiful, so peaceful. So ready to lull her into a false sense of security. If they hadn't seen the smoke, they would still think they were alone in this wilderness. She stared at the red cliffs until she heard a noise from Maggie and Casey's room, telling her that the twins were awake.

Taking a deep breath, she went to greet her nieces. They came running out of their room wearing their bathing suits and their beach shoes.

"Aunt Abby," they shouted, beaming wide, expectant smiles at her, "can we go swimming in the lake?"

Casey had her bathing suit on backward, and Maggie had her shoes on the wrong feet. Tears gathered in Abby's eyes as she thought about the men stalking these innocent children. Pulling the two girls into her arms for a fierce hug, Abby buried her face in their hair, savoring the sweet child-smell of them.

"We need to eat breakfast first," she said, swallowing hard to hide the tears in her voice. "Then we'll see."

Would Damien let them go down to the lake? Would he want them in the open? She had no idea.

She tried to pay attention to Casey's innocuous chatter and Maggie's questions as she fixed muffins and cereal for them, but her gaze kept drifting toward Damien's closed bedroom door. What was he doing in there? And what would he say to the girls if they agreed to talk to him? More importantly, what was she going to say to them?

Almost as if he'd read her mind, Damien emerged from his room and walked into the tiny kitchen.

Stopping at the table where the girls sat eating, he squatted down so his face was at their level and said gravely, as if speaking to another adult, "Good morning, Casey. Good morning, Maggie."

The girls both giggled and chorused, "Good morning, Damien.

Abby's heart twisted as she saw the pain shadow his eyes at their response. His hand clenched the back of the chair, his knuckles turning white, as he asked, "Did you hear any bears during the night?"

"There aren't any bears here, Damien," Maggie said in a lecturing tone of voice. "Bears are afraid of Angus." She reached down to pet the black cat, who was sitting next to her chair.

Abby smiled at the sight of Maggie, the more quiet of the two twins, correcting Damien. "Damien doesn't know that Angus scares away all the bears, Mags," she said.

"We couldn't hear no bears 'cause there aren't any," the girl explained, watching Damien earnestly.

Abby saw the effort it took for Damien to collect himself and smile back at Maggie. "Well, that's good to know. I thought I heard one last night, and I was afraid I was going to have to set a bear trap today."

"What's a bear trap?" Maggie asked.

At the same time Casey said, "Can I help?"

Damien rocked back on his heels and stood up. Abby saw the tension ease from his face as he stepped away from Maggie and Casey.

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"A bear trap is something that you set in the woods to scare away the bears. You don't actually want to catch one, of course. You just want to scare them away."

"Why don't you want to catch one?" Maggie asked.

Damien looked at her, and Abby wondered if he realized that his eyes softened a fraction at the same time as his hands tensed. "What would you

do with a bear if you caught one, Maggie?"

"I'd keep it for a pet," she answered immediately. "They're fuzzy and cuddly."

"They're also big and smelly," Damien said. "And they'd eat all of your aunt Abby's food. That's why we don't want them around."

Abby looked at her nieces' faces. Both of them were enthralled by Damien's words, and she suddenly realized what he was doing. If they were busy building a bear trap together, they wouldn't be on the beach, exposed to anyone watching for them.

Her heart softened as she watched the man standing only inches away from her. It was obvious that Damien was uncomfortable around children, and that he wanted to avoid them at all cost. But he was going out of his way to get Maggie and Casey interested in helping him build a "bear trap" in the woods so they wouldn't go near the lake today.

What kind of pain was he inviting for himself by deliberately spending time with Maggie and Casey? And why was he doing it?

The answer to that question was obvious, at least. He was doing it to protect them. She could tell by the way Damien's eyes drifted to the window behind her, his eyes scanning the mountains as he talked to the twins.

Abby's attention was jerked back to her nieces as each finished her breakfast and jumped up. "We're ready to go," Casey mumbled over a bite of muffin. "Can we help you build the bear trap?"

Damien leaned forward. "I think you would be a big help," he said.

"Go change your clothes, honey," Abby told her. "You'll need to wear shorts and a shirt and your gym shoes if you're going to work in the woods."

"Okay." The two girls raced into their room and closed the door behind them. Abby could hear their faint giggles and the sound of drawers being pulled out as she turned to Damien.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "I wasn't sure how to keep them off the beach."

He shrugged. "No one will be able to see them if they're in the woods. And it'll give me a chance to rig up some sort of warning system around the cabin so no one can surprise us."

Abby licked her lips. "I didn't get a chance to talk to them about what happened when they went to work with Janna. Do you want me to do that now?"

Damien considered for a moment, then he shook his head. "No. Let them get more comfortable with me first. Then maybe they won't be so scared to talk to me."

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"How hard is this going to be for you?" she asked softly.

"I've set up systems like this more times than I can count." He scanned the kitchen instead of looking at her. "I'm going to need to borrow some things for our bear trap, though."

"That's not what I meant," Abby said more sharply than she'd intended.

Slowly he turned to face her. "This is my job, Abby. To protect those girls, and you. It's not a matter of hard. It's a matter of doing it correctly. I figure this morning I'm killing two birds with one stone. I'm keeping them away from the lake and I'm protecting us from any surprises."

"I know that you're uncomfortable around children. I've seen it every time you look at Maggie and Casey."

"That's irrelevant." His voice was hard and cold. "My personal feelings don't enter into my job at all. I don't allow them to."

Abby watched him leave the cabin, quietly closing the screen door behind him. She reached blindly for the cup of coffee that she'd left sitting on the

counter and took a gulp of the cold liquid. She may have been foolish enough to be moved by the kiss they'd shared, to hope that Damien was as affected by her as she was by him, but obviously Damien didn't allow any such human failings. He'd just told her so in no uncertain terms.

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Chapter 6

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Abby's hands were immersed in soapy water when Maggie and Casey emerged from their bedroom, dressed in wildly clashing shorts and T-shirts. "We're ready to build a bear trap," Casey shouted, running for the door.

Maggie stopped and looked around the cabin. "Where's Damien?" she asked, her tiny eyebrows puckering into a frown.

"He went outside to check on something," Abby answered, improvising quickly. "He's probably making sure it's safe to go into the woods."

"I'm going to go find him," Casey said, heading for the door. "Wait!" Abby's voice was too sharp, and she bit her lip as Casey turned to her, startled. "I don't think that Damien would want you to go outside until he was very sure all the bears were gone," she said in what she hoped was a calmer tone. "Why don't you watch for him at the window?"

"We want to go outside, Aunt Abby," came Maggie's voice, and Abby looked at the two children watching her with pleading eyes.

"All right," she said, sighing. "But I want you to wait near the truck for Damien. Don't go into the woods, and don't go down to the lake."

Abby stood by the door and watched them for a moment, her mouth curving into a tender smile as they

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played. They were careful not to stray from the truck, dancing around it as they peered into the woods and watched for Damien. Abby knew immediately when he emerged from the brush. Both twins jumped up and down, squealing his name.

Damien paused in front of them and said something, then headed for the house. Abby hurriedly stepped away from the door and turned back to the sink. By the time Damien entered the house, she was busily wringing out the dishrag and wiping down the counter.

He stopped right behind her, close enough that a ripple of awareness shivered down her spine. Clutching the dishrag more tightly, she tried to step away from him, to ignore the flare of heat his presence ignited, but it was impossible.

"I told the girls to stay by the truck until I came back out." His low, husky voice was like sandpaper over her nerves, making her whole body tingle. Reluctantly she turned around to face him, determined to be as casual as he was.

"What do you need?"

Heat leaped into his eyes, making them glow like two hot embers. She stared at him for a moment, mesmerized, before she turned away to fumble with the dishrag again. "For the bear trap, I mean." She barely recognized the low-pitched, throaty voice as her own.

She heard him draw a long, shaky breath. "Just some odds and ends from the kitchen. I'll get them in a minute." The harsh, impersonal voice was back, and Abby turned around slowly to face him again. He studied her face, all expression wiped off of his own.

"Have you tried to call your sister today?"

Abby swallowed as she stared at him, unable to look away. The wall was solidly back in place, as impenetrable as ever. That moment of heat and need she'd seen in his face might never have existed.

"No," she finally said. "I haven't called her yet. I thought I'd wait until Maggie and Casey are outside with you."

"Good." He handed her his cellular phone and moved over to the door. From the tension in his back she knew he was watching the twins. "Go

ahead and call. I'll keep an eye on the girls."

Picking up the phone, Abby watched her hand tremble as she punched the numbers into the keypad.

Would Janna answer her phone? Was she even at the hotel in Mexico? A horrible fear for her sister filled her. She was far away in Mexico, and she was in danger. What would she say when she picked up the phone?

The phone seemed to ring forever, but the hotel picked it up after the third ring. When she asked for Janna Steward, the clerk put her on hold.

"At least she's registered there. The operator is ringing Janna's room," she told Damien. The silence on the phone line stretched on and on, tightening along with her nerves. Finally the hotel operator came on the line again.

"I'm sorry, there is no answer. Would you like to leave a message?"

"Would I like to leave a message?" Abby repeated, looking over at Damien.

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He shook his head, and she looked blindly down at the telephone in front of her. "No, thank you," she said softly to the operator. "I'll try again later."

Laying the phone gently on the counter, she looked up at Damien again. She knew her fear was obvious, but she didn't care. "Why didn't you want me to leave a message?"

"Because a message isn't private," he answered calmly. "Anyone can look at it, and I have no intention of telling anyone where we are."

She nodded, feeling numb. "She's probably working already. I'll try her again tonight."

"Probably." His voice had no inflection. "Why don't I get what I need and get busy on that bear trap? I don't want your nieces wandering down to the lake because they got bored."

"Take whatever you need." Abby waved her hand around the kitchen. "Shea didn't seem like she would mind."

Damien looked at her for a moment, then nodded. Moving swiftly through the tiny kitchen, he picked up an odd assortment of items, put them into a bag with a roll of twine and stepped out the door. Turning to look at her before he let it close, he said, "We'll be within shouting distance if you need us."

Abby's sense of security dissolved like the bubbles in flat champagne. Heading for the door, she watched Damien vanish into the woods, Maggie and Casey right behind him. For a few moments she watched the place where they had disappeared, listening to the girls' giggles and the cracking of branches under their feet. Then she turned around and went back into the cabin, closing the door behind her.

This wasn't a game. Damien wasn't taking Maggie and Casey into the woods to play out their childish fantasies about bears. This was about protecting all of them from a possible threat to their lives.

Abby tried to forget about the smoke and its possible implications. She moved around the cabin, picking up the girls' toys and poking into cabinets to see what kinds of supplies Shea had provided. But after fifteen minutes the cabin was spotless and she had memorized the contents of every cabinet. Finally she sat down in the tiny living area of the cabin, dragging a chair close to the window. As she stared out at the mountains surrounding the cabin, she wondered again who had been camping last night. Surely Damien was right. It had been someone from a nearby ranch, stranded on the mountain after dark.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw something move. When she turned to look, she saw a man on a horse, standing on an outcropping of rock across the lake from the house.

Without taking her eyes off the man, she reached behind her to find the binoculars on the counter. When her hand finally closed around them, she pulled them out of the pouch and brought them up to her eyes.

She was trembling so hard that she couldn't see anything for a moment. Then the man and the horse sprang into sharp focus.

* * *

Damien listened to the excited chatter of the two girls behind him as they headed into the stand of trees behind the cabin. With a supreme effort of will he tried to harden himself against the pain. This was an opportunity too valuable to be missed, and he might not get another chance. If the twins relaxed around him today and accepted him as a trustworthy adult, then they might answer the questions he had to ask.

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His personal feelings didn't matter.

"Damien!" one of the girls shouted behind him. "Is this a good place for a bear trap?"

He turned around and looked. Casey jumped up and down in a small clearing, her eyes blazing with excitement. Something moved in his chest as he watched her joyous enthusiasm, and he realized with a jolt of surprise that it wasn't pain. It was delight in her pleasure, enjoyment of her complete and utterly unconscious happiness. It was an emotion he hadn't felt for three years.

Guilt made him answer too gruffly. "We'll remember this place. But we need to check out the rest of the forest first. We wouldn't want to build our bear trap, then find someplace better, would we?"

"I think the bears would hide in the bushes, not in the open." Maggie looked at Damien with Abby's hazel eyes. "Don't you, Damien?"

The trust in those huge eyes made Damien squat down in front of Maggie. He dug his hands into the dead leaves on the ground, resisting the sudden impulse to reach out for her. "I think you're a very smart little girl. And you, too, Casey," he added to the girl next to him. "You're very observant. We

may have to make more than one trap, just to be sure we get them all. What do you think about that?"

"I think we need ten traps," Casey shouted, jumping into the air. "Maybe twenty. And maybe we should put some on the beach, too."

"Bears are only in the forest," he answered quickly, then stood up again. "So we need to stay here."

Without giving either Casey or Maggie a chance to think about the beach, he handed each of them a small bag of supplies. "Do you think you girls could carry these for me? I'm afraid I'm making too much noise with them. We wouldn't want to warn the bears that we're coming."

"Do you think they're watching us?" Maggie's voice was hushed in the woods.

Damning himself for scaring her, Damien squatted in front of her again. "No, Maggie, I don't. I think those bears are sleeping late this morning. But that's one of the rules when you're in the woods. You don't make more noise than you have to. That way you can hear what's going on around you."

"You mean like birds and squirrels, and things like that?" Casey piped up.

"That's exactly what I mean." Damien glanced over at her. "What do you like to see and hear in the woods, Casey?"

"I like the birds," she answered immediately.

Damien rocked back on his heels and watched her. "I like watching the birds, too," he said gravely.

"What is it you like about them?"

"They're pretty, and I like the way they can fly. I want to be able to fly like them." She raised her head to look at the tops of the trees, and her expressive face was suddenly filled with longing. "If I could fly, I could hide in the trees and no one would be able to find me."

"Why would you want to hide in the trees?" he asked, holding his breath. It couldn't really be this simple, could it?

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Casey looked back at him, her eyes solemn. "Sometimes I don't like the man at Mommy's work." Then she turned to her sister, her mood apparently forgotten. "Come on, Maggie. Let's go find a fairy tree."

The two girls scurried away as Damien slowly straightened. Janna worked with several men. Abby might know which one Casey was talking about. It might be completely unrelated to this case, but the hairs on the back of his neck rose as he thought about Casey's words. He couldn't afford to ignore them.

He followed the sound of the twins' laughing voices through the trees until he found them squatting underneath an aspen tree. "Is this a fairy tree?" he asked, trying to keep his voice even.

"Yep," Maggie said, pointing to a puffball mushroom. "See, here's the fairy dust." She pressed gently on the top of the mushroom and both girls watched, enthralled, as the spores rose in a tiny cloud out of the bole in the top.

"What makes this a fairy tree?" he asked, sitting down in the leaf litter next to them.

Maggie turned to him, her eyes wide and solemn. "Fairies live in trees, you know."

Her gaze was trusting and completely open. An unexpected wave of guilt washed over him, and he swallowed once and forced himself to meet her gaze. "No, I didn't know that."

Maggie nodded. "They do. And they picked this tree because there's fairy dust around it. See?"

Damien looked around and saw that puffball mushrooms surrounded the tree in a rough circle. "I can see that," he said slowly. "I believe you're right, Maggie. This must be a fairy tree."

Casey nodded happily beside him. "You can't see the fairies. They only come out when nobody's looking. But I'm going to leave a wish at the fairy tree, and the fairies will make it come true."

"What kind of a wish do you want to make, Casey?" he asked, tensed for another revelation like the one about the man her mother worked with.

"You can't tell," Maggie warned her sister. "It won't come true if you do."

"I know that." Casey's voice dripped scorn. She threw her arms around the smooth bark of the tree and scrunched her eyes closed. A moment later she opened them and grinned at Damien and Maggie. "Your turn, Mags ."

Maggie stepped delicately over to the tree and laid her palm against the trunk. She turned her wide, solemn gaze onto Damien, and he watched her lips move as she mouthed a silent wish. Then she stepped away from the tree and closer to him.

"Do you want to make a wish at the fairy tree?"

Damien shook his head, trying to swallow around the hard lump of pain in his throat. "I don't think it works for grownups, Maggie." Regret stirred inside him, and for a moment he wished passionately that he believed in fairy trees and the magic of fairy dust. Holding more tightly to his bag of supplies, he said,

"We'd better get to work on this bear trap."

"First you have to promise, Damien." Casey's earnest young voice stopped him before he'd taken two steps.

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"Promise what?"

"That you won't tell."

Slowly he turned around. "What can't I tell, Casey?"

"About the fairy tree, of course." She sounded impatient with his dimness. "You have to keep it a secret."

Damien squatted down in front of Casey, careful not to touch her. "Do I have to keep it a secret from everyone in the whole world?"

She nodded, giving him another of her grins. "You can't tell no one ."

"What about your aunt Abby? Can we tell her?"

The twins exchanged glances, then turned to look at him again. "Aunt Abby keeps secrets good," Maggie said.

Damien's heart began to pound. "Can we tell her about the fairy tree? Maybe she'd like to make a wish."

Maggie and Casey looked at each other again, then nodded. "We can tell her," Casey said.

Damien closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then looked at the two girls. "If I had secrets, I would tell your aunt," he said in what he hoped was a casual voice.

If he hadn't been watching very carefully, he would have missed the flash of fear on Maggie's face, missed Casey's sudden stillness.

The next moment Casey went dashing off into the woods, shouting. "I know a good place for a bear trap."

Maggie gave him a frightened look, then followed her sister through the brush. Damien walked after them slowly, cursing himself for his clumsiness. He hadn't intended to bring up secrets and the sharing of those secrets this morning, but the opportunity had seemed too good to pass up. And now Maggie and Casey watched him with wary eyes again.

* * *

Two hours later the three of them headed back to the cabin. He was hot and sweaty, and the two girls were giggling and laughing about the bears they were going to catch tonight. He had been very careful not to mention secrets again, and gradually the twins had relaxed around him.

"What are we going to use for bait in our bear trap, Damien?" Maggie's voice jerked him back to reality, and he looked at the child walking next to him.

"I've heard that bears are very fond of chocolate-chip cookies."

A gleam lit Maggie's eyes. "Aunt Abby knows how to make chocolate-chip cookies."

"Maybe she'll let us help her make some, then we can put them in our bear trap. What do you think?"

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Maggie gave the idea serious consideration. "I think she will. Aunt Abby doesn't want any bears to come around here. And I'll say please when we ask her. She likes it when we say please."

Damien took a deep breath and closed his eyes as the memories tore at his heart. A dark-haired little boy stood in front of him, saying "please" in a hopeful voice, his enormous dark eyes pleading. Damien watched himself kissing the boy goodbye, telling him firmly that he had to go, that it was only for a little while. It was the last time he'd seen him alive.

"Here we are at the cabin," he said as he spotted the reddish brown logs through the trees. His voice sounded strained and harsh. "Why don't you go tell Aunt Abby about the bear traps we built? I'll check the outside of the house."

The twins scampered toward the cabin, and as soon as Damien saw them go inside he stopped and leaned against a tree. Grief welled up inside him again, churning with the guilt that was always there. He couldn't face Abby and the girls until he had buried those feelings deep inside of him, buried them so far below the surface that the sight of Maggie and Casey wouldn't make him want to die himself.

He should have backed out of this assignment as soon as he heard that the possible witnesses were two children. Except that he'd never backed out of an assignment in his life. He'd been sure he could handle it.

He hadn't counted on Maggie's huge hazel eyes and Casey's utterly disarming grin.

He hadn't counted on Abby Markham, either.

After a few moments he straightened and walked toward the cabin with grim determination. He had a job to do. The two children and the woman in that cabin needed his protection, and all the crying in the world wasn't about to change that. He hadn't let his personal life interfere with his job for three years, and he wasn't about to start now.

* * *

Abby listened to Maggie and Casey tell her excitedly about the bear trap and their adventures in the woods. Waiting for Casey to take a breath, she asked, "Where did Damien go?"

"He's checking the outside of the cabin," Casey told her, bouncing up and down on the chair. "He wants to make sure that no bears can get in here."

Abby glanced at the door, wondering where he was. Had he found something outside that alarmed him?

Was there something wrong?

"Can we, Aunt Abby?" Maggie asked. "Please?"

Abby jerked her attention back to her nieces. "I'm sorry, honey, I didn't hear you. What did you want to do?"

"Can we make some chocolate-chip cookies? We need them for the bear trap 'cause Damien says bears like chocolate-chip cookies."

For a man who didn't want to be around children, Damien certainly seemed to understand them. How could he have known that the only way of keeping the girls off the beach was to tempt them with

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cookies? "Of course we can make cookies, Maggie," she murmured. "We don't want any bears around here."

The door opened silently, and Damien slipped inside. "The girls tell me we need cookies for the bear trap," Abby said brightly.

Damien nodded once and headed for the sink. "Chocolate chips are best," he said, his voice abrupt.

"The girls want to help you make them."

Abby stared at his back. His spine was rigid and stiff, his muscles braced as if for an attack. Had he seen something outside?

"Girls, why don't you get cleaned up and wash your hands," Abby said, standing up and shooing the twins toward the bathroom as she watched Damien. "Then we'll get started on those cookies."

Maggie and Casey hurried off to the bathroom, and Abby walked into the kitchen. "Did you see something out there?" she asked in a low voice.

Damien shook his head. "Not a thing. I couldn't even be sure someone had been in the woods last night."

"Then why are you so tense? Did something else happen?"

"Nothing happened outside, Abby." He stared out the window, his back to her, and the air around him seemed to quiver with tension. "We built a few bear traps, and now we're going to make cookies. That should keep them off the beach for a while."

"You don't have to worry about them going down to the beach."

Slowly he turned around. Before he could disguise it, she saw terrible anguish in his eyes. The three hours he had spent with Maggie and Casey had taken their toll.

Then he looked over her shoulder at the closed bathroom door, and his eyes were a careful blank again.

But Abby knew she hadn't been mistaken. The pain in his eyes and his rigid stance were impossible to hide.

"Why don't I have to worry about the beach?" he asked, his voice sounding impersonal and distant.

"Because I think I saw the man responsible for the campfire last night."

He swung his gaze back to face her. "*What?*"

"I was watching out the window after you left, and I saw a man on a horse over there." She waved to the other side of the small lake.

"Did he see you?"

She heard the tension in his voice, and shook her head. "I was inside. I did get a look at him through the binoculars, though."

"What did he look like?"

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She shrugged. "Like a cowboy, I guess. He had on a cowboy hat and jeans, with those leather things over the jeans. And there was a pack behind his

saddle."

"That doesn't prove anything, Abby." Damien sounded impatient.

"I thought you said he was probably some cowboy who needed to spend the night out here. That's just what he looked like."

"Where did he go?"

"I have no idea. He disappeared behind the rocks, and I didn't see him again."

"I'll call Shea later and ask her if anyone else is supposed to be up here."

"What if it's one of her neighbors? She might not know."

"I'll ask anyway. And I'll talk to her brother, the sheriff."

"What would he be able to do?" A cold twist of fear curled to life inside her.

"Keep his eyes open. He knows Cameron and the surrounding area. If there's anything out of the ordinary going on, he'll know about it."

"I thought you didn't want anyone to know where we were."

"Devlin and Shea already know that we're here. If I didn't trust them, we wouldn't have come here. I'm just going to tell Devlin more about why we're here."

Damien stood at the window, looking out at the lake. His eyes swept the shoreline, slowly and methodically, like a hunter searching for his prey. After a moment he turned to her. "Can you point out exactly where he was, and which direction he went?"

He looked like a stranger, cold and remote, even more distant than usual. Fear bubbled in Abby's throat as she watched him. The men looking for Maggie and Casey could look no more menacing than Damien did right now. But Damien was supposed to be different. He was supposed to be one of the good guys.

"We'll get a better view from the porch." Abby turned and walked out the door, Damien right behind her. She could feel the heat and tension that poured off him.

"Where exactly was he?" Damien lifted the binoculars to his eyes.

"There's a rock that juts out into the water over there on the right side of the lake. He was standing on top of that. When he left, he rode off to the left, away from the house."

Damien scanned the shore, his knuckles white on the binoculars. She could tell the moment he brought the rock into focus. He froze for a moment, then stepped closer to the railing, keeping his binoculars fixed on one spot.

"Describe him for me again." His voice was impersonal and clipped.

"Jeans, a blue work shirt and a cowboy hat. And those leather things on his legs." She shrugged her

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shoulders. "He looked like a cowboy."

He took the binoculars away from his eyes long enough to ask, "Did you see his face?"

Abby balled her hands inside the pockets of her shorts. Oh, God, she'd tried so hard. "Only a glimpse.

The hat made a shadow, and the light was wrong."

"Would you recognize him again?"

"I don't know."

Damien looked back at the rock, standing motionless while he stared at it. Tension seemed to flow from him in ever tightening waves, surrounding her, suffocating her with their intensity. When she opened her mouth to

plead with him to stop, to tell her what he was thinking, he abruptly lowered the binoculars and turned to her again.

"No one's there now. He's probably long gone, but I'm going to go over there and take a look."

Abby had thought she couldn't be any more scared than she had been already. She'd been wrong.

"What if someone's waiting there for you?" She stared at him, appalled.

"I'll know before I get there. I won't be walking into an ambush." He turned to face her. "And you and the girls will be fine here alone."

"I wasn't worried about us." Abby trailed after him, trying to think of a way to stop him. "You didn't say anything about rounding up the suspects yourself."

He stopped and turned around. "What do you think this is all about, Abby? It's about catching whoever killed Joey Stefanetto. You're probably right. The man on the horse was the one who had the campfire this morning, and he's probably just a local cowboy. But I want to make sure. I can't afford to ignore anything. Because catching the man who killed Joey is the bottom line. The sooner I find out who was responsible and arrest them, the safer your nieces will be."

And that was all she wanted, wasn't it? As she watched him check his gun, Abby told herself fiercely that it didn't matter what risks Damien took. All that mattered was Maggie and Casey's safety.

Aloud she said, "Be careful. Promise me you won't do anything stupid."

He paused and looked up from his gun, and for a moment Abby thought that the grimness on his face eased a little. "What's your definition of stupid?"

"Doing something dangerous that could get you hurt. That's one definition of stupid," she said flatly.

He gave her a smile that held no humor. "Don't worry, Abby. I won't do anything stupid."

His gaze swept the cabin, then fixed on the door. "Stay inside and keep the doors locked. Don't let anyone in, no matter what they say to you." He took a deep breath and looked at the twins' bedroom, where he could hear the girls playing. "Even someone you know. The phone's on the counter, along with Devlin's phone number. If anything makes you nervous or suspicious, anything at all, call him."

He headed for the door, and she heard herself saying, "Damien."

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Stopping, he turned around slowly. "What?"

She stared at him helplessly for a moment, battling the panic that threatened. She told herself she was scared for Maggie and Casey, that it had nothing to do with Damien personally. Finally she said softly,

"Be careful."

Damien took a step toward her, then another. He moved like a man who was being pulled against his will, battling against a force too strong to resist. When he stood in front of her, he reached out and cupped her face in his palm, letting his roughened fingers caress her cheek for a moment.

"Don't worry about me, Abby. I know what I'm doing. I'll be fine. I'm more worried about leaving you and the girls alone here in the cabin."

She ached to turn her face into his hand, to seek the reassurance of his touch. Slowly, watching him, she brought her hand up to cover his. Letting her fingers twine with his for a fleeting moment, she said, "Don't get hurt, Damien. Too many people have been hurt already."

His fingers answered the pressure of hers, then his hand fell away. "I'll be back soon, Abby. Stay in the cabin with the doors locked."

As he turned to leave, he glanced in the twins' room. Abby saw his step falter, then he looked away and headed for the door. He walked out and let it close behind him without looking back.

Abby realized her hand cupped her face in the same spot where Damien's hand had been. Letting it drop, she hurried over to lock the door behind him. She couldn't resist peering out the window, to try to watch him for as long as possible. But he had already disappeared.

Abby watched the woods for a long time, hoping to see some hint of Damien. It was as if he'd merged with the plants, becoming invisible to her eyes and everyone else's. Finally she turned away to find Maggie and Casey watching her solemnly from the door of their room.

"Where did Damien go?" Casey asked.

"He went to see if you needed to make any more bear traps."

"Really?" Maggie's eyes lit up.

"Really, sweetheart." Abby gave her an extra hug, then stood up. "Now, why don't we get busy on those cookies so they'll be finished when Damien gets back?"

Casey looked up at her, a grin filling her brown eyes. "We don't have to use them all for the bear trap, do we?"

Chapter 7

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An hour and a half later Damien stood on the porch of the cabin and stared back at the lake, his eyes narrowed in speculation. A swirl of voices from inside the cabin interrupted his thoughts, and he heard

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Abby's even, calm voice blending with the eager chatter of the two girls. At the sound of her voice he forgot all about the man on the horse and Joey Stefanetto. A fierce longing engulfed him to be a part of the group on the other side of the door, to have the right to sweep inside and bundle all three of them into his anus.

His hand tightened on the doorknob as he told himself again why that wasn't possible. These three people were his job and nothing more. To make them more than that was to endanger their lives, and his sanity. The fragile equilibrium he'd constructed of his life would come crashing down, shattered beyond repair.

Drawing a deep breath, he knocked on the door. The noise on the other side stopped abruptly, and the sudden silence told him he'd made a mistake. He knew with a gut-twisting certainty what he would see if he looked in a window. Abby would be drawing the two girls closer as she stared at the door, her eyes wide with fear, wondering who was on the other side.

"It's me, Abby," he said, his voice rising on the mountain breeze.

A moment later Abby pulled the door open and greeted him with a wan smile. "Thank goodness," she said, slightly breathless. "For a minute there I was a little startled."

Her face told him otherwise. She had been scared silly, and now her hazel eyes mirrored her relief and joy at seeing him. She was only grateful it was

him at the door instead of some thug, he told himself harshly. But a part of him wanted to believe her smile was because he was safe.

"No one else would have knocked," he answered, angry with himself for frightening her, and even more angry at his own fantasies. Closing and locking the door carefully behind him, he forced his mouth to smile as he looked over at Maggie and Casey. "What have you two been doing while I was gone?"

"We made cookies for the bear traps," Casey answered proudly, stepping out from behind her aunt.

"Can we go put them in the woods now?"

Anticipation sparkled in her eyes and in her happy grin, and Damien fought the tenderness and pain that welled up inside him. "We have to wait until it's almost dark, because that's when the bears come out.

We wouldn't want the coyotes to get our cookies, would we?"

"We made lots," Maggie piped up. "So if the coyotes ate some, we could put more in the woods later."

"Wouldn't you rather eat the cookies yourselves?" Damien stood up and looked over at the racks of cooling cookies on the counter. "I know I would."

"You can't have any until they're cool," Maggie said, her voice an imitation of her aunt's. "That's the rules."

"I don't know, they look cool to me," he answered, looking over at Abby. "What do you think, Aunt Abby?"

"I think you could each have one, if you eat it at the table." Abby's voice was so quiet he barely heard the tremor beneath her words. He watched as she poured Maggie and Casey a glass of milk. One of her hands lingered on each blond head for a moment, then she looked up at him.

"There's something I'd like to show you on the porch," she said in a neutral voice. "The girls will be fine

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here for a few minutes."

Silently he stepped out the door. Abby didn't make a sound when she joined him, but he was excruciatingly aware of her presence.

"What happened?" she asked in a low voice from behind him.

"Not a damn thing."

"What do you mean?" She moved closer to him, and he could feel her gaze on his face. "What did you see?"

"I didn't see a thing. There was no sign that anyone has been up here lately."

"The man on the horse wasn't an apparition. And we both saw the smoke from the fire."

"I did find the remains of a fire. It had been carefully buried." He paused, remembering how he'd had to search. "Too carefully."

"What do you mean?"

He heard the catch of fear in her voice and wanted to reassure her, but she deserved the truth.

"Someone took great pains to make sure that fire was out and buried, to make sure that all traces of their campsite were gone."

"That's just being safe. It's very dry up here." He wished he could agree with her. "Someone also smoothed branches over the dirt at the campsite to erase their footprints. That goes way beyond safety."

"Maybe it was someone from another ranch who didn't want your friends to know he was trespassing."

"Maybe." He shifted to look out over the lake. "I'm going to talk to Devlin today."

"All right." Her voice was practically a whisper. "Do you think we should leave?"

He'd thought about that already. "No. We don't know for sure that anyone's found us. Let's see what Devlin has to say."

"Okay." She tried to smile at him, but he could see what an effort it was.

"The girls want to go swimming, I think. Why don't we let them?"

"All right." He watched as she struggled to hide her fear, then turned and opened the door. "Who wants to go swimming in here?"

"We do! We do!" Damien turned around to see Maggie and Casey standing in the door to the cabin, the smears of chocolate on their faces proof of their enjoyment of the cookies.

"You two look good enough to eat," Abby said. "Go clean your faces, then put on your bathing suits."

Her voice gave no hint of her emotional turmoil. "We'll all go down to the lake and do a little swimming."

She turned to him. "I assume you brought your bathing suit." He thought about the swim trunks that he'd

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packed just yesterday. Three years ago they'd been brand-new. They still were. He'd had to cut the tags off them before he put them in his suitcase. He'd bought them just before the last trip he'd planned with his family. Now he wanted to throw the trunks in the trash along with the tags, but

something made him pack them instead. "Yes." He knew his voice was terse, but he didn't care.

"Well, if you want to swim with us, you might as well get changed. Maggie and Casey wait for no man when it comes to swimming."

She brushed past him and went into her room, closing the door gently behind her. Watching that closed door, listening to the giggles coming from the room, he finally forced himself to walk to his own room.

Staring at the clothes in his suitcase for a long time, he finally reached in and pulled out the trunks. He held them in his clenched fist for a moment, staring at them with unseeing eyes, then he deliberately relaxed his hand and began to undress.

* * *

Abby stepped out of her bedroom, nervously smoothing her hands down the short beach cover-up she wore. The logistics of swimming hadn't occurred to her when Damien had suggested it. She hadn't thought about the fact that she would have to appear in front of Damien in a bathing suit.

He made her feel self-conscious enough as it was. Wearing a bathing suit, she felt much too exposed and absurdly vulnerable. Even though her bright green one-piece suit was modest by anyone's standards, she had to stop herself from reaching around and tugging it down in the back.

"We're ready. Aunt Abby!" Maggie and Casey came charging out of their room, wearing their bathing suits and heading for the bag that held their beach toys and towels. "Let's go. Last one in the water is a rotten egg."

"We have to wait for Damien," she reminded them. "It would be rude to leave without him." And possibly dangerous, she acknowledged with a glance toward the lake.

The door to his bedroom opened, and he walked into the kitchen. Abby's mouth went dry as she looked at him. The towel he had slung around his shoulders did nothing to hide his chest. Broad and solid, his muscles rippled

under tanned skin. Wiry rather than bulky, he looked fit and hard, able to handle any challenge. The thatch of black hair on his chest arched down his belly in a tantalizing line that disappeared into the waistband of his swimming trunks.

His legs were long and lean, and as she watched him she imagined them wrapped around her, drawing her closer to him. She felt her face flame as she watched him, but she was unable to look away. Damien was an imposing figure fully dressed, but now standing in front of her wearing only a swimsuit, he was overwhelming. Power and strength emanated from him in almost tangible waves.

But his face was shuttered and remote, and he held himself stiffly erect, as if he were battling some inner demon. "Damien?" she asked tentatively, her embarrassment forgotten as she realized how unnatural his pose was. "Is something wrong?"

He looked over at her, and she saw a flash of agony in his eyes for a moment before he looked away. "I just haven't been swimming in a long time."

"You have a pretty bathing suit, Damien," Casey said, admiring the multicolored trunks, and this time Abby couldn't miss the searing pain that crossed his face.

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"I'm glad you like it," he replied, forcing out the words. As he turned away, Abby had to stop herself from reaching for him. Damien wasn't a child that needed comfort and protection. He was an adult, and he'd made it clear that he didn't need anything from her besides access to her nieces.

"We're burning daylight, troops," she said, forcing a cheerful note into her voice. "Let's go."

The girls raced out the door, and Damien followed them immediately, staying only a few steps behind them. Abby pulled the door shut and

walked more slowly, her gaze fixed on the complex man in front of her.

Damien Kane was an enigma, a man shrouded in mystery. What had put that pain in his eyes? And more importantly why did she feel compelled to ease it?

Because she was a sucker for anything wounded, she reminded herself with a sigh, whether it was a child, an animal or an attractive man. She had taken one look at Damien's haunted eyes, and her mothering instinct had kicked into high gear.

Except that her feelings for Damien were anything but motherly, she admitted as she watched the play of muscles in his long legs. The attraction she felt for him was as powerful as it was disturbing and unwanted. Her life was perfect the way it was. She had her students during the schoolyear, and her nieces any time she wanted to see them. After the disastrous experience with her former fiancé, she had no intention of getting involved again. Especially with a man who was uncomfortable around children.

And apparently Damien felt the same way. He might not be able to hide his attraction to her, but he'd made it plain he intended to fight it as hard as he could. That was fine with her, because she planned on doing the same thing.

By the time she reached the small strip of sand that bordered the lake, Maggie and Casey were already in the water, splashing each other and shrieking with joy. Damien stood at the edge of the water, scanning the shores of the lake with his unreadable gaze.

"Do you see anything?" she asked in a low voice, watching her nieces.

He shook his head. "Whoever you saw this morning is gone. There's no reason to stop your nieces from swimming. Everything has to be as normal as possible for them. They'd think it was odd if you kept them out of the lake, wouldn't they?"

"Are you always this cold?" she whispered. "Is there anything you do without a reason, without planning it in advance?"

He turned to look at her, his eyes suddenly blazing. "There are a lot of things I can't plan, Abby. Just like there are things that happen without a reason."

"Like what?" Her voice was barely audible over the breeze and the lapping of the waves.

"Like this." His mouth came down on hers, hard and fast. His kiss burned down into her soul, lighting a fire that threatened to consume her. She had no idea how long they stood there, his lips hungry and demanding on hers. When she reached for him, he took a step backward and looked away.

"I'm sorry, Abby," he muttered. "I didn't mean to do that." Shaken, trembling inside with desire and fear,

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she felt his words gash a wound in her heart. Turning away, she managed to say, "That makes two of us, then."

Stepping in front of her, he turned her head until she was forced to look at him. "That's not what I meant.

We're supposed to be watching your nieces, not making out like a couple of teenagers."

She felt the blood drain from her face as she swung around to search frantically for her nieces. "Oh, my God. I can't believe I forgot about them."

"They're fine, Abby." He gave her a strange look. "They were right in front of us the whole time. That's not what I meant. All I was saying was that we were supposed to be watching for the men we saw this morning."

"No, you don't understand. I'm supposed to be watching while they swim. I can't take my eyes off them for a minute."

"That's a little excessive, don't you think?" He raised his eyebrows at her. "That kiss lasted maybe all of thirty seconds."

"A lot can happen in thirty seconds," she retorted. "Swimming is dangerous."

"Abby, they're in about a foot of water and we were standing right here. I'd say they were about as safe as they're going to be while they're swimming."

"You don't understand," she cried.

"Then tell me."

Abby looked over at him, and for a moment she was tempted to do just that. She didn't think Damien would judge her, or condemn her for something that had happened so many years ago. And she really didn't blame herself anymore. She had realized long ago that it wasn't her fault. But she still couldn't force herself to tell him.

"I'm just very concerned about water safety," she muttered. "I make sure I'm watching the twins whenever they're swimming."

Damien watched her for a moment, and the understanding in his eyes made her uneasy. There was no way he could know, none at all. Turning away abruptly, she said, "I think I'll go for a swim myself."

"Good idea," he said easily. "I'll join you."

She didn't want him to join her. She wanted to get away from him, to put some distance between herself and those knowing eyes of his. Pulling off her short cover-up, she ran into the water and dived underneath, swimming out several yards until her feet barely touched the rocky bottom of the lake.

"Aunt Abby," Casey called when she surfaced. "Can we come out that far?"

"Stay where you are, girls," she replied. "You can't come out into deeper water until you can swim."

Damien broke through the surface of the water beside her and turned to face the girls. "Your aunt Abby is right," he called. "But maybe later I can give you some swimming lessons."

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Abby turned to look at him, startled. "Swimming lessons?"

"All kids need to learn to swim," he said, treading water and looking around the lake. "They're not too young to learn. I'm surprised your sister hasn't taken them to swimming lessons already."

Abby thought of all the times she'd offered, and of Janna's adamant answer. They weren't old enough yet. Even though Abby knew the reason, she didn't agree with her sister. "Janna works during the day,"

she answered carefully. "It's hard to schedule things like swimming lessons when you work full-time."

She could feel his eyes on her face as he studied her. "Are you always this protective?" he finally asked.

It sounded like the words had been dragged out of him involuntarily.

Shrugging, she turned away, watching Maggie and Casey play. They'd gotten out of the water and were building a castle in the dry sand on the shore. Angus, her cat, had followed them down to the beach and now sat on a rock watching them, and she glanced over at him. "I take care of my family," she said lightly.

She felt his gaze follow hers to the cat. "And family is described as anyone or anything who comes into your life needing help?"

His voice was surprisingly gentle, without sarcasm or scorn. Startled, she turned to look at him and found him gazing at her with a look of longing in his eyes so intense that her breath caught in her throat.

"Damien?" she said, feeling a rush of heat sweep over her. Even the water swirling around her felt hot, as if licks of flame engulfed her.

She saw the struggle in his eyes, saw him trying to pull away from her. But slowly, as if his hands moved against his will, he reached for her, pulling

her toward him. Instead of taking her in his arms, though, he turned her around so she faced the shore.

"Watch the girls," he whispered into her ear. "I just want to hold you for a minute."

Maggie and Casey were mounding sand into a lopsided castle, their giggling voices drifting to her on the breeze. She yearned to turn to the man standing behind her, to lose herself in his embrace, but she couldn't look away from her nieces. She couldn't take her eyes off them while they were this close to the water.

"I know," his voice whispered into her ear, and for a moment she thought he'd read her mind. "You watch them. I'll watch you."

His hands settled on her hips, pulling her back against him. The water lapped gently over her shoulders, a cool counterpoint to the touch of Damien's fingers on her sides. The thin nylon of her swimsuit might as well have been nonexistent as the pressure from his hands burned into her. As he pulled her back into the cradle of his legs, desire washed over her in a wave of heat, leaving her trembling in his arms.

And, in spite of his earlier words to her, she wasn't alone in her desire. She felt him burning into her, hard and rigid against her buttocks. When she shifted and moved against him, his hands tightened on her hips, pressing in and pulling her closer.

To anyone watching them on the shore, they would simply be two people watching children play in the

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sand. But although her eyes and one part of her mind were focused on the two children in front of her, the rest of her being centered around Damien's hands on her stomach and Damien's body, pressed against hers in the cool water.

His arms slowly encircled her waist as he bent down to press a kiss into her neck. "Forgive me, Abby, because I can't help myself." His whispered words brushed across the fine hairs on her neck, and she shivered convulsively, her body tightening under his hands. Slowly she reached out and laid her hands on his arms, holding them next to her.

She heard his sudden intake of breath when she touched him, and felt the involuntary jerk of his body.

Then, slowly and carefully, he moved his hands higher on her stomach.

Her body throbbing, she held her breath, waiting for his touch. When his hands finally cupped her breasts lightly, his fingers barely brushing the sides, she exhaled with a rush and drew in a shaky breath.

Desire twisted inside her until she ached to thrust her throbbing breasts into his hands. Instead, she stood very still, and waited.

It seemed like he stood motionless forever, his hands resting on the curves of her breasts, his face still nuzzled into her neck. Finally he moved, and she had to bite back a cry of disappointment as one hand drifted down her stomach. Resting that hand on her abdomen, he lifted his head and looked up at Maggie and Casey.

"Are they all right?" he asked, his voice breathless in her ear.

"They're fine," she managed to answer.

Bending his head to her neck again, he pressed his lips against a spot below her ear. She felt his tongue, hot and moist as he tasted her skin, and she shivered again.

He went very still as she moved against him, then his hand trembled on her breast. Slowly, as if he was helpless to stop himself, his fingers sought out her nipple straining against the thin nylon of her swim suit.

Desire exploded inside her, shinning her with its force. As he brushed his thumb over her again, barely touching her, she sagged back against him, her

legs trembling and weak.

"Damien," she moaned, his name drifting up and melting into the breeze that caressed them both.

His hands stopped their explorations, and he murmured into her ear, "Do you want me to stop?"

The small part of her brain that was watching the twins, the only part able to think, wanted to say yes. It urged her to move away from his hypnotizing hands, from the deep, drugging pleasure of his touch. But she was helpless against the passion he had unleashed, and so she shook her head no.

That wasn't enough. He bent his head closer, until she could feel his breath ruffle the fine hairs on her neck. "Tell me, Abby. What do you want?"

Swallowing hard, knowing that her next words would set her on an unknown path, she finally whispered,

"I don't want you to stop."

His hands trembled again, then he bent and kissed her neck. His tongue traced patterns on her skin, tasting her, swirling her taste around his mouth, letting her know how he wanted to taste other parts of

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her.

Maggie and Casey rolled in the sand in front of her as Casey shrieked once, forcing her to focus on them. Damien had been right; they were on dry land and were perfectly safe. But still she couldn't take her eyes off them. As much as she wanted to turn around and melt into Damien's arms, she couldn't force herself to do it.

And he seemed to understand. "Don't move," he murmured into her hair as he shifted against her. "Just let me hold you for a while."

The weight of his hand on her breast shifted and eased, and she was shocked at how disappointed she felt. Then he lifted the edge of the tight green nylon, and his fingers slipped underneath it. Even in the cool water his skin burned against hers. When his fingers found her nipple, she turned her head to smother her cry against his shoulder.

Her knees weakened, threatening to buckle under her, and she leaned more heavily against him. He surged into her, and she could feel the hard length of him probing against her buttocks. Mindless with need and consumed by passion, her eyes drifted closed as she tried to turn around in his arms. Then she heard a voice in front of her.

"Aunt Abby, why are you and Damien just standing there?" Casey's voice had the innocent curiosity of childhood, and Abby's eyes snapped open.

"We're watching you and Maggie, sweetheart," she managed to say weakly.

"I thought you wanted to swim."

"We're just getting used to the water, Casey." Abby stumbled over the words, feeling heat blaze into her face. "I'll come play with you in a minute."

"Okay." Casey scooped more sand into her bucket and dumped it onto the castle.

"She didn't see a thing," Damien whispered into her ear. "And she's not going to." He pressed his lips into her neck one more time and then stepped away from her. Abby turned in time to see him dive under the water. He surfaced twenty feet away from her and began swimming, heading steadily out into the lake. Still aching with the need he had stirred, she watched him for a while, feeling the same frustration that drove him. Finally she turned toward her nieces.

As she swam the few strokes through the water to get to the beach, her body felt like an alien being, outside her control and totally foreign to her. When she reached the castle Maggie and Casey were building, she turned and

looked for Damien again. He was far out in the lake, still swimming steadily. Was he running from her or from his own demons?she wondered.

Maybe they were one and the same. Her heart twisted, but she turned and forced herself to smile at Maggie and Casey. "Do you want me to help you make your castle?" she asked.

"Yes!" they shouted. They both spoke at the same time, telling her the story of the castle.

After a few minutes she glanced over her shoulder. Damien was swimming back toward her. She turned back to the girls, but a movement off to the side caught her attention. A bright color flashed in the trees on her left, then was gone.

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A moment later a hiker emerged from the pines and began walking on the edge of the lake. He didn't look over at her, but she pulled the girls behind her anyway.

As she watched, he veered up toward the trees again. Just before he turned, he gave her a casual wave and disappeared.

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Chapter 8

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Damien swam toward the middle of the small lake, cutting through the water with smooth, powerful strokes, swearing steadily at himself. He tried to ignore the need still throbbing inside him, tried to ignore the scent of Abby that still filled his senses, but it was impossible. He couldn't swim fast enough or hard enough to leave her behind.

His need for her, his yearning for her touch, a force that had been building inside him since he'd first seen her, had overpowered him. He'd given in to it, and now he knew she wanted him, as well.

He hadn't wanted to know that. It was hard enough to keep his distance when he thought his desire was one-sided. Now that he had felt her respond, held her in his arms while she shivered from his touch, it would be agony to back away from her.

But it would be a worse agony to repeat what had happened today, far worse indeed to allow himself to feel anything again. Because he knew the price he would pay. And this time the cost would be more than he could afford.

Pulling through the water as though the hounds of hell were after him, he didn't stop until he saw the shoreline approaching and red cliffs rising out of the water in front of him. Then he paused and turned around. He could barely make out the cabin hidden on the other side of the lake, and Abby and the two girls were tiny, almost invisible specks on the sand.

His lungs heaved for air as he started back across the lake, calling himself every ugly name he could think of. He'd lost control of himself, and then compounded his mistake by swimming off and leaving the three of them unprotected. Some bodyguard, he thought bitterly, trying to propel himself through the water more quickly.

By the time he dragged himself onto the beach, gasping for breath, Abby and the two girls were sitting in the sand, working on a sand castle. "We saw you swimming, Damien," Casey said, grinning at him over a castle wall.

"You went far." Maggie examined him with a critical eye. "Did you have a tube?"

The sand warmed his cool body, and the breeze dried the water on his back as he tried to steady his breathing. "No, Maggie, I didn't have a tube. I know how to swim."

"We don't swim. I think my mommy is afraid of swimming," Casey confided. "She doesn't ever go in the water."

"Maybe she just doesn't like the water." He casually answered the girl as he let his gaze drift over the

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area surrounding the cabin.

"She's scared," Casey insisted. "I can tell."

Damien looked back at the child with sharpened interest. "How can you tell she's scared, Casey?"

"Because of the way she looks when we're playing in the water. She looks like Aunt Abby looked once, when we played in the bushes behind her house without telling her."

Damien looked over at Abby, who was sitting rigidly in the sand. He expected her to be smiling at her niece's fantasies, but instead he saw a look of stricken fear on her face. Was it because of the swimming, or was it something else?

"The lake can be dangerous," he said carefully, noticing that all three of them were listening to him. "But it's less dangerous if you know how to

swim. Would you like me to teach you how?"

Casey nodded her head with enthusiasm. "Yes! I want to be able to swim as far as you did, Damien."

"It'll be a long time before you can do that. But you should be able to swim along the shore by yourself."

He looked at Maggie. "How about you, Mags?"

The pet name slipped out before he realized it. But before he could react and snatch back the endearment, Maggie nodded doubtfully. "I guess so. But I'm not sure I want to put my face in the water."

"I'll show you how, I promise you." He glanced over at Abby. "What do you think, Abby? Is it all right if I try to teach them to swim?"

Abby looked at him, doubt in her eyes. "Are you sure?" she asked quietly. "I thought you had a lot of things to do while we were here."

He knew what she was doing. He could see the concern in her eyes. She'd realized he didn't like being around the twins, but instead of condemning him for it, she was trying to give him an excuse. Trying to ignore the tenderness that welled up within him at her words, he shook his head. "I have time for some swimming lessons. As long as it's all right with you."

"I don't mind," she said slowly. "I think the girls should know how to swim. But I need to talk to you first."

As he watched her, he sensed that there was more to her decision than simply letting her nieces learn to swim. Pain and sorrow flickered in her eyes for a moment, then she looked at Maggie and Casey and her face softened.

"Great." He spoke too heartily, trying to keep himself from wrapping Abby in his arms. He wanted to wipe that pain from her eyes and replace it with something else, something hot and full of desire for him.

Something he shouldn't even be thinking about.

He turned to the twins. "Why don't you play in the sand for another few minutes? I need to talk to your aunt Abby."

When they had moved away from the girls, he took Abby's arm. He forced himself to ignore the way she felt, smooth and warm. And as soft as a satin sheet. "What is it, Abby? Would you rather I didn't

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teach them to swim?"

"It's not that." She licked her lips, and he couldn't help the fire that snaked through him. "I saw someone while you were swimming."

"What?" He tightened his hold on her arm. "Where?"

"It was a man, hiking. He had a pack and a walking stick. He just appeared along the lake, then disappeared back into the woods." She paused, swallowing once. "It didn't look like he was paying any attention to us, then he waved to us just before he disappeared."

"Did it look like the man on the horse this morning?"

"I couldn't tell. He wasn't wearing a hat, though, so I did get a look at his face."

"Would you recognize him again?"

"I think so."

He rocked back on his heels, watching the twins scoop up sand as he thought. "I need to talk to Devlin,"

he finally said. "I'll call him and see if he has some time."

"Right now?"

He looked at the girls again. "Later. Right now I have some swimming lessons to give."

Ten minutes later Abby sat on the beach and watched Damien in the water with Maggie and Casey.

Snatches of words drifted to her on the wind as he stood with them in the water and showed them how to put their heads beneath the surface. A flutter of panic rose up inside her as Casey vanished beneath the smooth surface of the lake, then bobbed up, laughing, a few seconds later.

Maggie watched her sister, then tentatively stuck part of her face in the water. Encouraged by Damien's praise, she tried it again. Within minutes both of the girls were happily dunking their faces in the lake as Damien stood waist deep in the water and watched them.

He was so good with the girls, Abby thought. The realization stunned her for a moment, then she leaned forward intently. The man who had made it very clear that he wanted nothing to do with children was now teaching Maggie and Casey to swim. And he was doing it well. He was patient, encouraging and gentle, and he made it enough fun that both Maggie and Casey forgot the fear of the water that their mother had fostered.

Watching him show the girls how to float made her chest tighten. His rare smile brightened the already sunny day, and his hands held Maggie afloat like she was rare, exquisite china. When Casey bounced out of the water, he gave her a grinning high five that made Abby's eyes burn.

What had happened to Damien? Why had the smiling man standing in front of her become an aloof loner who avoided children and turned away from emotional attachments of any kind? And where had he gotten the inner strength to work so closely with the girls, despite the anguish it obviously caused him?

The need to know Damien, to reach out to him, became overwhelming as she watched him with her nieces.

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If there was ever a man who needed protecting, it was Damien Kane, she thought as she watched him in the water. The rest of the world might see him as a rock, a man of strength, determination and courage, but it hadn't taken long for her to see the demons clawing at him. And to want to help him overpower them.

"Hey, Abby, could you give us a hand here?"

Damien's voice traveled over the water, jerking her out of her reverie. He stood with Maggie and Casey, all three of them watching her expectantly. "What do you need?" she asked, getting to her feet.

"I'd like you to swim while I explain to the girls what you're doing." He flashed her his smile, and her breath caught in her throat. "In other words I need your body for a few minutes."

As heat swept over her, he added innocently, "To demonstrate swimming to the girls, of course."

"Of course," she muttered as she stepped into the water. The waves felt icy cold to her overheated body, and she walked slowly toward Damien and the twins. She finally launched herself into the water and began swimming in front of them, welcoming the shock of the cold water. Concentrating on stroking and kicking, and aware that her face was still hot and red, she didn't look in their direction. After she'd swum for what seemed like forever, Damien grasped her arm and pulled her upright in the water.

"Thanks, Abby." His voice was quiet, and she finally looked over at him. He was still smiling, but there were lines of strain around his eyes and his arms and legs were tense and hard. And it wasn't because of her, she realized as he turned back to the girls. Most people would have missed the infinitesimal tightening of his muscles when he reached out for Maggie, but she noticed it. And wondered where he got his strength.

"Maybe you should take a break for a while and let the girls practice," Abby said in what she hoped was a casual voice.

Damien hesitated, then nodded. He didn't turn to face her. "Maybe so. What do you think, guys?" he asked Maggie and Casey. "Do you want to practice for a while and let me rest? I'm not as young as I used to be."

Both girls bounced under the water without answering. "I think we can take that as a yes," Abby said, wading out of the water. "I left the towels on the rocks if you want to dry off."

"No, thanks." He dropped into the sand and leaned back on his elbows, watching the two girls in the water.

Abby sat down next to him. "Thank you for helping them learn to swim."

He shrugged. "No problem. They're bright kids. They'll learn fast, then you won't have to worry so much when they're in the water."

She wanted to tell him that she would always worry when they were in the water, but she couldn't force the words out of her mouth. Instead, she asked, "Why did you do it?"

He shrugged again, still not looking at her. "A way to pass the time. A good excuse to hang around, get them to feel comfortable with me."

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"That's not what I meant and you know it." Abby took a deep breath, steadying herself, then continued,

"I know you don't like to be around children. So why did you go out of your way to offer to teach them to swim, knowing that it would force you to spend a lot of hours with them?"

"It's my job to spend time with them, Abby." His voice was devoid of expression. "It's the only way to protect them. And every kid should know how to swim."

"There are a lot of other ways to protect them without teaching them to swim," she retorted. "That requires a lot of contact, and ever since we met you've been trying to avoid Maggie and Casey. Why the change now?"

He waited so long that she didn't think he was going to answer her. Finally he said quietly, "Leave it alone, Abby. I'm not a stray like Angus that you can adopt and take into your fold. You can't wave your magic wand over me and make me all better. You don't want to know me, believe me. Just leave it alone."

"You seemed to want to know me when we were standing in the lake earlier." She tried, and failed, to keep the pain out of her voice.

"That was physical." His words were brutally harsh. "And I won't deny that I want you. You are a beautiful, vibrant woman, and I'm attracted to you. Hell, I'd be dead if I wasn't. But that doesn't mean I want you crawling around inside my head, trying to figure out what makes me tick so you can fix the broken parts."

His words stabbed into her like pointed shards of glass. But even through her pain Abby heard the tremor in his voice, and the fear that he tried to hide but couldn't. "I wasn't trying to intrude, Damien," she said in a low voice. "I just don't want you to get hurt."

"It's too late for that," he muttered, then stood up and began walking toward the cabin.

Abby scrambled to her feet to follow him. "What's that supposed to mean?" she demanded, grabbing his arm.

He flinched when she touched him, then slowly turned to face her. "This isn't about you and I, Abby. Or have you forgotten that I'm here to protect you and your nieces? If I'm thinking about you, it means I'm not thinking about what could happen next. It means I'm not doing my job. And not doing my job could get all of us killed."

Abby let go of his arm and took a step away from him. "You and I weren't the issue I was discussing,"

she forced herself to say. "I was concerned about you spending so much time with Maggie and Casey.

That's what I meant when I said I didn't want you to get hurt."

As he stood and stared at her, his eyes softened momentarily. "You don't give up, do you, Abby Markham?" It sounded like the words were dragged out of him involuntarily. "You're determined to protect me, just like you protect those girls and that cat and God knows who else."

"Is there something wrong with that?" She jammed her hands into the pockets of her beach cover-up to hide their trembling.

His eyes softened even more. "No," he said softly. "There's nothing wrong with that. But I don't need or deserve your protection. So concentrate on the people who do."

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Turning away from her, he strode into the water and splashed out to where it was deep enough to dive.

He surfaced twenty yards away from the shore, then started to swim back toward Maggie and Casey.

When the girls saw him coming, they bounced up and down in the water and yelled out his name.

Abby stood on the shore and watched the three of them, seeing both Damien's smile as he approached the girls and the tenseness in his arms and shoulders as Maggie and Casey splashed out to him. He was trapped in a situation that must be sheer torture for him, every minute of the day. And there was no way she could make it better.

Except by helping him find out what Casey and Maggie had seen, thereby allowing him to leave.

Swallowing hard, she sat down on the rocks and dangled her feet in the water as she acknowledged that she didn't want him to leave. She didn't want him to disappear, never to be seen again. And that was just what he would do if he found the killers and arrested them. He would disappear out of their lives as quickly as he had appeared at the ice-cream store.

Was that why she'd been stalling? Was that why she'd been so reluctant to ask the girls what they'd seen, why she had made up excuses not to ask them? Feeling thoroughly ashamed of herself, she glanced over to where Damien was standing in the water with the twins.

"Could you come here for a moment, please, Damien?" she called.

He said something to the girls, then swam over to the rocks. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I just thought that I would go try to get hold of Janna and I didn't want to leave without telling you."

"Good idea. If you don't get through now, we'll try again tonight."

Abby watched him turn away and wade over to the twins, then forced herself to walk up to the house.

She glanced back one time at Damien in the water with the twins, and it hit her with a shock that this was the first time she'd ever left the girls alone in the water, even when there was another adult watching them.

She trusted him, she realized, trusted him to keep Maggie and Casey safe. Standing on the porch of the house, her hand on the door, she watched them for a moment. She had no doubt that Damien would guard the twins with his life. And that they would be as safe from the dangers in the water as they would be protected from the men who stalked them.

Allowing herself to watch them for another minute, Abby finally turned and went into the house. It was silent and empty without the girls' laughter and Damien's presence. Hurrying over to the phone, she dialed the number for Janna's hotel and waited for an answer.

There was still no answer from Janna's room. Replacing the phone gently in its cradle, she stared blindly out the window as a wave of terror washed over her.

Janna, where are you? she cried silently. What's wrong? Why didn't she answer her phone?

It was business hours, she told herself, but the fear grew and grew inside her. What if Damien was right?

What if the man who'd killed Joey had known the girls saw something? Her sister could be a hostage somewhere. Or worse.

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Dragging her feet, she headed for the door to go back to the beach. Just as she stepped out onto the porch, she heard the girls' excited voices and spotted them walking toward the house, Damien trailing a step behind them.

"Aunt Abby, Aunt Abby!" Maggie spotted her and began to run. "I put my face in the water and floated by myself!"

"That's wonderful, sweetheart." Abby bent down to hug Maggie, who flung herself into her aunt's arms.

"You'll be swimming before you know it."

"Damien promised he would teach us more tomorrow," Casey informed her, running up the steps. "I'm going to swim in the deep water."

"Not quite yet, Casey." Damien's voice came from behind the girl.

Abby sat back on her heels and smiled at them. "I'm so proud of you both." She looked up at Damien.

"Thank you," she said softly. "I appreciate you teaching them to swim. It's something they need to know."

He shrugged. "It only made sense. And besides, it was a good excuse to stick close to them and let them get to know me."

He might shrug it off, but she suspected how much effort it had taken him to spend so much time with the girls. "Thank you," she said again softly, then turned to Maggie and Casey. "I want you girls to change your clothes and put your swimsuits in the bathroom. Then you can look at a book or play quietly for a while."

She turned back to Damien. She was frightened for Janna, terrified in fact. But she couldn't say anything in front of Janna's children. "There's something I'd like you to look at out on the porch," she said, trying to sound casual. "Do you have a minute?"

She stepped out of the house to join him. As soon as they were out of the girls' hearing, he turned to her, grasping her arms. "What's wrong?" he demanded.

"I don't know. Nothing, I hope." His hands were cool from the lake, his grip strong and electrifying. She knew she should pull away from his touch, but all she could do was look at him. His eyes were dark with worry, and when she realized it was for her, she felt her breathing quicken.

"I tried to call Janna again. She wasn't there."

His hands tightened on her arms for a moment, then he let her go. "That doesn't mean anything, Abby."

There was absolutely no inflection in his voice.

"I know. I told myself that this is still business hours. I wouldn't expect her to be in her room. But I'm still worried."

"There's nothing we can do. I passed along the information you gave me about her hotel. Someone will check on her."

"I'm so scared for her."

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"I know." He touched her face once, then stepped back. "I'm going to call Devlin."

Damien was too aware of Abby watching him as he spoke to Devlin. Her gaze felt as intimate as a touch, and he turned away. He needed to concentrate on his job. He didn't turn back to her until he got off the phone.

"The movie theater in Cameron is showing a Walt Disney movie," he said in a low voice. "We're going to meet Devlin for dinner, then we'll take the girls to see it."

She looked over at him, surprise on her face. "I assumed Devlin would come up here. Won't it be dangerous to go into town?"

"I don't think so. We don't know for certain that anyone has found us."

Abby studied his face. "Why do you want to do this? And don't tell me you love Disney movies. I may be gullible, but even I won't swallow that."

He shrugged again, avoiding her eyes. "I need to talk to Devlin, and he can't get away right now. He's having a few problems in town. I thought the girls would enjoy a movie. What child their age doesn't? It's all part of my plan to get them to trust me and be willing to talk to me."

"If you say so." The look Abby gave him told him clearly she didn't believe him. "I'm sure Maggie and Casey will love the idea. I'll get them ready to go."

He watched her walk away, knowing he couldn't tell her the real reason he wanted to leave the house tonight. He did need to talk to Devlin. But spending the evening in the tiny cabin with Abby Markham would drive him slowly crazy. He'd told himself countless times that he couldn't touch her, couldn't get involved with her even in the most superficial physical way. It didn't matter. The taste of her filled his senses, and the feel of her soft, giving body was imprinted on his.

If he had to spend the evening with her, the two of them alone and surrounded by the stillness of the warm summer night, he would go out of his mind.

So they would go to town, meet with Devlin and see the movie. By the time they got back to the cabin, he could hide in his room with the door closed.

But he wouldn't be able to shut Abby out of his mind so easily. She would linger there, haunting his dreams and disturbing his sleep, just as she had the past several nights. He would wake up with the taste of her in his mouth and his body hard and aching from wanting her.

She already haunted his waking hours. If it had just been the physical wanting, he could have ignored it.

There were cold showers, and he'd had a lot of practice blocking unwanted distractions out of his life.

But somehow Abby had sneaked in under his defenses with her concern for him. He couldn't remember the last person who had wanted to protect him. Even his wife had always leaned on him, always deferred to his strength.

So he and Abby would take the girls into town and spend the evening watching the magic of Disney on the screen, rather than watching each other. All in all, he figured it was a much safer choice.

Casey came charging out of her room, interrupting his thoughts. "Are we really going to a movie, Damien? Really?"

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She watched him with complete trust in her eyes, and he felt his heart flutter. "Of course we are. Your aunt Abby wouldn't lie to you."

"Can we get popcorn?" She was practically dancing with excitement.

"You bet. And maybe even soda, too."

"Maggie," Casey shouted, "we get popcorn and soda."

Maggie came running out of the bedroom, followed by Abby. "Can we go now, Damien?"

"As soon as everyone's ready."

He followed them out to the Bronco, listening to the excited chatter, their childish delight another arrow in his heart. "Go ahead and get in the truck," he muttered. "I want to make sure everything is locked."

When he heard the truck doors open, he took a deep breath and tried the cabin door again, although he knew he'd locked it. Swallowing hard, he gripped the doorknob for a few moments while he tried to regain his composure. He was the one who'd suggested this outing, so he'd damn well better be prepared to face the consequences. And if the consequences included five-year-old children who tore his heart out, that was no one's fault but his. If he hadn't let Joey Stefanetto slip away from him, none of this would have been necessary.

Making sure he'd left some subtle clues that would let him know if anyone had been at the door while they were gone, he turned and walked to the truck. Both of the girls were strapped into their car seats, and Abby sat in the front seat, watching him with concern in her eyes. "Everybody all set?" he said, forcing a cheerful note into his voice.

Both girls responded eagerly, but Abby just looked at him. As they drove down the driveway, she said in a low voice, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." His voice was short and he knew it, but he didn't turn to look at her.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, after all."

The worry in her voice was for him. The knowledge made his answer more curt than she deserved. "We have no choice. I have to see Devlin. And do you want to tell the girls we've changed our minds?"

He could almost feel the heat from her flush in the close confines of the truck. After what seemed like a long time, she said, "I just don't want you to be hurt." Her voice was so low he could barely hear her. He wondered if he was meant to.

Neither of them spoke as they drove down the long, rutted road back to the McAllister ranch. As they passed the house, Shea waved at them from a corral. She was on a horse, and there were several barrels set up in the corral.

"What's she doing, Damien?" Casey asked.

"Shea's a barrel racer," Damien said. "It looks like she's practicing."

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"What's a barrel racer?"

Grateful for the distraction, Damien described what a barrel racer did as they approached the town of Cameron. But as they got closer, his voice began to falter and his heart began to pound. He didn't want to be here, didn't want to bring Abby anywhere near this town. But he had no choice. He'd picked Cameron and now he had to deal with the consequences.

He stared straight ahead as he drove down Main Street. Every building they passed evoked another painful memory. Finally he managed to say, "We're meeting Devlin at the diner, Heaven on Seventh." He didn't look at Abby. "We'll have dinner there."

"Won't the people in Cameron wonder why there are strangers in town?"

His hands tightened on the steering wheel, then he deliberately relaxed them. "I'm not a stranger here. I used to live in Cameron."

Chapter 9

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Abby stared at Damien, shocked by his words. "What do you mean, you used to live here?"

"I have a home here. A second home. That's how I know Devlin and Shea." His knuckles whitened on the steering wheel. "And a lot of other people in town."

He swung the Bronco into a parking space and climbed out before she could ask another question. As she unbuckled the twins from their car seats, she glanced over at Damien. His face was hard, his expression grim. He looked like he was surveying the street to make sure there was no danger.

But Abby knew better. She saw the pain beneath the surface, pain he tried hard to hide. When Damien looked over at her once and his gaze brushed the twins, she saw the agony in his eyes.

"Let's go inside," he said gruffly as soon as Maggie and Casey were standing on the sidewalk.

The restaurant was half-filled with people, and Abby felt Damien relax as he gazed around. At first she thought it was because he didn't see a threat, but she quickly realized it was because he didn't see anyone he knew.

Then the door opened behind him. Three people walked in, and she felt him tense again.

"Good to see you, Kane." A tall man with golden brown hair stepped over to shake his hand. From the star pinned on his khaki shirt, Abby assumed he was the sheriff.

"You, too, Dev." Damien turned to her. "This is Devlin McAllister, the sheriff here in Cameron. Dev, this is Abby Markham."

She shook the other man's hands, noticing the careful scrutiny in his gray eyes. "Thank you for everything you've done for us, Sheriff." She didn't want to say anything about staying in his cabin. She had no idea who might be in the restaurant.

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She watched his eyes warm, as if he understood what she was doing. "I'm glad we could help."

The sheriff turned to the two people who'd walked in with him. "You call me if anything else happens, Becca."

"I'll do that, Devlin." The blond woman began to turn to the child at her side. She froze as she spotted Damien. "Damien?" she whispered. "Is that really you?"

Abby thought Damien's face couldn't get any harder, but at the woman's words he froze. Finally he reached out and shook her hand. "It's good to see you, Becca."

"You remember my daughter, Cassie," she said, motioning to the child.

Damien reached out to shake the child's hand. "Good to see you again, Cassie. I'd like you to meet Maggie and Casey and their aunt Abby."

Damien moved closer to Abby, as if to shield her and the twins.

"Go ahead and sit down, Damien," the sheriff said. "Tell Mandy I want that table in the corner."

As Mandy led them to the large round table that sat isolated in the corner, Abby saw Devlin leaning over Becca and Cassie, saying something in a low voice. After a few minutes he joined them at the table.

"Becca and Cassie won't say a word about you being here in town," he said as he sat down. "Becca's having some problems of her own, and she knows how to keep her mouth shut."

He scooted his chair closer to the table. "Now what's going on?"

As Damien told Devlin what had happened since they'd arrived at the cabin, Abby looked around the restaurant. Fresh flowers and plants covered the walls and the tables, and the ceiling was painted to look like the sky on a sunny day. Even the twins stared at the decorations.

"I like this place, Aunt Abby," said Maggie.

"Are we going to eat here?" asked Casey.

Before Abby could answer, Devlin interrupted her. "Can you describe the man you saw walking near the cabin today?" he asked.

As she did, she watched his mouth tighten. "That doesn't sound like anyone from our ranch or the ranches that adjoin our land. It could be a hiker who wandered over from the federal land on the other side of the mountain, though."

He hesitated for a few moments, then said to Damien, "Do you remember Sy Ames?"

"Yeah, I remember him."

"Would you recognize him again if you saw him?"

"I think so."

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"He might be around. When you told me about the campfire smoke and the hiker, I thought it might be him. Someone's been harassing Becca. Sy's disappeared from town, but he's one of the suspects. He could easily have gone up into the hills to hide."

Damien leaned back against the chair. "I'd like to think it was him, but I can't afford to take that chance."

"I agree. I'll keep an eye on any strangers that come to town. I'll run any Nevada license plates that come through, too. And if you think they've found you, move to town. My deputies and I can't do much for you up at that cabin. It'd take too long to get there in an emergency."

Abby watched Damien's face tighten. "I'll think about it."

"You do that." The sheriff slapped the table, then stood up. "Enjoy your dinner. Janie is as good as she ever was."

"Who's Janie?" Abby asked as the sheriff walked away.

"She's the woman who owns the diner." For the first time since they'd arrived in town, Damien smiled.

"Once you taste her food, you'll know what Devlin meant."

A short while later, as they ate their dinner, Abby noticed that a few people stared at them with open curiosity and a few more watched Damien with sympathy. Everyone looked surprised to see the twins.

But no one approached. Devlin had said something to the waitress as he left, and now she wondered if he'd told her to make sure they were left alone.

As soon as they'd finished the last bite of food on their plates, Damien stood up. "Ready to go?"

He hustled them out of the restaurant and back into the Bronco, then drove the few blocks back to Main Street and the movie theater. "I want to make sure the truck is close by," he said, his words clipped.

They took seats near the back of the theater, and as the lights dimmed she leaned over. "Are you sure this is going to be all right?"

He took her hand. "I'm fine, Abby. But thank you for asking."

Even over the sound of the movie she heard his voice soften. Twining her fingers with his, she said, "I could see how hard this was for you. I wish I

could make it easier."

He gripped her hand more tightly, then surprised her by leaning over and brushing her cheek with his mouth. "You already have," he whispered.

They sat silently during the movie, their palms pressed together. Abby glanced over at the girls occasionally, but all her attention was focused on the man at her side. He wasn't paying attention to the action on the screen. Instead, his eyes traveled patiently over the crowd in the theater, time after time, looking for something out of the ordinary.

She ached for him. He tried so hard to hide his pain, but she saw it, raw and throbbing, every time she looked at him. The girls were entranced by the movie, but she couldn't wait to leave. Every moment spent in this town was clearly painful for Damien. By the time the movie credits rolled onto the screen, all she wanted was to run out of the building.

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"Aunt Abby?" Casey pulled on her hand. "I have to go to the bathroom."

"I'll walk you there," Damien said in a low voice.

The rest rooms were at one end of the building, and Damien watched Abby and the girls walk through the door. Then he positioned himself outside the door to wait for them. When they emerged, he stepped next to them.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

She nodded and started for the door. She had only taken a few steps when she stopped abruptly and grabbed Damien. Her face was white as paper.

"What's wrong?" Instinctively he stepped in front of Abby and the twins, shielding them.

"He's here," she whispered.

"Who?" Damien scanned the crowd as his hand hovered over the gun in his shoulder holster.

"The man who was hiking past the cabin this afternoon. He's standing over by the door, watching everyone who leaves."

Damien saw the man, leaning against the door like he was waiting for someone. But his eyes watched the crowd carefully, lighting on each person who walked past him.

"Let's go," he said, turning to shepherd them back into the auditorium.

"We need to leave," Abby said urgently. "Why are we going back in here?"

He didn't answer until they were hidden from the view of the man by the door. "We're going to go out one of the fire exits. I doubt he would try anything here in a crowded theater, but I don't want to take the chance. With any luck we'll get back to the truck before he realizes we've given him the slip."

Abby nodded, taking the girls' hands. When they reached the fire exits at the front of the building, he watched her take a deep breath and glance over her shoulder. Then she pulled the twins closer, pushed the door open and was relieved when no alarm went off. In a moment they were standing in the alley behind the theater.

"Once we get back in front, we'll blend in with the crowds. We'll just get in the truck and drive away."

Abby nodded once, jerkily, and led the twins toward the street-light at the end of the alley. Damien let his hand linger on the gun in his shoulder holster, but they got back to the Bronco without seeing the man again. In moments they were speeding out of the town of Cameron, the girls already asleep in the backseat.

Damien pulled out his cellular phone and called Devlin, but he had little hope of the sheriff catching the man. When he snapped it shut, the silence

hung heavy with tension in the truck. "I don't see anyone following us," Abby finally said in a low voice.

"They don't have to. They know where to find us," he answered, looking in his rearview mirror again.

The night sky behind them was utterly black. The red taillights of the truck were the only illumination on

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the bumpy, twisting road. His hands tightened on the steering wheel. It would be a perfect place for an ambush.

He strained his eyes looking ahead of the truck. Even with the high beams on, the only thing visible was the narrow ribbon of rutted road. Going into Cameron had been a stupid idea, he told himself grimly.

They would have been far better off staying at the cabin, where at least he knew the territory.

But the cabin had its own set of dangers, and the knowledge gnawed at him as he drove through the night. They were driving in this pitch blackness, a target for anyone lurking on the road, because he had been afraid he wouldn't be able to control himself if he was alone with Abby. The knowledge made him both angry and scared, and once again he cursed the fate that had given him this case.

"Is there someone out there?" Abby's voice sounded disembodied in the darkness, floating on the air and trembling between them. He jerked his attention away from his own problems and glanced over at her.

She stared out the window at the inky blackness, her hand wrapped tight around the door handle. Even without touching her, he knew she was wound as tightly as a spring.

"I don't know." At least he could give her honesty. "I doubt it. Anyone else trying to take this road would have had to go past Shea and the rest of the people at the Red Rock Ranch. Shea would have heard something, and she would have called me. She has my cell-phone number."

"Would they try something now?" she whispered. "While we're in the truck? Would they try to stop us, to hurt Maggie and Casey somehow?"

"I don't know, Abby." He gripped the steering wheel more tightly. "Anything's possible, but I think they would wait until they thought we were off guard. Whoever was watching us tonight must know by now that we saw him. They know we'll be prepared for something."

"Are we prepared?" she asked, finally turning to look at him. "I am, Abby." He heard the hardness in his voice and made no effort to disguise it.

"I trust you, you know." Abby's low voice surrounded him, its soft threads wrapping around his heart and pulling tight. "I really do."

"You sound surprised." It was the only answer he could think of that might make her draw away from him.

"I am," she answered, turning and looking at him again. The warmth he heard in her voice had him curling his hands around the steering wheel. "I never thought I would trust anyone else with the girls' safety."

"You're right not to trust anyone. You shouldn't even trust me," he said, ignoring the fact that he'd been trying to convince her to trust him since the moment they met. "I'm the one who took the three of you into Cameron and exposed you to more danger than if we'd stayed home at the cabin."

There was silence in the truck for a long time. Finally Abby said softly, "Do you always beat yourself up like this over things you can't predict or control?"

"I take responsibility for my actions." His voice was stark and full of pain, and far too revealing. He wished he could snatch the words back, but they hung in the air between them, vibrating so loudly they echoed in his head.

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Soft fingers brushed his skin and made his muscles jump' and he looked down to see that Abby had laid her hand on his arm. "Everything that goes wrong isn't your fault, you know. Sometimes things just happen and we can't do anything about it."

Her hand burned into him, making him ache with wanting her. He'd never wanted a woman so much, not even his wife. And what scared him, he realized, was that he wanted to give her more than he'd ever given anyone. The words threatened to come tumbling out of his mouth, the ugly story about his wife and son. He wanted to tell her. He wanted to make her understand what he had done, to know that he could never be absolved of blame for the deaths of the two people that should have mattered most to him.

And maybe he just wanted her to absolve him, he told himself coldly. Because Abby would. She'd tell him it wasn't his fault, that he couldn't have predicted what had happened. Her soft voice would weave its magic around him until he'd believe her. And he could never allow that to happen.

"I refuse to indulge myself with that cop-out," he said, swerving the Bronco to park it beside the cabin.

"It would become too easy to shrug everything off that way. Pretty soon I would convince myself that I wasn't responsible for anything, and someone would end up dead." He stopped the truck and turned off the engine. As he turned to her in the darkness, he could hear crickets chirping outside. "Do you want it to be you or one of the twins?"

"Of course not," she said impatiently. "And I know you too well to think that would ever happen. But I suspect you're carrying around a load of guilt that's eating you up inside."

He could only stare at her, horrified that she'd been able to see past his carefully constructed barriers and even more horrified that he was relieved.

As she stared back at him, something changed in her face.

The impatience vanished, replaced by a tenderness that made him yearn to reach out for her. He wanted her tenderness and her caring, needed it like a flower needs rain and sun. Tenderness had been missing in his life for far too long. Crushing his keys into his hand, feeling them cut into his palm, he allowed himself to look at her for a moment before he abruptly wrenched open the door.

"Stay in here for a moment while I check things out," he muttered.

Striding to the front door, he paused to check on his indicators. His mouth tightened. Someone had been here tonight, had tried to get into the cabin. He looked back at the truck, seeing only the pale oval of Abby's face in the darkness. The girls were still sound asleep in the backseat, and for a moment all he wanted to do was get into the truck and start driving, away from the danger and the men who stalked them.

That wasn't his only job, he reminded himself grimly. Not only did he have to protect Maggie and Casey, but he also had to find out who had killed Joey Stefanetto. And the men who stalked them had the answers.

Drawing his gun out of its holster, he unlocked the door then kicked it open. The house stood silent and dimly lit, only the lights on the porch and in the kitchen illuminating the rooms. Damien stood in the doorway for a moment, listening. There was no sound of feet shuffling, no muffled breathing to disturb the silence, no acrid smell of fear. The house was empty.

Just to be sure, he searched every room, looking in the closets and under the beds. When he was sure they were alone, he went to the truck and motioned Abby outside.

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"What's wrong?" she asked, licking her lips.

"Someone was here tonight. They tried to get in. I don't think they succeeded, and there's no one in the house now. Let's get the girls inside."

Without a word Abby turned and unfastened the car seat nearest her and lifted a sleeping Casey into her arms. Damien watched until she was safely in the house, then turned to Maggie.

She slept with her head bent at an angle and her mouth half-open. Slowly he reached for the car seat and unfastened it, then slid his hands underneath the sleeping child. She felt light as a thistle down when he lifted her into his arms. Clenching his teeth, he started for the house, willing himself not to notice the way she nestled against him.

When they reached the porch, Abby opened the door and came out, then stopped abruptly when she saw him carrying Maggie. "I'll take her," she whispered, holding out her arms.

He shook his head. "That might wake her up. Just get her bed ready."

Maggie stirred when he spoke, opening her eyes to look up at him. A sleepy smile flickered across her face. "Thank you for the movie, Damien," she murmured, then closed her eyes and snuggled closer to him.

Damien stared down at her, feeling pain rush in to fill the spot where his heart used to be. His arms tightened for a moment, then he looked up blindly and headed for the twins' room.

"Lay her down here," Abby whispered, and he saw her standing next to the lower bunk. Casey was already curled up next to the wall, and he gently lowered Maggie down next to her. "It would be too hard to lift one of them to the upper bunk, and they sleep together half the time, anyway," she explained as she knelt to tuck Maggie in.

Damien watched for a moment, unable to turn away as Abby smoothed the hair away from Casey's face then pressed a kiss to Maggie's cheek. When she straightened, he turned and walked out of the room.

By the time Abby emerged from the girls' bedroom, he was busy searching the house, checking to see if anything had been disturbed.

Even though he couldn't see her, he knew Abby stood in the doorway watching him. He felt her presence as surely as if she'd touched him. He stared at the kitchen counter for a moment, his muscles tensed, waiting for her to go to her own room. When she didn't move, he pushed away from the counter and walked onto the porch.

It didn't help. Her scent drifted to him on the cool night air, and when she followed him to the porch he finally looked up at her.

"Go to bed, Abby. Get some rest."

"I'm not tired yet," she answered, her voice mild. "What have you found?"

"Not much." He turned away again. "I don't think anyone was in the house. Nothing's been disturbed, as far as I can tell."

"Then maybe no one was at the door earlier."

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"Someone was there." His voice was grim. "My guess is that when they realized no one was here, they didn't bother to come into the house. There was nothing inside they wanted."

"I thought we would be safe here," she whispered. "I didn't think anything could hurt us here in the mountains."

"You're not safe anywhere until the people who killed Joey are caught." He turned to face her. "Don't you see that?"

Slowly she nodded, staring out the window in the direction of the brown cottage. "I'm beginning to understand," she whispered. She turned to look at him, her eyes wide and her face pale.

The fear in her eyes made him say, "I'm not going to let anything happen to them, Abby. They'll be safe with me."

Taking a step closer to him, she said, "Why don't you try talking to them, Damien? They trust you. If they'd talk to anyone, it would be you."

Damien closed his eyes, remembering the scene in the woods. "I'm afraid if I ask too soon they'll get scared and not say a thing. They've only known me for a few days, after all."

"I know you'll do what's best for them. At first I thought you were only interested in solving your case, but I know better now. You'd never hurt them."

"Not intentionally, no. But I'm going to use them to solve this case, Abby. Make no mistake about that."

The fear was gone from her eyes. There was only tenderness there now. "I saw you in the water with them this afternoon, and I saw the way you carried Maggie into the house this evening. Don't try to tell me you don't care anything about them."

"You're pretending again, Abby," he said harshly. "You were right when you said I didn't want to be around children. I don't. I want nothing to do with them. All I want is to solve this case and move on. The only reason I said I didn't want to talk to them yet is I don't want to spook them. If they get upset and won't talk to me, it'll just take longer to get the answers I need. So don't go getting all starry-eyed about the twins and me. They're cute kids, but my interest in them is strictly professional."

"What happened, Damien?" She came closer, so that the scent of her golden brown hair filled his senses.

"Why is it so painful for you to be around children?"

He closed his eyes to block her out, to take away his need to tell her. Deliberately he said, "If we're sharing secrets, why don't we start with

yours?" He made his voice as harsh and cold as he could. "Why are you so frightened for the girls when they're near water?"

She stared at him for a while, a mix of pity and fear in her eyes. Finally the fear won, and she turned away. "I'm sorry I intruded," she said in a low voice. "I didn't mean to. I promise I won't say anything more."

For a moment they had been wrapped in intimacy, cocooned in the stillness of the night and bound together by their concern for two small children. As Abby turned away, Damien felt a stab of pain at the loss of that intimacy.

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That frightened him more than ten thugs with guns. Walking over to the window, he stared out over the lake without seeing anything. He'd screwed this case up royally, and the sooner he could end it, the better.

"Why don't you try calling your sister again?" he said quietly.

"I will. Thank you for reminding me." Abby sounded as if she was grateful for the diversion. Hell, so was he. If he didn't finish this case and get away from this woman, he was going to do something he'd regret for a long time.

Abby looked at Damien for a moment before she turned away to find Janna's telephone number.

Standing by the window, looking out into the night, Damien was a lonely, solitary figure. One who was that way by choice, she reminded herself. Nothing had made that more clear than his answer to her request a few minutes ago. He intended for his secrets to remain his.

Still she couldn't resist the warmth that welled up inside her. She'd been moved almost to tears by the way he'd looked at Maggie as he'd carried her into the house. There had been pain in his eyes, but there had also been tenderness. He'd looked at the sleeping child as if she was the most precious thing in the world to him.

Picking up the piece of paper with Janna's phone number written on it, she stared at it blindly for a few moments. She didn't want Damien to leave. And if he found out what had happened and caught the murderers, he would do just that. But she couldn't bear to cause him any more pain, either. Slowly she picked up the phone and dialed Janna's phone number.

After three rings she heard her sister's voice. "Hello?" Janna said cautiously.

"Hi, Janna, it's Abby."

Damien stepped closer to hear the conversation.

"Abby!" The sharp intake of Janna's breath was obvious even over the phone line. "Why are you calling?"

"What's wrong?"

Abby's hand tightened on the receiver. "Why do you assume something's wrong?"

"It's ... it's so late," her sister answered lamely. "You're normally asleep by now."

"The girls are fine," Abby said. "How are you?"

"Busy." Her voice sounded rushed, and there was a quaver beneath it that Abby was afraid to identify. "I might have to stay a little longer. Is that going to be a problem?"

"The girls miss you, Janna. I wish you could come home." Abby paused and took a deep breath. "I need to ask you about something that happened at work the day you left. The day you took the girls to work with you."

"They had a great time that day."

Abby wondered at the forced cheerfulness of Janna's voice, but said carefully, "Did they say anything to

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you about something they might have seen that day?Something that might have scared or upset them?"

"Everyone at work loves them." Janna's voice was too bright. "They get a lot of attention whenever I have to bring them to the office."

"Something's wrong, Janna. Something's bothering them."

"Are they all right?" Her voice sharpened.

"They're fine. But they need you."

"I miss them, too." Something caught in her sister's voice as she added, "Tell them I love them and I'll be home soon."

"Janna, I think you need to come home now."

"I can't do that, Abby. There's a lot going on down here."

Abby heard something in the background she couldn't identify. "We're not at home, Janna. I thought the girls could use a change of scenery."

"I trust you," her sister interrupted. "I know you'll take good care of them, Abby." Her voice broke again. "Tell them that I love them, and I'll see them soon."

Before Abby could answer, Janna hung up the phone. Abby stood staring down at the receiver in her hand, listening to the dial tone. Slowly she closed the phone and looked up to find Damien watching her.

"Something's wrong."

"Yes."

"She sounded so odd," she cried.

"She was trying to protect you and the twins," he said, taking the phone out of her hand. "Someone was listening to the conversation, and she didn't want you to say anything."

"She's in trouble, isn't she?" She wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly cold.

Damien slid his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. His warmth seeped into her shivering muscles, and she pressed into him.

"It sounds like Janna is holding her own. She was able to talk to you and give you a subtle warning.

She's not here, Abby. There are people down in Mexico watching her, trying to ensure her safety. We can't do anything to help her right now, and worrying isn't going to change that. So we have to concentrate on keeping the girls safe."

She shuddered, and he immediately tightened his hold on her. When she burrowed closer, he began caressing her shoulder, soothing and stroking her almost as if his hand had a mind of its own. Abby's muscles trembled where he touched her, and her heart beat frantically against her chest. She told herself it was because she felt safe and protected in his arms, but she knew safety had very little to do with the way Damien made her feel.

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Hormones had a lot more to do with it. As her body quivered and tightened, she reached out her hand and lightly touched his face. The faint stubble of his beard rasped her fingertips, and his skin suddenly burned under her hand. He stilled, watching her intently. All she could read in his eyes was a yearning hunger that he tried desperately to hide.

"Damien," she whispered. She wanted to tell him that she needed his strength tonight, needed to feel his arms around her, banishing the fear, but as she watched his face her breath caught in her throat.

She had never seen that kind of desire in a man's eyes before. Not for her, AbbyMarkham. Her life was plain and ordinary, and she'd expected any passion that came her way to be plain and ordinary, too.

What she saw in Damien's eyes burned into her soul, igniting her with its heat. She held her breath, unwilling to break the spell as her eyes locked with his. Slowly, his eyes fixed on hers, he drew her into his arms.

"Just onekiss , Abby," he murmured, his lips hovering over hers.

"One kiss," she agreed, her eyes fluttering closed.

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Chapter 10

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His mouth brushed over hers with exquisite tenderness, lingering for a moment as if he couldn't bear to let her go. Abby could feel his arms trembling as he held her away from him and raised his head.

A hollow, empty place inside her cried out in protest, and she opened her eyes. "That wasn't enough,"

she whispered, and his hands tightened on her shoulders as he groaned.

"Don't say that, Abby. Tell me to let you go." Wordlessly she shook her head. "I can't," she breathed, speaking so softly that she wasn't sure if he heard her. But he had. "Then God help us both," he muttered as he pulled her against him. His mouth crushed hers, taking her with a searing possession that had desire roaring to life inside her. Reaching around him, she clung to his back, feeling his sleek muscles tense and tighten under her fingers. The world spun around her as he slanted his mouth over hers, and she curled her hands into his shirt and held on.

Bringing his hands up to cup her face, he broke off the kiss and leaned back, looking into her eyes. "I have no right, Abby. None at all."

"You have whatever right I give you." Her voice was fierce, and the words surrounded them with heat.

Laying her hand against his chest, she felt his heart pounding hard and fast against it. "Hold me, Damien."

This time his kiss was infinitely gentle. Her lips still ached from his first kiss, and he soothed them with his tongue, nibbling and caressing her until her mouth opened for him. She heard him groan as he tasted the dark velvet of her mouth, stroking her until she throbbed deep inside her belly.

His hands shifted and eased on her back as he feathered his way down her spine, his fingers lingering as if they memorized every sweep of muscle and bone. When he reached her waist, he hesitated, then slowly bunched her blouse into his hand. She shivered as the cool night air breathed over her skin, then he

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rested his warm hand on her stomach and she was flooded with heat.

Her muscles jumped every time he moved his fingers. As he slid his hand along her ribs, she wrapped her arms more tightly around him to hide their trembling.

When he cupped her breast in his palm, she gasped as pleasure shot through her. Slowly he touched her nipples with the pads of his thumbs, and she went rigid as sensation threatened to overwhelm her. He hesitated, and she held her breath until he slipped his hand underneath her bra and touched her again.

Need throbbed deep inside her with an almost unbearable strength. She had to touch him, to feel his skin against her hands. Letting go of his shirt, she tried to force the buttons through the tiny holes on the front, but her hands shook too hard. With a muttered oath Damien let her go and roughly pulled his shirt over his head. His smooth skin gleamed in the dim light, his sleek muscles rippling as he reached for her again.

Abby laid her hands against the dark hair that furred his chest, the coarse strands tickling her palms. As she moved her hands, his skin quivered in response. Astonished, she touched him again and felt his muscles bunch and tense.

His flat male nipples were hard and beaded, dusky against his smooth skin. She reached out and touched one with a tentative finger, watching as it tightened even more. When she touched him again, he pulled her closer and covered her mouth with his.

This tune she tasted not only his need, but the passion that drove it. Easing onto the couch behind them, he pulled her down on top of him and wrapped his arms around her as if he couldn't bear to let her go.

His arousal burned into her, even through the clothing they both wore.

As he tasted her neck, biting gently then smoothing with his tongue, his hands slowly unbuttoned her blouse. When the last button fell open, she felt the cool night air flutter against her overheated skin. In one smooth motion he swept the blouse from her shoulders, and she lay on top of him with nothing covering her except her sheer, lacy bra.

For a moment, as he stared at her, panic swept over her. Kisses were one thing, but now she was on the brink of something else entirely. Control was slipping out of her hands, and she had an almost unstoppable urge to cover herself.

Then Damien reached out and unfastened her bra. As it fell open, she felt his response to her, and when he looked up at her the wonder in his eyes made her heart lurch in her chest.

"You're so beautiful." His voice was awed, and she felt herself begin to tremble.

He pulled the scrap of lace from her arms and dropped it on the floor, then bent his head to take a nipple in his mouth. If she had been on fire before, now she was engulfed by the flames. Moaning his name, she arched her back, trying to get closer to him. He responded by wedging one of his thighs between hers and wrapping his arms around her.

Sensation exploded inside her as she struggled to get closer. His hands cupped her bottom, then slid around to tug at the waistband of her shorts. Suddenly she was swept with urgency. Rolling to her side, she fumbled with the button on the fly of his jeans. Time and again her hands brushed the hard ridge of male flesh that burned her even through the thick denim, until her shaking hands managed to free the button.

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He strained toward her touch as she eased the zipper down, until he suddenly tensed and grabbed her hands. "Wait," he whispered. "I'm not going to make love on this couch." He swept her up into his arms.

"You deserve more than that."

Twining her arms around his neck, she let him carry her into his bedroom. Moonlight dappled the quilt on the bed and made his broad chest glimmer in the dim, pearly light. The dark hairs that arched into a thin line seemed to disappear into the darkness, hidden by his jeans. She stared at him for a moment, drinking in the sight of his hard muscles and smooth skin, until she realized that he was looking at her, too.

He reached for her then, holding her at arm's length. "Are the twins going to be all right?"

"They both sleep soundly, if that's what you're asking. We won't disturb them." She realized that she'd already made the decision to make love with him, that she'd wanted to ever since he'd kissed her that first time.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive. Do you think I would do anything that I thought would harm them?"

His eyes softened and he pulled her closer. "I think you would give your life for them. So if you say they won't wake up, I believe you."

Slowly he bent to kiss her, and the inferno roared to life inside her again. She wanted him like she'd never wanted another man in her life. She fumbled with his jeans, then his hands joined her, his urgency making her tremble even more.

Before his jeans were completely off, he was tearing at the zipper on her shorts. Kicking away the remains of their clothes, they fell onto the bed,

straining to get closer. The quilt twisted around them, wrapping around their arms and legs, until Damien shoved it off the bed with a muttered oath.

His hands were everywhere, stroking, caressing, claiming her as his. She pressed her palms into his back, glorying in his shuddering response. When she swept her hand down to cup his buttocks, he groaned and pulled her under him.

"I can't wait, Abby," he whispered, taking her earlobe in his teeth. "I want you too much."

Wrapping her legs around him, pulsing with desire for him, she tried to pull him closer. "I don't want you to wait. I can't wait, either." When she reached down and cupped him in her hand, he groaned and surged into her.

A convulsion shook her immediately. Biting his shoulder to keep from crying out, she bucked against him, feeling him drive even more deeply inside her. He called her name, his voice hoarse, as he lunged again and again and poured himself into her.

They lay twined together for a long time. Abby didn't want to move. His weight pressed her into the mattress, and she gloried in it. She felt his heart gradually slow against her chest, and his ragged breathing smooth out. After a long time he raised his head.

"I'm sorry," he murmured.

She pushed a lock of his hair out of his face. "For what?"

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"I wanted to go slow, be gentle. Instead, I took you like a rutting animal. I didn't give you everything you deserve."

"You gave me exactly what I wanted. Isn't that more important?"

He eased himself away and rolled over, pulling her next to him. "I also didn't use any protection."

The thought of the possible consequences made her freeze in shock for a moment. Then she hastened to reassure him. "I think this was a safe time of the month. We probably don't have anything to worry about."

"We have plenty to worry about. I don't believe how stupidly careless I was." His voice was grim, even though he continued to hang on to her.

"What are you worried about? That I'll get pregnant?" She was shocked at how little the idea bothered her.

"Yes. That's what I'm worried about." His voice was harsh, and he sat up. "Damn, I can't believe I did that."

"There were two of us in that bed," she reminded him, sitting up slowly, a sick feeling in her stomach.

"And one of us should have been thinking." He stood up and pulled on his jeans. "I've never, ever taken that kind of chance before. Never."

She crossed her arms over her chest, suddenly feeling too exposed, and reached for one of his shirts that hung over the end of the bed. "Neither have I, Damien," she whispered. She wouldn't tell him why. She couldn't. Not when he stood looking down at her, such horror in his eyes over what might have happened. The words shriveled and died on her lips as she pulled the shirt on, buttoning it hastily.

"You'll let me know..." He stopped in the middle of his sentence and spun around, staring in the direction of the door.

Abby slowly stood up, instinctively moving closer to him. "What's wrong?"

Then she heard it, too. One of the twins was sobbing softly in the other room.

She ran into the room and knelt beside the bed where both girls slept. Maggie was clutching her white blanket to her chest, and tears trickled out of her eyes.

"What is it, honey?" Abby scooped the child into her arms and rocked her back and forth. "What's wrong?"

Maggie slowly opened her eyes and stared up at her aunt. The tears continued in a steady stream down her face.

"Do you want me to hold you?" Damien asked Maggie.

Suddenly Abby was aware of him standing next to her, smoothing Maggie's hair back from her face. To her surprise, Maggie nodded.

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The little girl curled her arms around Damien's neck and buried her head against his shoulder. As Damien wrapped his arms around her, his face filled with tender concern. "You can tell me about it if you want to," he said.

Maggie sobbed for a few more minutes and Damien rocked her, murmuring soothing words into her ear.

Gradually her crying stopped, and then she began to speak. Abby couldn't bear what Maggie said, but she saw Damien tighten his hold on her.

Suddenly she stopped talking and Abby saw her body relax in Damien's arms. He held her for a while longer, then gently laid her down on the bed and pulled the quilt over her.

Abby followed him out of the room. "She had another nightmare," he said, his voice low in the darkness of the cabin. "It sounded like the same as the last one. A man was lying on the ground and her white blanket got some red on it. And she was scared."

"She saw the murder, didn't she?" Abby turned and looked back at the room where the two girls slept.

"It sounds like she did." Damien's voice was without expression.

"You'll have to ask them about it."

"Yes, I will. But not tonight, Abby." He reached out and touched her, and the heat came flooding back.

His chest was bare. He'd pulled on jeans, but he hadn't buttoned them. When she moved closer to him, she realized that her scent was trapped in the hair on his chest.

She swayed closer to him, her eyes fluttering closed, need for him filling her again. His hand tightened on her arm, then he stepped back. "Don't, Abby."

She slowly opened her eyes. "What?"

"This should never have happened." He waved his hand toward her room and looked at her with a grim expression on his face. "I could have gotten all of us killed."

Suddenly she felt exposed and terribly vulnerable. Even though Damien's shirt covered her to her knees, she felt naked. "You weren't alone, you know."

"I should have known better. It's bad enough that I forgot my job and got involved with someone I'm supposed to be guarding. But to let it happen when there's a possibility of an ambush is inexcusable."

His harsh words hit her like a fistful of tiny arrows, and she slowly straightened. "Is that what this was, a spur-of-the-moment fling?"

"I sure as hell didn't plan on making love with you." His gaze lowered to the piles of clothes scattered on the floor from the living room to the bedroom. Then, avoiding her eyes, he stared out the window into the darkness surrounding the cabin.

"Was it so wrong?" she said softly. For a moment she didn't think he'd heard her, then he turned around to look at her.

"Hell, yes, it was wrong. I told you, Abby, that my job is to protect you and the twins. I can't do that if

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I'm not paying attention every minute. And I can tell you for a fact that while we were on that bed I wasn't paying attention to anything but you."

Gathering her courage, bracing herself for the rejection she was sure was coming, she said, "What if you didn't have to worry about protecting me and the girls? Would it be so wrong then?"

He stared at her for a long time. His face was in the shadows, and she couldn't see the expression in his eyes. Finally he said flatly, "Yes, it would be. You're too innocent, too giving. Too nice. You don't need a person like me in your life. You need someone who can give you everything you deserve."

Taking a deep breath, she said, "And why isn't that person you?"

"I don't have anything to give you, Abby. Nothing at all. The only thing that matters to me is my job, and that's not going to be a hell of a lot of comfort to you on a cold night." The hard words fell between them, pitiless and final.

"I think you have a lot to give, if you'd only let yourself." Abby stood up and started to go to him, but stopped when he backed up.

"That's because you're a dreamer," he said harshly. "You won't believe anything bad about anyone. But there are no soft spots in my soul, Abby. There's nothing there to save."

"I think you're wrong." Her voice was soft and yearning in the dim light, but she didn't move toward him.

He paced the kitchen restlessly, staring out the windows and testing the lock on the door. Every movement spoke of his guilt at his perceived failure to

be on guard. He wasn't in the mood to be convinced of anything.

He stopped in front of the kitchen window, staring out into the night at the mountains. Abruptly he said,

"We're leaving first thing in the morning."

Apprehension fluttered inside her. "Why are we leaving? Where else can we go?"

He turned to face her. "We're going into the town of Cameron. Obviously the men who are after the twins know where we are. I don't know how the hell they figured it out, but they know. This cabin was safe only as long as no one knew where we were. Now that they know, it's a liability. We're trapped up here, at the mercy of whoever wants to come after us. All they have to do is pick their time."

"So why are we waiting until the morning?"

"I want to check the car and the truck, and I need daylight for that." His mouth tightened. "I want to make sure no one planted a transmitter in Devlin's Bronco while we were in town. They traced us somehow, and I'm going to figure it out before we move. And I want to make sure no one follows us."

The offhand way he talked about transmitters and being followed made her shiver. Wrapping her arms around herself, she watched him check all the doors and windows one more time. She did the same thing every night at her own home. Then it was just routine. She wasn't thinking about protecting herself against someone who wanted to harm her. Staring at him, truly frightened, she said the first thing that came to her mind.

"The girls are going to be disappointed. They were counting on more swimming lessons."

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He stopped and looked over at her. "We'll figure out something to explain to them."

Abby ran her hands down the sides of Damien's shirt, wiping the perspiration off her palms. "I'm sorry, that was a stupid thing for me to say. You have enough other things to worry about."

At her words his eyes softened. "When people are under stress, they worry about odd things. Besides, swimming lessons for the twins are important. They need to know how to survive in the water."

"It's more important that they survive, period," she said grimly. "I'll try not to forget that."

He moved closer to her. "It'll be all right, Abby. We'll have help in town. Devlin and his deputies will be looking out for us, and watching for strangers. We'll be safer there."

She wanted to throw herself into his arms and let his strength surround her. For the first time she wanted to let someone else be strong and do the protecting. Shaken by the realization, she backed up. "It sounds like we'll have to be up early in the morning. I guess we'd better get to bed."

It was the wrong thing to say. His eyes darkened and smoldered, then he turned away. "Go ahead," he said, his voice expressionless. "I'm going to do a little more checking."

She watched his rigid back for a moment, then turned and went into her room without another word, closing the door softly behind her.

Damien stood motionless in the kitchen, listening to the sounds of Abby preparing for bed. Even through the closed door he could identify almost every move she made. When he finally heard her slip between the sheets, he exhaled slowly and let his shoulders relax. Now, if he could just block the past hour out of his mind, he would be able to concentrate on the job he had to do.

But that was impossible. Whenever his mind wandered for even a moment, it conjured up the sight of her lying on top of him in the hushed silence of the cabin, or lying underneath him, holding him so tightly he could barely breathe. The dim light cast golden shadows over her smooth skin, and he longed to touch her again. Her face was flushed, alive with desire and something deeper he refused to even think about.

When he closed his eyes to banish her image, he tasted her again, the giving sweetness of her mouth threatening to overwhelm him.

He prowled the house for a long time, almost wishing the goon from the theater would try something tonight. He ached for a fight, for the physical release it would bring.

And it would give him something to think about other than going to Cameron tomorrow. Because in a case filled with mistakes on his part, this was going to be one of the biggest. He should have known better than to bring Abby and the twins anywhere near Cameron, Utah.

It didn't matter that it had been a good idea at first. In the few days since he'd met her, he'd allowed Abby to become far too important to him. And he couldn't think of anything more painful than to take her to the house in Cameron.

But they were here, and his house was the safest place to stay. He'd always said that his job came first, before his personal feelings and needs. Now it was time to prove it.

* * *

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When he emerged from his room in the darkness of early morning, he found Abby standing at the stove, a coffee cup in her hand. Turning around, she gave him a wan smile.

"I can't face the morning without a cup of coffee. Would you like one? I made plenty."

It would take a lot more than a cup of coffee to make this day bearable, he thought grimly. Aloud he said, "Thanks," and poured himself a cup.

"I got most of our things packed last night," she said too brightly. "It won't take me long to get the kitchen ready, then we can leave. You probably want to be on the road as soon as possible."

"As soon as I've checked the truck," he agreed, watching her. Her forced smile and chatter wouldn't fool him. He'd heard her up most of the night, moving restlessly from her room to the kitchen and back again.

He'd heard her because he'd been awake himself.

Swallowing most of the scalding-hot coffee in one gulp, he laid his cup on the counter. "I'm going to check the truck, then I'll carry out the luggage. You go ahead and finish packing up the food."

"Fine," she said, giving him what she probably thought was a perky smile. "The suitcases are next to the door."

As if he hadn't heard every one of them packed, then moved out to the kitchen, he thought sourly.

Without a word he picked up as many as he could carry and walked out into the stillness of early morning. The sky was beginning to lighten, and he could hear birds singing in the woods. Leaves rustled softly, and the sounds of animals stirring drifted to him on the breeze. Waves lapped at the shore in a steady rhythm, and he was surprised to realize that he would miss this cabin.

But it wasn't safe, and so they would leave. Shutting the door to the memories, he set the suitcases on the ground and began searching the truck. Ten minutes later he knew there was no transmitter on the truck that had revealed their location.

When he came back into the house, Abby had several bags lined up on the counter. "These are the groceries that Shea left here. Is it too early to stop and return them to her?"

Damien shook his head. "Ranch work starts early. We'll stop on the way to town. We have to return Devlin's truck and get my car back, anyway."

"Did you find anything on the truck?"

"Not a damn thing."

"What are you looking for?"

"A small piece of plastic. It works the way some car alarms do, by sending out a signal that another unit can pick up." He ran his hand through his hair and looked out the window. "I'll check the car when we get to Shea's house. I can't think of how else they would have found us."

"Would it have to be on the truck or the car?" she asked slowly.

"Not necessarily. It just has to be with us."

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He watched her swallow once. "Could the person who broke into my house have left a transmitter somehow?"

Damien spun around, cursing himself. "Of course. Didn't the police say that some luggage had been disturbed?"

Abby nodded. "The girls' suitcases had been moved, but I didn't look at them because they were empty."

"Where are they?"

"You already took them out to the car."

Moments later he had the suitcases open on the kitchen table. It only took moments more to find the small plastic box hidden in a side pocket of one of the suitcases.

"No wonder they were here right after we were," he said grimly. "I led them right to us."

"You had no way of knowing that they'd hidden that." Abby nodded toward the innocent-looking box.

"I should have checked."

"It's all right. Damien," she said softly. "You can't anticipate everything."

"You're wrong, Abby. It's my job to do just that." His voice was flat. He picked up the transmitter and slid it into his pocket. "I'll take this with us to Cameron. I think Devlin would be willing to have one of his deputies drive it a few hours away. I'll have him leave it in a city, someplace where the men following us could think they might have lost us."

"All right. I'll get Maggie and Casey in the truck."

"They're heavy. I'll do it." He felt his muscles tense as he spoke. The feel of Maggie's tiny body cuddled against his chest last night was imprinted on his soul. Turning quickly, he headed out the door before Abby could see how much the idea bothered him. He could feel her eyes on him as he walked to the truck and set the grocery bags next to the suitcases in the back.

When he walked back into the house, she said quietly, "I'll get the twins if you finish loading the bags."

"I've done it a million times before." She turned around and walked into the girls' room before he could answer.

He hadn't missed the flash of compassion in her eyes. His mouth tightening, he followed her into the room and watched as she scooped up the still-sleeping Maggie. As their eyes met in the dimly lit room, he saw surprise flicker in hers, followed by another surge of sympathy.

Ignoring her, he walked over to the lower bunk and looked down at Casey. She lay sprawled over the bed, her hair covering her face. Slowly he squatted next to the bunk and pulled her toward him.

She was even lighter than her sister. The clean, fresh, little-girl scent of her drifted up to him, making him close his eyes and try to block it out. Hoping the pounding of his heart wasn't loud enough to wake her, he held her lightly and hurried toward the car. Abby already had the door open and the chest piece raised on the car seat. He slipped her into her seat then backed away as Abby bent to fasten her in.

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He was inside the house before Abby finished fiddling with the car seat. He checked all the windows again and made sure all the blinds were closed, looking for something to erase the memory of the child he'd held in his arms. It had been three years since he'd held a child, but the pain hadn't diminished at all.

If anything, it had gotten worse the past few days. Seeing Maggie and Casey, speculating on what his son would have been like had he lived, had torn at his heart. Now the old wound was open again, ragged and bleeding and unspeakably painful.

"We're all set and ready to go."

Abby's voice spoke from the doorway, and he tightened his grip on the bags and turned around. "Go ahead and get in the truck. I'm checking the house one more time."

Instead of leaving, Abby looked around the small room. "I'm going to miss this cabin," she said softly.

"We were only here a few days, but it feels like home." She looked at him steadily, then turned and walked out the door.

As he locked the door behind her, his treacherous heart told him the same thing.

Five minutes later he drove carefully down the rutted road, watching for trouble. He would not be surprised again. He'd screwed up too many times on this case already. If someone waited for them in the shadows by the side of the road, he would be prepared.

The headlights illuminated the ruts in the gravel road and nothing else. The rearview mirror brightened as the first pink fingers of dawn spread over the mountains beyond the lake, but he didn't look back to see the sunrise. Nothing mattered right now besides getting on the road safely, without being seen or followed.

When he reached the spot where Shea and Devlin's house was visible from the road, he stopped and watched for a moment. Lights were on in the house, but there were no signs of anything unusual. And there were no signs that anyone had followed him.

Easing the truck back into gear, he roiled down the hill, coasting to a stop outside the house. Before he could knock on the door, Shea stepped out into the gloom of dawn.

"What are you doing here?" she asked in a low voice.

"Did Dev tell you what happened yesterday?"

She shook her head. "He's too busy with Becca Johnson's situation to even come home. He's been staying in town."

"The men who are after the girls found us at the cabin." He suppressed the anger at himself. It wouldn't help Abby and the girls now. "So we're going into town. It'll be easier for Dev and his deputies if we're closer. And we'll have more sets of eyes to watch for strangers."

Shea leaned into the window on Abby's side of the truck. "I'm so sorry. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Damien saw the brief look of surprise that flashed over Abby's face before she got out of the truck.

"Thank you," she said quietly. She hesitated for a moment, then leaned over and hugged Shea. "Thank

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you for all you've done already. I don't know what we would have done if you hadn't let us stay in your cabin."

Shea gripped her arms. "Damien would have thought of something else. You can trust him, you know.

He won't let you down."

"I know that."

Something seemed to pass between the two women, then Shea stepped backward. "Let's get you organized," she said briskly. "I'll get your car and we'll have you on your way in a few minutes."

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Chapter 11

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" Cameron doesn't seem like a typical place for a second home."

Damien felt her gaze on him as he drove toward town, and for a moment he was tempted to give her a meaningless, vague answer—that he'd passed through the town once on vacation, that he'd liked the atmosphere. Both answers would have been true enough, but they weren't the whole truth. And suddenly he wanted Abby to know. She had trusted him with her life and the lives of her nieces. He could tell her the truth about Cameron.

"It's not. My wife grew up there. When she inherited a house in the town, it seemed like the perfect place for a second home."

He felt her shock in the silence that suddenly filled the car. "I didn't know you were married," she said carefully after a long pause.

"I'm not." His words were flat and final. "She died three years ago."

Her sharp intake of breath echoed in the car. "I'm sorry. Damien. I shouldn't have asked."

"It's a legitimate question after we've made love. You should have asked earlier." He hoped he sounded sufficiently jaded. Maybe if he insulted her deeply enough, she'd stop looking at him with that softness in her eyes.

"I never thought you would make love to me if you were still married. I know you have too much integrity for that."

"If I had that much integrity, I never would have touched you in the first place," he said harshly.

"Remember that, Abby."

"You're too hard on yourself," she said, so quietly that he barely heard her. "Caring about someone could never be wrong. No one was hurt because we made love, Damien."

Go ahead, he told himself. Tell her that you don't care about her. It would be the easiest way to solve the problem. She would be deeply wounded and wouldn't come near him again. He could solve this case without the distraction of Abby and get on with his life.

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But he couldn't do it. He couldn't open his mouth and lie to her in a way that would guarantee she would be hurt, so he gripped the steering wheel more tightly and changed the subject.

"I'm going to stop at Heaven on Seventh. Dev is usually there in the morning and I'll give him the transmitter. I need some coffee, too. Would you like a cup?" Maybe hot, strong coffee could get rid of the bitter taste in his mouth, the one full of regret for what could never be. If Abby knew what he really was, she'd run so fast that all she'd leave behind was a cloud of dust.

"I'd love some. And a sweet roll, too." She looked over at him, giving him a warm smile. "I'll warn you right now, Damien, I'm not a cheap date."

Her smile stunned him, and for a moment all he could do was stare at her. Then the car behind him honked, and he swung the car into a parking spot. When he looked over at her again, her lips still curved upward, a wealth of understanding in her eyes.

His chest tightened, but he couldn't force himself to look away. Her eyes drew him in, made him feel like he was drowning in the understanding acceptance he saw there. Abby saw right through his harsh words.

Saw right through him, and understood. And her smile told him she wasn't going to back off.

He finally turned away, his heart pounding in his chest as he grabbed blindly for the door handle. "I'll be right back," he muttered.

He ordered quickly, then spoke briefly to Devlin, handing him the transmitter. He turned and looked out the window at the car while he waited for their order. He could just see Abby, sitting in the front seat.

Could the promise in her eyes possibly be real? If she knew the truth, would she still have that light in her eyes when she looked at him, or would he see accusation there, the same kind of blame his wife's family laid on him? Was it even remotely possible that if she knew the truth she'd still want to reach out for him?

When he eased himself back into the car, he handed Abby her cup and the box that held her roll. "I don't want to drive while I drink this coffee."

She nodded. "That's fine."

They sat in the car and sipped their coffee, but he wasn't thinking about the men who were chasing them.

The only thing real to him right now was the woman sitting next to him. All that was important had narrowed down to this car, to the small space between the two bucket seats.

And he was sure Abby felt it, too. Every time he glanced in her direction, her shoulders tensed a little more. The air in the car suddenly lacked oxygen. His heart pounded and his chest tightened as they sat in silence, staring at the empty street as the tension built inside the car.

"How far is it to your house?" Abby's voice sounded breathless, as if she felt the lack of oxygen as much as he did.

"Just a few minutes. Cameron isn't a very big town. We're on the outskirts, on the other side of town."

He drank his coffee and didn't allow himself to look over at Abby again. He was afraid of what he would see in her eyes, and more afraid of what she

would read in his.

When he heard the first sounds from the back seat, he drew a deep, shaky breath of relief. With Maggie and Casey awake, some of the tension that vibrated between the two adults was bound to dissipate.

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"Mommy?" he heard Maggie say. He didn't even think about how readily he could identify her voice.

Abby set her coffee down and twisted in her seat. She reached back with one hand to brush the hair out of the girl's face. "Your mommy isn't here, sweetheart," she said softly. "It's Aunt Abby, remember?"

In the rearview mirror he watched as Maggie struggled to sit up in her car seat. "I don't remember the car, Aunt Abby. Why are we in the car?"

"Damien is taking us to his house." Abby's voice was low and soothing. "He thought you might like to see it."

Maggie shifted in her seat and looked over at him. He met her eyes in the rearview mirror, eyes full of trust and acceptance, and he felt his heart contract. "Do you have a lake at your house, Damien?"

"No, but there's a swimming pool nearby." He struggled to keep his voice even. "We can swim there."

"Okay." Maggie turned to look at her aunt. "I'm hungry, Aunt Abby. What are we going to eat for breakfast?"

Damien barely heard Abby's answer to Maggie's question. He felt like he'd been gut punched. The trust in Maggie's hazel eyes had stolen his breath, leaving him gasping for air and scrambling for a way to put some distance between himself and the two girls.

But he couldn't give into that need, not yet. First he had to get them to tell him what they'd seen that day at their mother's office.

"Do you mind if they have sweet rolls, too?" he asked. "I can run in and get them from Heaven on Seventh."

"That's fine," she said, giving him a wry smile. "Healthy eating habits don't seem nearly as important when you're on the run."

While the twins ate their sweet rolls, he stopped at the grocery store, then drove toward the house that stood on the edge of town. A house that he never wanted to see again, but now would be living in. With Abby and the two girls.

"Look, Aunt Abby! There's a fair!"

Casey's excited voice spilled over him, and he welcomed the interruption. And once more he wondered uneasily at how quickly he'd known which girl was speaking.

He glanced out the window, and his hands tightened on the steering wheel. "That's a rodeo," he said.

"There's always a rodeo in Cameron over the Fourth of July."

"Can we go, Damien? Please?"

The twins' pleading voices reminded him too much of another child begging to be taken to the rodeo.

"We'll see," he said, and he felt Abby's gaze on him. He refused to look over at her. He knew the pain in his eyes, on his face, would be too raw.

Abby saw the way he'd tensed as they got closer to his house. And she saw the pain in his face when

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Casey asked to go to the rodeo. When they finally pulled into the driveway of the house, Abby waited only long enough for the car to stop moving before she scrambled to pull open the door and jump out. A huge weight of

emotion pressed on her from all sides, making her head pound and her hands shake.

Standing next to the car, she gulped in the clean, fresh air and closed her eyes.

She had no idea how difficult it must have been for Damien to bring them to this house. Every expression on his face, every tense muscle in his body, reverberated with pain. He had done this for them, she told herself. He had brought them to Cameron to keep them safe, even though it tore his heart out of his chest to do so.

The girls' calls to her from the back seat caught her attention, and she turned back to the car. "I'll bet you're ready to get out of those car seats," she said brightly as she opened the back door.

Casey scrambled out, followed by Maggie. "Is that Damien's house?" Casey asked.

"I guess it is." For the first time Abby turned to look at the structure in front of them. Nestled up against the hills that surrounded the town, the house was set apart from the neighboring houses by a yard filled with trees and bushes and an overgrown garden. The house had a desolate air and was very tiny. She wondered uneasily how she and Damien were going to avoid one another in such a small house.

"I'll show you the house and bring your bags in later."

Damien's voice interrupted her calculations of bedroom size and location, and she turned to him reluctantly. "All right." Abby reached for Maggie and Casey's hands and held on tightly.

Damien opened the front door and stood aside for them to enter, and Abby breathed a sigh of relief.

The house looked so small because it was built on two levels. The top floor consisted of two bedrooms and a loft that looked down over the living room below it. As Damien led the way down the stairs, she saw the kitchen and

another bedroom leading off the living room. And next to the other bedroom was a half-finished addition to the house. Sawdust and pieces of drywall on the floor spoke plainly of the ongoing work on the room.

Damien leaned against the counter and turned to face her. "We're not going to use the bedroom down here. The twins will take one of the rooms upstairs, and you'll take the other. I'll sleep on the couch in the loft."

Fear bubbled up again, although she tried to hide it. "That's fine."

He took her arm and turned her to face him. "I think we're safe for a day or two, Abby, but that doesn't mean I'm going to take any stupid chances where you or the twins are concerned." The expression in his eyes softened. "I'll sleep better if everyone is close by."

The thought of Damien sleeping just outside her room sent a wave of heat sweeping over her. "All right."

She hoped he didn't hear the tremor in her voice. "Which room do you want them to have?"

"I'll show you. Come back upstairs."

The room he led them to was small, with two windows shaded by a pine tree on the side of the house. It was furnished with bunk beds and a chest of drawers in dark wood. Otherwise it showed no signs of ever being occupied.

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"This is perfect for them. They'll..." She glanced over at Damien as she spoke, and the rest of her words died in her throat. A mask had frozen over his face, leaving his eyes bleak and shuttered and his mouth a hard line. Pain was etched in every line of his body.

"Damien?" she whispered, shocked. "Are you all right?"

Slowly he turned to face her. "No. I won't be all right until this case is solved and the person responsible for Joey Stefanetto's death is behind bars." He turned and walked out of the room, and a few moments later she heard the front door open and quietly close behind him. The sound echoed in the silent house.

Damien's pain seemed to linger in the room, a throbbing presence that made her heart ache. Instinctively she turned to follow him, but stopped when the door opened again and he walked in, his arms full of suitcases.

"I thought the girls would want some of their toys and things." He dropped the suitcases in the hall between the two bedrooms. "I'll let you sort out what goes where."

His eyes were carefully blank, and she couldn't read anything in his gaze. After a moment he turned away and headed out the door, and she slowly bent to pick up Maggie and Casey's suitcases. She would find out what caused the torment she'd seen in his eyes, she vowed. Somehow, in the past few days, easing Damien's pain had become very important to her.

"Aunt Abby, can we play outside?" Casey's voice intruded on her thoughts, and she looked up with a start. Both girls watched her with expectant, eager eyes.

"Why don't we wait for Damien?" she finally answered. "Maybe he has more he'd like to show us."

"It'll be safe outside 'cause he doesn't have a lake," Casey assured her. "I looked out the window. But he has a hill just like the hill behind your house. We can play there."

If only their safety were as easily defined as the lack of a lake, Abby thought. She bit her lip at the thought of them playing unsupervised in the yard. Damien might have said that they would be safe here for a day or two, but she didn't want to take any chances. "We'll have to ask Damien about that, honey,"

she said after a moment. "Maybe his hill isn't safe for little girls to play on by themselves."

The look of scorn on Casey's face would have made her laugh any other time. "We play on hills all the time, Aunt Abby. We don't get lost."

If only getting lost were all they had to worry about, Abby thought with a painful tug of fear. The door opened behind her, and Damien came in with the bags of groceries he'd just bought. She turned to him with relief.

"The girls want to go play outside, but I told them we'd have to ask you about it."

Setting the bags down, he straightened. "I think that would be all right, but maybe we should have something to eat first."

"Okay." Maggie answered with a grin, then turned and clattered down the stairs, Casey close behind.

"I'm starved," she called from below.

Damien certainly knew how to distract the girls, she thought as she followed more slowly down the

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stairs. And it wasn't the first time she'd seen him do it, either. The time he'd suggested the bear trap was just one example of how effortlessly he'd managed to direct their attention away from what he didn't want them to do.

How could a man who seemed to handle children so well be so determined to avoid them? she wondered as she walked into the kitchen. Intent on unraveling the mystery of Damien, she didn't notice immediately that Maggie and Casey had their noses pressed to the sliding doors that led to the deck off the living room.

"Aunt Abby," Casey called, excited. "There's someone in the bushes."

Abby froze as she looked over at them standing in front of the door. They were perfect targets with the sunlight streaming down on them, illuminating them completely through the glass door. Her stomach clenched and her throat tightened with fear. "Get away from the window," she said, her voice sharper than she intended.

The girls jumped back and looked at her, a puzzled expression in their eyes. Taking a deep breath, she said in a calmer voice, "You don't know who that was out there. Maybe Damien wants to surprise them."

It was a pretty lame explanation, she thought as she watched them, but they seemed to buy it. "You mean surprise them with us?" Maggie asked eagerly.

She was saved from answering by Damien's footsteps on the stairs. "It's all right, Abby. I know who it was." He came into the kitchen and went to stand over by the glass door. "It was my neighbor's kids. I saw them while I was unpacking the car."

"Are we going to be a surprise for your neighbor?" Casey asked, jumping up and down with excitement.

"Probably not." Abby heard the dry tone in his voice. "I think they've already seen you."

"Can we play with them, Aunt Abby?" Casey pleaded, turning her huge brown eyes on her aunt. "We haven't played for a long time."

Abby was about to say no when Damien spoke. "We'll see, Casey. Right now why don't we have some lunch?"

All through the meal the girls chattered about the children they had seen in the bushes. After the sandwiches were gone and the girls had disappeared into their room, Abby asked in a low voice, "Are you sure they saw your neighbor's children and not someone else?"

"I'm positive. I saw them myself at the same time Maggie and Casey spotted them."

"What are we going to do? Maggie and Casey are going to be clamoring to play with them now."

Damien turned and stared out the window for a moment before answering. Finally he said slowly, "Then we'll let them. I know Laura Weston and her kids, Todd and Jenny. Laura was born and raised here in Cameron. I'd rather no one know we're here, but the kids have seen us and we won't be able to keep it a secret."

"I'm not sure it's a good idea to let the girls play with your neighbor's children. What if they tell someone else?" Abby knew Damien could hear the panic in her voice, but she couldn't help herself. After seeing

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the men watching them at the lake, she didn't want another soul to know where they were.

"I'll give Laura some story about why you're here. She won't tell anyone."

"You trust her?" Abby heard her voice rising, but didn't bother to disguise her skepticism.

"We don't have much choice at this point," Damien answered grimly. "Todd and Jenny have already seen someone in the house. We can't hide inside, because that would just make them more curious. I'll think up some reason why you're here and we'll let Maggie and Casey play with the kids." His mouth a thin line, he added, "After all, it'll just make everything seem more natural to the girls. And natural is what we're after if we want them to talk to me."

"I can't believe that you're willing to trust our safety to a perfect stranger," she muttered.

"We don't have any choice, Abby." He reached out his hand and took hers, absently rubbing her knuckles with his thumb. "They already know I'm here and that I'm not alone. And they're not strangers."

Laura will be over to say hello, and we have to have some story ready for her. I'll think of some reason why you're here, and some reason she can't tell anyone."

"Why don't we just leave?" Abby whispered, looking out the windows at the hills and valleys that could hide so many threats.

"Where do you suggest we go?" Damien squeezed her hand, then let her go as he stood up and went to the window. "We can't go back to your house, that's for damn sure. And we can't go back to my apartment in Las Vegas. You can bet your life they're being watched." He glanced over his shoulder at her. "And you would be betting your life. No, even though Jenny and Todd have seen us, I still think we're safer here than anywhere else. And besides, with any luck the men watching us will be following one of Devlin's deputies to Cedar City."

"Maggie and Casey need to tell you what they saw, don't they?" Staring down at the hand that still tingled from Damien's touch, she tried to still her instinctive objections. This problem wasn't going to go away, and trying to protect her nieces would only endanger them more.

"Yes, Abby, they do." Damien's voice was surprisingly gentle. "And eventually they will." He moved back over to the table and took her hand again. "It'll be all right," he said softly. "They'll be fine.

Nobody's going to get hurt."

As Abby clung to his hand, she realized with astonishment that she believed him. More than that, she trusted him to take care of Maggie and Casey. He would never hurt them or endanger them. As much as it pained him to be around children, Abby knew that he would guard them with his life.

"I believe you," she said, and her wariness must have been plain in her voice because Damien's face softened as he watched her.

"Was that so difficult?" he said, the corners of his mouth turning up in a slight smile.

Staring at him, unable to believe what her heart had told her, she finally said baldly, "Yes. When I'm responsible for them, I've never trusted anyone but myself when it came to their safety."

The smile disappeared from his face, and his eyes glittered as he leaned toward her. "You won't ever regret trusting me with them, Abby. I swear it. They'll be as safe with me as they would with you."

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Involuntarily she glanced toward the loft, where she could hear their voices, then looked back at him. "I'll cut your heart out if you ever hurt them, Damien."

Pain flashed in his eyes for a moment, then he turned away. "Don't worry, Abby. They'll be safe with me."

Ashamed of her words, regretting the impulse that had made her blurt them out but unable to call them back, she twisted in her chair and spotted the unfinished room. She said the first thing that came to mind.

"What kind of addition are you building?"

His eyes darkened, and his mouth compressed to a thin line. Turning his head slightly, he stared at the skeleton of a room that was only a few feet away. He stared at it for so long Abby was sure he wasn't going to answer.

Slowly he turned to look at her, and his eyes were so full of raw pain that she wanted to leap from her seat and wrap her arms around him. She opened her mouth to apologize for asking, but he answered before she could speak.

"It was going to be a nursery."

Appalled, she could only stare at him for a frozen moment as the meaning of his words sunk in. "Your wife was pregnant when she died?"

He gave a small, stiff nod of his head, as if every muscle screamed in protest at the movement.

"Oh, Damien, I'm so sorry. No wonder you don't..."

His chair scraped on the floor as he shoved it away from the table and stood up. "Don't, Abby. You have no idea what happened. Just leave it alone." His eyes warned her not to probe as he retreated from her. The length of the kitchen separated them as he turned his back to stare out the window.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "What a horrible thing to lose both your wife and your unborn child at the same time."

He stood stiffly at the window, his back and shoulders silhouetted against the bright sunlight. Abby stood up and moved across the room, putting her arms around his waist and pulling him close. All of his muscles tensed, and she thought for a moment that he would pull away from her. To her surprise, though, he turned and wrapped his arms around her, holding her as though he never wanted to let her go.

Abby had no idea how long they stood locked together in the sunlight. She was conscious only of the feel of his arms holding her tightly and the beating of his heart, strong and steady against hers. Comfort flowed like a warm river between them as the tension in Damien slowly dissipated.

Finally he leaned away and smoothed her hair back from her face. "Thank you, Abby," he whispered.

"I didn't do anything," she answered, unable to take her gaze off his eyes. They had been black with despair earlier. Now she saw life stirring in their depths, something awakening that had nothing to do with death or pain.

"You did everything." His kiss was meant to be quick and light, she was sure, but the moment their lips

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touched a lightning bolt of desire arced between them.

She clung to him, feeling herself being swept away and glorying in it. For a few beats of her heart she forgot about the twins, forgot about the danger that Damien was protecting them from, forgot about everything but the man who held her so tightly.

Damien broke away abruptly. "Someone's coming." He looked out the window for a moment, then ran to the stairs, sliding his gun out of its shoulder holster in one smooth motion. Abby watched, numb, as he disappeared above her.

Damien took the stairs two at a time, struggling to replace the lingering passion of Abby's kiss with the cold logic and precise timing he would need to defend her and the twins. Stopping abruptly at the front door when he saw the doorknob turning, he gripped the gun more tightly as he called out, "Who's there?"

"It's me, Damien. Laura." His neighbor's friendly voice was tinged with impatience, as if she wanted to ask him who else could possibly be at his door. Shoving his gun back into the holster, he pulled on a jacket to cover it before he opened the door.

"Hi, Laura," he said as the door swung open.

Without waiting for an invitation, his next-door neighbor stepped into the house. "The kids said you were here." She smiled and handed him a plate of cookies. "It's a good thing I did some baking this morning."

He looked down at the plate in his hand and saw that the cookies were his favorite kind. "Thanks, Laura."

She waved her hand. "It was nothing. It's good to see you again, Damien." Her smile slowly disappeared as she examined his face. "How are you doing?" she asked softly.

"I'm fine." He set the plate down on a small table and shoved his hands into his pockets, making a quick decision. Better to tell her now about his

visitors than let her think he was trying to hide them. "I'm not here alone."

Her eyes lit up. "Damien, that's wonderful. It's about time you joined the human race again. I know how you felt about Carol and-"

"It's not what you think," he interrupted, knowing what she was going to say and not able to bear it. "I have a woman and her two nieces staying here, and it's not a pleasure trip."

The smile slowly disappeared from her face. "What do you mean?"

"The woman is trying to protect her nieces and running away from an abusive situation. Please don't tell anyone they're here. If her husband finds out where they are, they could be in serious danger."

Laura's eyes had widened as she listened to him. "This is an FBI case?"

"I can't tell you all the details. Please just don't say anything to anyone."

"You know I won't," she assured him. "And I'm sorry for jumping to conclusions. It's just that I hate to see you like this, coming up here only to torture yourself by working on that damn nursery. I'm glad you have company this time, even if it's only part of your job."

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His chest tightened as he thought about how much more Abby had come to mean to him than being just part of his job. He wasn't sure if the feeling was fear or pleasure.

Changing the subject, he said, "I saw those urchins of yours in the bushes outside the house. I suppose they told you about the two girls."

"They said you weren't alone, but that was about all. I'm not sure they realized you had kids here with you." She grinned at him again. "Why don't you send the girls over to play sometime? There's only so much time kids can spend with their siblings before all hell breaks loose. A change of scenery might do them some good."

"Maybe we'll do that." He looked down at the plate sitting on the counter. "Thanks for the cookies, Laura. I'm sure we'll all enjoy them."

The woman laughed. "I'm going, Damien. I can take a hint." Her smile disappeared. "And don't worry. I won't breathe a word to anyone about your guests."

Damien felt his face relax into a genuine smile. "Thanks, Laura. I know you won't."

Abby waited in the kitchen. "You didn't tell her that the girls would be over to play with her children, did you?" she said the minute he walked into the room.

Surprised, he set the plate of cookies on the counter and turned to stare at her. "I thought we talked about that. I told you, I know Laura. It's not like I'm letting them go to a stranger's house."

Abby scowled. "You should have asked me first."

"I'm sorry, but I thought we had already discussed it." He kept his voice mild.

"Forget it, then." Abby turned away and fussed with the plate of cookies. "Did your neighbor bring these? That was nice of her."

"Abby, tell me what's wrong." He reached out for her and gently turned her to face him. "Why are you so upset about me agreeing to let Maggie and Casey go to Laura's house?"

"I'm not upset," she insisted. "I just thought you should have put her off until I met her."

"I'm sorry," he said again, wondering what was wrong.

She turned to head up the stairs, but he reached out and stopped her. "What's going on, Abby? And don't give me any more of that bull about discussing it with me first."

For what seemed like a long time she stood rigid in his grasp, staring at something on his chest. Finally she looked up at him. Her eyes were huge and full of remembered pain. "I'm sorry, Damien," she whispered. "You're right. It does make sense to let Maggie and Casey play with your neighbor's children, and it was stupid of me to get upset."

"Then why did you?"

Hesitation, fear and pain flitted across her face in the split second before she answered him. He only had

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time to wonder uneasily why he was able to read her so readily when her face softened and she said, "I know I overreact sometimes. I'll try to be more reasonable."

She turned to continue up the stairs, but he slid his hand down her arm and took her hand. "Tell me, Abby. What's wrong?"

Slowly she turned to face him, and now there was nothing but sadness on her face. "It's unfortunately a too common story, Damien, and really not a big deal. My family was what is politely called dysfunctional.

My mother was an alcoholic, and Janna and I were pretty much on our own. Since I was the oldest, I was responsible for her."

She tried to smile. "Alcoholics aren't known for their sense of responsibility. Janna almost drowned once when she was seven and I was ten, and I felt like it was my fault. That's why she's so afraid of water, and I guess that's why I take my responsibilities so seriously. Sometimes it feels like I've been responsible and incontrol my whole life. I don't have any excuse for bringing it up now besides the fact that I'm worried about Maggie and Casey. I didn't stop to think."

"This isn't about Maggie or Casey," he said, drawing her back into the kitchen. He followed her glance up the stairs and said, "They're fine. You

can hear them playing in their room. I don't want to talk about the twins, Abby. I want to talk about you."

"There's nothing to talk about."

"I think there is." He led her into the living room and pulled her down next to him on the couch. "I understand better now why you're so protective of the twins. And so vigilant when they're near water."

"No, that's not the point." She shook her head. "I'm not afraid that you would beat them or terrorize them. I know you better than that. But the bottom line is that Maggie and Casey are just an assignment for you. They're everything that's important to me."

He held her hand, staring unseeing at her slender, delicate fingers. Images of the twins danced in front of his eyes, pictures of Casey grinning in triumph as she swam a few strokes, of the three of them setting bear traps, of the simple trust in Maggie's eyes when she looked at him.

"They're a lot more than just an assignment for me, and I think you know that." He held Abby's hand more tightly, forcing himself to face the truth, to acknowledge that he cared about the two girls. "I would die myself before I let anyone hurt either of them."

"Then why do you cringe when one of them talks to you? Why do you go out of your way to avoid them?" she asked, gripping his hand.

Tell her, he ordered himself. Tell her the whole story right now.

But the words wouldn't come, and he stood up abruptly and walked to the window.

Face it. You're a coward.

The harsh words echoed inside his brain, and he silently acknowledged their truth. He couldn't tell Abby what had really happened. He'd never told anyone the whole truth. He wouldn't be able to bear the condemnation he'd see on their faces and the silent pity that would fill their eyes.

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"Leave it alone, Abby. You don't want to know."

"I do, Damien." She stood up and began walking toward him. "I want to know why you carry around so much pain. No one should have to carry a burden like that."

"It's not nearly heavy enough," he said harshly, brushing past her and heading for the stairs. "I'm going to make sure everything is secure outside. You and the girls stay inside until I'm finished."

As he walked up the stairs and toward the front door, he could feel Abby's gaze on his back. Not until he was outside did he take a deep breath. He had come too close in there. In another moment he would have been spilling his guts, telling her everything that happened and silently begging for absolution.

And she would have given it. Abby wouldn't blame him for the deaths of his son and his wife. He knew that suddenly with a flash of insight. What's more, she would try to make him believe it, too.

He wanted, more than anything, to believe her. But he knew, it was impossible .

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Chapter 12

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Damien was up the next morning long before dawn, unable to bear the tension. Abby slept on the other side of the wall, and every time she sighed, every time she turned in her sleep, a hot arrow of need stabbed at him. So he'd left the couch, gotten far enough away from Abby that he couldn't feel her presence. Now he paced in the kitchen, watching the sun rise over the mountains and battling the darker memories that tried to claim his soul.

He had to get away, if only for a few hours. He had to get out of this house, away from the constant reminders of his failure. The rodeo in Cameron would be in full swing today, he knew. It was the Fourth of July. The four of them could get lost in the crowds, be just another anonymous family.

The thought tore at him, but he pushed the pain away. They'd go to the rodeo, and he could forget for several hours.

A few hours later Damien maneuvered his car into a parking lot that was already three-quarters full.

Both Casey and Maggie were straining against their car seats, trying to look out the window. Even Abby was smiling.

"I see why you wanted to come here," she murmured.

He shot her a glance. "What do you mean?"

"It's the old 'hide in plain sight' routine. There are so many people here that we're lost in the crowd."

"That's the idea," Damien said grimly. He had his own ghosts of rodeos past to deal with, but Abby didn't have to know that. Couldn't know that.

"Can we ride on that big round thing that goes up in the air?" Casey was so excited that her voice almost squeaked.

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He looked out the window. "That's the Ferns wheel."

"Can we ride in one of those little chairs?"

"Have you ever ridden on a Ferris wheel before?" he asked.

"Uh-uh. But it looks like fun."

"If you want to ride the Ferris wheel, then we will," he promised as he pulled into a parking place.

"Everybody ready for the rodeo?" He struggled to inject some enthusiasm into his voice.

"Yes! Yes!" the girls shouted.

"They have pretty colored horses here that you can ride," Maggie said, her hazel eyes shining. "I saw them when we drove in."

"I take it you want to ride the merry-go-round, Maggie."

"It's magic," she told him, her voice serious. "The horses get to be real when you ride them."

Maggie looked up at him, her eyes bright with excitement, and he felt his throat swell. The merry-go-round had been his son's favorite ride, too. "I didn't know that," he managed to say.

She nodded vigorously. "I'm going to pretend my horse is real already." She ran over to her sister. "You can, too, Casey. We'll pretend on the horses."

As the twins hopped and jumped toward the gate, Damien watched Abby take both their hands and crouch down in front of them. "You both need to hold my hands all the time," she said in a firm voice.

"No running off. You remember what I've told you about holding my hand when we're in a busy place, don't you?"

"Yes, Aunt Abby," came the chorus. "We will."

"If you don't hold my hand, we'll have to leave." Abby searched their eyes, then stood up and smiled.

"Now, let's go and have some fun."

Several hours later Damien was surprised to find himself doing just that. As he watched the twins eat a huge mass of purple cotton candy, a large soda and a box of caramel corn, he was glad he'd brought them here. He had forgotten the magic of seeing wonder and awe in the eyes of children, and as he watched their joy he felt something stirring to life in his soul.

He wasn't prepared, however, when he stood with Maggie on the merry-go-round for the second time.

She looked lit from within, her face glowing with joy. Then the memories became a tight fist, squeezing his heart until he could barely stand the pain.

But he wasn't going to be allowed to escape. He spotted Laura and her children, and Cassie Johnson, coming toward them.

"Damien," she said, a welcoming smile on her face. "I'm so glad you decided to come to the rodeo."

"I thought the twins would enjoy it," he muttered.

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Laura's eyes softened. "That was kind of you," she said softly.

When she turned and smiled at Abby, he was forced to introduce her. "This is Abby," he said to Laura.

"And these are her nieces, Casey and Maggie. This is my neighbor, Laura Weston," he said to Abby.

Laura reached out and shook Abby's hand, then crouched down in front of Maggie and Casey. "How do you do?" she said. "Would you like to meet my children?"

The girls nodded shyly and looked over at the three children standing next to Laura. Damien saw the longing in their eyes.

"This is Todd, and this is Jenny." She indicated a boy of about two and a girl who was a little older than the twins. "And this is Cassie Johnson." Her hand rested on the shoulder of the older girl who looked about eight. "We were heading over to the Ferris wheel. Would you like to join us?"

Casey immediately turned pleading eyes on Abby. "Could we, Aunt Abby? I want to go with Cassie.

Her name is almost the same as mine."

Abby looked over at Damien, horribly unsure about what to do. He gave her a reassuring nod, and his eyes held hers steadily. He was trying to tell her that everything would be fine, she knew. Abby hesitated for a moment, then she smiled at Casey. "Sure, honey. We can go on the Ferris wheel again."

Cassie turned and waved to a blond woman who was standing with a dark-haired man. Abby recognized Cassie's mother, Becca, and waved at her. "Is that your dad with your mom?" Abby asked Cassie.

Cassie grinned. "Uh-uh. That's Mr. Farrell. He brought us to the rodeo today. He owns a ranch outside of Cameron and my mom takes care of his animals. She's a veterinarian. Mr. Farrell used to be a bull rider.

He showed me all about the rodeo." Her blue eyes sparkled. "I'm going to be in the rodeo when I grow up."

Abby smiled at the child, charmed by her. "Good for you, Cassie."

"We saw Shea win the barrel race," Casey piped up.

"Wasn't she awesome?" Cassie looked down at Casey and grinned.

Casey smiled back at the older girl, obviously charmed by more than the similarity in their names. She took Cassie's hand, completely unselfconsciously. "She ran so fast I could hardly see her."

"Mr. Farrell is going to teach me to be a barrel racer," Cassie said proudly.

Casey started peppering her with questions about the rodeo, and Abby watched as Cassie seemed to stand taller as she answered. When she glanced over her shoulder, she saw that Becca Johnson, the child's mother, was watching with a smile on her face.

A number of people smiled at Damien and several of them greeted him by name as they headed toward the Ferris wheel. But there was no sign of the man who'd watched them at the theater. "How long do you think we should stay here?" she asked Damien in a low voice.

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"There are fireworks after dark," he said. "Do you want to stay that long?"

"The girls would love fireworks. But is it safe to stay that late?"

"I think so. I doubt if anyone could find us in this crowd."

"Are you sure about that?" Abby heard the urgency in her voice.

"There are no guarantees in life," he said, and she thought she heard bitterness in his voice. "But I think this is a pretty safe bet."

"Then we'll stay." Abby looked at the twins, who were chattering to Jenny, Todd and Cassie. "I want them to have some good memories of this trip."

Damien laid a hand on her arm. "You've done a wonderful job, Abby. I don't think they realize anything is wrong."

His heat flowed into her, and she could feel the strength in his hand. She tried to ignore the emotions that churned inside her at his touch. "I hope so," she said in a soft voice.

They went on the Ferris wheel twice more, then watched the fireworks. Cassie had long since been reunited with her mother, and by the time the fireworks were over, the twins were almost asleep.

"I'm going to carry them to the car," Abby whispered. "Let me take one of them," Damien said. She shook her head, knowing how painful that would be for him. "That's all right. I'm used to it."

"Think, Abby. Wouldn't it be more natural for each of us to take one of the girls? We want to blend in here, remember? Not stand out."

"All right." She watched him pick Maggie up, and her heart bled a little. Damien cradled her like she was precious spun glass, but his eyes filled with pain.

Holding Casey close, she walked as quickly as she could until they reached the car. Once the girls were buckled into their car seats, she took Damien's hand.

"I know that wasn't easy for you. Thank you."

He held on to her hand for a moment, then touched her face. "It's getting easier, Abby." His voice was full of wonder. "Thank you for that."

They rode home in silence, and Abby realized she was very tired. By the time they reached Damien's house, she was almost asleep. "We're all going to sleep like the dead tonight," she murmured sleepily.

Damien gave her a glance full of suppressed need. "I hope so," he muttered.

* * *

"Who'd like to go for a swim?" Damien called as he watched the girls playing the next morning. In spite of his weariness, he'd spent another long

night filled with restless longing and unfulfilled desire. He couldn't bear to be cooped up in the house.

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And he needed to make the girls trust him enough to confide in him.

Maggie and Casey scrambled to their feet in the living room. "Can we, Damien? Really?" Casey asked breathlessly.

"Sure. I think it's time for another swimming lesson, don't you?" He struggled to keep his voice casual and light.

Both girls' eyes lit up, and they turned and ran into Abby's room. "Can we, Aunt Abby? Can we all go swimming with Damien?"

Abby emerged from her room and looked doubtfully at him. "Are you sure?"

She wasn't asking if they would be safe. Damien knew that for a fact. She was concerned about him.

Deliberately he misunderstood her. "I think it'll be fine. It's the middle of the summer, and the pool will be crowded. No one's going to notice a few more people."

A flash in her eyes told him that she realized what he was doing, but he knew she wouldn't challenge him in front of the twins. "That sounds like fun," she said, her voice strained. "All right, girls, why don't you get your bathing suits on?"

In a few minutes they were all ready to go. As he drove the short distance to the pool, he listened to the girls chatter in the back seat. They were much more relaxed and natural around him now, and he knew that soon he would be able to ask his questions, and they would trust him enough to answer.

He should have been thrilled at the prospect, but the knowledge wrapped itself around his heart and squeezed it painfully tight. Once the case was

over, he wouldn't see Abby again. Oh, he might possibly see her in court if her nieces had to testify against the person who killed Joey, but seeing her on the other side of a crowded, formal courtroom didn't count.

Her sweetness and caring had sneaked up on him, filling the dark, bleak corners of his life like a bright light that banished all the ugliness. In spite of his determination never to care about anyone again, he'd found himself caring about her. He couldn't help himself. Even a saint couldn't have stopped himself from falling for Abby Markham, and he was far from a saint.

He was in lust with her, he told himself. He refused to think of it as anything but that. And lust would pass if he ignored it long enough, just like every other need.

When they arrived at the pool and climbed out of the car, he slammed the door a little harder than necessary. The girls were out of their car seats and waiting impatiently for Abby to open the car doors as he retrieved towels and bags from the trunk.

"I can't wait," Casey shouted as she scampered next to them toward the entrance to the pool.

"I'll meet you at the pool," he said gruffly as they reached the doors to the women's dressing room.

When he strode onto the concrete deck a few minutes later, he looked around in satisfaction. He'd been right. The pool was filled with families, and no one gave him or the girls a second look.

With one exception.

Laura Weston saw him and waved her hand. Damien waved back, then turned and waited for Abby and

the girls to emerge from the locker room.

Abby realized something had changed the moment she walked out of the locker room. Damien stood waiting for them, his face set and hard. Instinctively she stopped walking and grasped the twins' hands a little harder, poised to flee.

"Damien?" she said softly.

She watched him struggle to relax. "Ready for some swimming lessons?" he asked the girls, trying to smile.

"Yeah!" they shouted together.

"Then go ahead and get into the pool," he instructed, "but stay in the shallow part." He pointed to where the zero-depth pool began, right behind him. "No deeper than your knees."

As the girls splashed into the water, Abby moved closer to Damien. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. But Laura is here with her kids. As much as I trust Laura, I don't want to spend too much time with her. The more she gets to know you, the more she'll suspect your story."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you don't act like an abused wife, Abby," he said quietly. "You're too strong."

He turned to look at her, and his gaze lingered on the curves revealed by her bathing suit. His eyes darkened and filled with an emotion that had nothing to do with his job as a protector. "Of course, maybe she'll decide that you're here for another reason."

"And what would that reason be?" she asked, feeling desire stir at the expression on Damien's face.

"What do you think?" he asked softly.

The heat in Damien's eyes as he looked at her made a hot flush start at her feet and sweep up her body.

"You told her we were with you because of a case, and that's what she'll think."

"Not a chance. Once she sees you dressed like that, she's going to change her mind."

"There's nothing wrong with the way I'm dressed," she protested. "This is a very modest bathing suit."

"I know." His eyes gleamed. "It leaves a lot to the imagination."

Trying to ignore the expression in his eyes and her immediate response to it, she turned away and pretended to look at the people lounging around the pool. "Why would your neighbor think we're involved because I'm dressed in a conservative bathing suit?"

"If you'd worn a skimpy bikini she'd know you're not my type and wouldn't have any trouble swallowing our story. But the way you're dressed..." He let his gaze drift down her body and back up again, making her tingle everywhere his gaze rested. "Only a woman who's trying to discourage a man would wear a bathing suit like that. And Laura will figure that out in no time."

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"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Ever hear the expression 'Where there's smoke there's fire'?"

"For your information, Damien Kane, this is the only bathing suit I own, so it's not a matter of encouraging or discouraging you." She welcomed her sudden anger and the way it swept aside all the other uncomfortable emotions Damien made her feel. "And besides, I got the distinct impression

a few nights ago that I could encourage you all I wanted and it wouldn't make a damn bit of difference. So don't try to play mind games with me."

She stalked off and threw their towels on a pair of vacant lounge chairs, then paused only long enough to see that although Damien had waded into the water and stood next to Maggie and Casey, he was still watching her. Hurrying to the edge of the pool, she dived in and began to swim laps. By the time she'd hauled herself out onto the side, a long time later, Casey and Maggie were churning through the water, arms and legs flailing and uncoordinated. They weren't swimming yet, but they were definitely making progress.

Her anger was long gone, burned away in her furious session in the pool. Instead, she was filled with sadness as she watched Damien with the girls. He had so much to give, if he would only allow himself to give it. And there was so much she wanted to give him, if only he would let her beyond the barriers he'd erected

He was a hard man, but underneath that hardness he cared passionately about a lot of things—their safety, his job, justice. What would it feel like, she thought with a pang of sorrow, to have him care like that about her?

As she watched him, wondering what she was going to do about her growing feelings for him, she saw Jenny, Todd and Cassie jump into the pool next to him.

The five children played together, splashing each other and Damien. He played with all of them, but Abby realized he was keeping a close eye on Casey and Maggie.

Laura Weston came over and sat down next to her. "Damien is wonderful with them, isn't he?" she said.

Abby murmured a response, watching him splash the five smiling faces surrounding him. Yes, he was wonderful with them. But she suspected that his kindness was extracting a high price. His eyes, she thought, would be full of pain.

"My kids are thrilled with the prospect of having some new playmates for a while," Laura said with a smile.

"Maggie and Casey were pretty excited themselves when they saw your kids in the yard the other day.

And they had a great time at the rodeo," she answered helplessly. Meeting the Westons yesterday was something she hadn't counted on or wanted, and she wasn't sure what to do.

"We'll have to get them together to play," Laura continued. "Cassie stays with us every day while her mother is working. They all get along pretty well as a rule, but a distraction in the form of new kids to play with is always welcome."

"The twins would like that," Abby said, feeling as if the situation was completely out of her control.

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"Believe me, you'd be doing me a favor," Laura said fervently.

After chatting about the rodeo for a few moments, Laura turned away and called to her three kids. "It looks like we interrupted a swimming lesson," she said. "Maybe we'll see you later."

"Great." Abby watched with relief as the three children swam over to the side of the pool. But when Laura told them it was time to go, she was greeted with loud protests.

Maggie and Casey added their voices to the din, until Damien finally interrupted. "Don't you want to finish your swimming lesson?" he asked the twins.

Maggie turned pleading eyes on him. "Could we do it tomorrow, Damien? We want to play with Jenny and Todd and Cassie."

"Yes," Casey shouted. "We want to play now."

Abby was watching Damien and she saw the way his eyes softened as he looked at Maggie and Casey.

"All right," he murmured after a moment. "You go ahead and play. We can swim again later."

As the five children splashed away, shouting triumphantly, Laura Weston turned to them with an apologetic look. "Sorry we disrupted your lesson."

Damien shrugged. "It's probably better for them to play with other kids for a while, anyway. Don't worry about it." He gave Laura one of his rare smiles. "Besides, it'll give me a rest. I'm getting too old for swimming lessons."

"I doubt that, Damien," she answered with a smile of her own. "I remember when you used to be out here for hours with..."

She stopped abruptly and reddened. "I'm sorry," she whispered, an appalled look on her face. "I didn't mean to dredge that up."

"It's all right." Damien's voice was tight. "Forget it."

As Laura turned away with another apology, Damien took Abby's hand and led her toward the lounge chairs that held their towels. His fingers were cold, and he gripped her hand as if it were a lifeline. After they sat down, Abby turned to Damien.

"What was that all about?"

He didn't answer for a long time. Finally he said, "Not now, Abby. I don't want to discuss it here."

He turned to look at the children playing in the pool, but he didn't let go of her hand. Sliding her fingers between them so their hands were entwined, she held on to him and hoped he could feel the comfort she wanted to give him. Because if anyone needed comforting, it was Damien Kane.

The stark angles and planes of his face were full of bleak despair, the kind of blackness that swallowed your soul and left you nothing but an empty shell. Abby knew, because once she had felt the same kind of despair. Once

she, too, had looked out at the world with the same darkness in her gaze, felt the same hopelessness that filled Damien's eyes.

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Holding tightly to Damien's hand, she looked toward the children playing in the pool. The flash of uneasiness that stabbed at her at the sight of Maggie and Casey playing in the water disappeared when she felt Damien squeeze her hand.

"They're fine." Had he read her mind? His husky voice curled around her like warm tendrils of sunlight, warming her to the core of her soul. "They know how to float, and neither of them are afraid of the water.

And besides us, there are two lifeguards watching them."

"I know." She turned to him, suddenly needing to make sure he understood that it wasn't him she mistrusted. It was herself. "It's just that I've always been nervous when they're in the water. They've learned a lot from you, but it's going to take a while for me to remember that."

"It's all right, Abby." His voice was gentle, and she looked over at him. Understanding shone out of his eyes. "You have a good reason for being nervous when they're in the water. I don't think you're being foolish or silly."

As he watched her, she saw only compassion and reassurance in his eyes. If they weren't in a public place, he would hold her and comfort her, the same way he'd done after she'd talked to Janna.

She felt her face redden as she remembered what had happened that night. Comfort had been the last thing on either of their minds. Her hand tingled and throbbed in his, and the heat from their clasped hands swept up her arm and centered deep in her belly. Gently she pulled her hand away from his, then reached casually for a towel and draped it over her shoulders. Her bathing suit was modest, but it wouldn't hide the way her body responded to his touch.

She watched Maggie and Casey as she struggled to subdue her reaction to Damien. As they played in the water, she saw Laura Weston lean over the edge of the pool and say something to all the children. In a moment Casey was scrambling out of the water, followed closely by Maggie. Both girls came running toward them, excited grins on their faces.

"Can we go over to play at Jenny's house?" they shouted as they got closer.

Abby opened her mouth to tell them no, but before she could speak she felt Damien's hand on her arm.

"Think about it, Abby," he said in a low voice. "It's only next door, and I'm sure they'd be safe there for a few hours."

"What if they aren't?" She turned to look at him, puzzled by his willingness to let the girls out of his sight.

"What if someone has found out where we are?"

"Then maybe they're better off at Laura's for a little while." His face was grim and his mouth a compressed line. "I haven't noticed anything out of the ordinary, but if someone found us I think they'd try something right away, while they still had the element of surprise. They'd expect the girls to be with us.

They'd have no reason to look anywhere else."

She looked at him doubtfully, then turned to Maggie and Casey, who had skidded to a stop in front of them. "Did Mrs. Weston invite you?" she asked, stalling for time to make up her mind.

Casey nodded vigorously. "She said we could come to their house and play, for as long as we wanted to."

Laura walked up behind the twins and gave Abby an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, I should have asked

you first, but the idea slipped out before I had a chance to think. If it's all right with you, they could come over and play for a while, then have dinner with us and watch a movie. Cassie's mom, Becca, has to work late tonight, so Cass will be there, too. We'll make it a party."

"It's up to you, Abby," Damien said, taking her hand. The pressure of his fingers told her it would be all right, that the twins would be safe at the Weston home.

Abby looked at her nieces. Their faces were trembling with hope, eagerness shining out of their eyes.

She couldn't bear to disappoint them. "I guess that would be all right," she said finally. "We'll have to go home and change first, though."

"Thank you," Casey said, throwing her arms around her aunt's neck. "We'll be good."

Abby held Casey close and swallowed hard. "I know you will, honey. I'm just going to miss you guys."

"We'll be back soon," Maggie assured her. "And you'll have Damien to keep you company."

Abby glanced over at Damien, and the heat in his eyes was almost enough to make her change her mind and tell the girls they couldn't go. Almost, but not enough. His gaze held hers for a moment, then he dropped her hand and reached for the towels on the chair.

Tossing one to each of them, he stood up and said, "We'd better get going. You don't want to be late for your adventure."

Chapter 13

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As Abby and Damien walked away from the Westons' an hour later, she looked over her shoulder one final time before the house was hidden by the surrounding trees. She must have slowed down, because Damien took her hand and pulled her closer.

"They'll be fine, Abby. They're just going to play and eat dinner, then we'll be back to get them."

"I know." Her voice was low, barely more than the sigh of the wind through the trees. "But I can't help worrying."

"If anyone has tracked us here, the last place they'd look for Maggie and Casey is the Westons' house,"

he said patiently. "Do you think I would have let them go if I thought there was the slightest chance of anything happening?"

"I know you wouldn't. But I've worried about them for so long that I can't seem to stop."

Damien halted and turned her to face him. His hands were gentle on her shoulders, reassuring and strengthening. "You're not alone anymore, Abby. I'm here to help. The burden of protecting them is mine, too, and I won't let anything or anyone hurt them."

"They are more than just a job for you, aren't they, Damien?" It wasn't what she'd intended to say, but in the sudden silence she realized how important his answer would be to her. She watched him, needing to know, waiting to see if there was anything inside him besides a colorless vacuum etched in pain.

It didn't take long to get her answer. For an instant as he stared at her, his eyes were bleak with despair.

Then he turned and headed for his house. "Damn you, yes. They're not just a job anymore. I care about them." The words sounded as if they'd been torn from his soul. "Is that what you wanted to hear? That they were able to make me feel something again? If it is, then the answer is yes."

Abby hurried to catch up with him. "Is it so bad to care about someone?" she asked as she reached his side.

When he turned to look at her, his eyes were black pools of suffering. "I would have cut my heart out if I could to stop it from feeling. I never wanted to care about anything or anyone again in my life. Especially not any children. I didn't want this job, not after I'd found out that two kids were witnesses. But it was my case, and I couldn't turn it over to someone else." A bitter, self-mocking smile flitted across his face.

"My pride wouldn't let me."

He'd reached the front door of his house, and he wrenched it open and went inside. Abby closed the door quietly behind them and followed him to the loft, where she found him leaning over the railing, staring at something on the lower level. When she followed his gaze, she realized he was looking into the unfinished nursery.

"Was it your pride that made you continue to work on the nursery?"

He didn't turn his head, didn't move at all, but his knuckles whitened on the loft railing. "Pride had nothing to do with it," he finally said, his voice cold and distant. "I do it so I won't forget."

"Surely there are better ways to remember your wife and unborn child." She laid her hand on his arm, feeling his rock-hard muscles tense under her touch.

He turned his head to look at her, his eyes as cold as Arctic snow. "I don't need to work on the room to remember them. I do it to remember why and

how they died."

A chill slowly enveloped her as she watched him, icy fingers clutching at her heart and filling her with dread. "What do you mean?" she whispered.

"I didn't want to tell you," he said, and it sounded as if the words were wrenched from him one by one.

"I swore I wouldn't. But I can't seem to stop myself. Are you sure you want to hear my story, Abby? Do you want to hear all the grisly details? Do you want to know why I can't bear to be around children, why I've tried so hard to stop myself from caring about you?"

"Yes, Damien," she said, reaching for his hand. "I do."

Instead of pulling his hand away, as she half expected him to do, he turned and twined his fingers with hers, holding on tightly. He looked at her for a moment, his eyes wary, then looked toward the nursery again.

"It wasn't just my wife and unborn child that were killed in the car accident. I had a three-year-old son, too. His name was Tyler."

Ignoring her swiftly indrawn breath, he continued, "We had just inherited this house a year earlier, and we had planned to come here for a weekend. At the last moment, I got a tip on the case I was working and decided to stay home. Carol was upset, so I told her to take Ty and come here by herself."

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He drew a deep, shaky breath and glanced over at her. "She wasn't happy about making the drive alone with a three-year-old, especially since she was six months' pregnant, but she was angry enough at me that she decided to do it." He looked away again as pain filled his eyes. "I should have gone with her, but it had gotten to the point where I found my job more interesting than my wife. My son was all that held my marriage together. Tyler begged me to come with them. He said it would be boring

without me to play with him. I gave him a kiss goodbye, strapped him in his car seat, and that was the last time I saw him."

"What happened?" Abby whispered, horrified.

"There was an accident on the way here. The car went off the road and down one of the cliffs. By the time the car hit the bottom, there was barely enough left of it to identify. But there was enough." His mouth thinned. "Enough to prove that they were pushed off the road by another car. I eventually caught the man responsible. He was involved in the case I was working on. He told me he thought I was in the car, too." He looked down at the nursery again. "I was supposed to be." His voice was filled with guilt.

"You can't blame yourself for their deaths," she said, appalled. "If you had been in the car, the only thing different would be that you would be dead, too."

"If I had been in the car, it might never have happened," he retorted. "I've been trained to avoid situations like that. I would have known what to do. Carol never had a chance."

"You're making an awful lot of assumptions," she said, turning him to face her. "You're not God. You can't think you would have prevented that from happening."

"I would have done a hell of a lot more if I'd been with them, where I belonged."

"Maybe it was your wife who made the wrong decision. Did you ever think of that? Maybe she should have stayed with you that weekend instead of going away by herself."

"I'm not going to make Carol the guilty one, Abby. She's dead and can't defend herself. I'm the one who chose to stay home. I'm the one who didn't go with the rest of my family. And I'm the one who's still alive."

"That's why you're guilty, isn't it? Because you're alive and they're dead."

"I'm guilty because I'm responsible. It's very simple and straightforward."

She gripped his arms and held on tight. "Is this what your wife would have wanted?" she demanded.

"Would she have wanted you to destroy the rest of your life because of what happened to her?"

"It wasn't just her, Abby. It was Tyler and his sister or brother who died, too. I destroyed my whole family because I was obsessed with my job."

"And you've paid for it," she said passionately. "You've paid for it with three years of hell."

"Are you telling me to forget about them?" he asked. "To forget what happened to them?"

"Of course not. But you have to stop blaming yourself. You have to allow yourself to heal and get on with your life."

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"Why are you saying this to me, Abby? Why do you care what I do with my life?"

Her heart contracted in her chest, then began to pound out an uneven rhythm. "Because I care about you, Damien. I care what happens to you."

"Am I another one of your charity cases, like Angus and all the other creatures you take under your wing?"

Slowly she shook her head. "You're not a charity case, Damien," she whispered. "I didn't want to care about you. I didn't want to feel what you're making me feel. I'm still not sure I do, but I can't seem to help myself."

He reached out and touched her face, trailing his fingers down to the pulse beating wildly in her neck.

"What a pair we are, Abby Markham," he muttered. "You and the twins made me feel things I'd sworn never to feel again. I wanted to hate you for it, but I couldn't. I couldn't even force myself to turn the case over to someone else."

"And now?" she asked.

"I don't know," he whispered. "Every time I look at Maggie and Casey, I hurt all over again. Being with them has been like riding a roller coaster, constantly feeling my stomach drop out from under me. I look at them and wonder what Tyler would have looked like now, listen to them and wonder what he would have said to his brother or sister. He would have been a year older than they are. Every time I see them, I remember that I'll never see him again."

"Oh, Damien." She stepped toward him and wrapped her arms around him, holding him close. "I'm so sorry we had to hurt you. I'm sorry that Janna took the girls to work that day, and I'm sorry that it had to be your case. But I'm not sorry that I met you. I could never be sorry about that."

He held her close for a long time, then finally leaned back and looked in her face. "And what about what happened at Shea's cabin? Are you sorry about that?"

"I could never regret making love with you, Damien," she whispered. "Never." The words were on her lips, words telling him that she loved him, that she would always love him, but instead of speaking she kissed him. She couldn't tell him that she wouldn't regret it no matter the consequences. Damien wasn't ready to hear the words, so until he was, she would keep them locked in her heart.

He hesitated for a moment, then crushed her to him. "I can't seem to stop wanting you, Abby. I know I'm not the person you need in your life, but even knowing that I could endanger you and the twins hasn't been able to stop me."

"You're exactly who I need in my life, Damien." Her words were muffled against the front of his shirt as she clung to him, her face buried in his chest.

The thundering of his heart reassured her, told her that he wasn't completely indifferent toward her in spite of his harsh words.

"Why do you think you need me, Abby? Is it because you collect the walking wounded? Am I another one of your projects?"

His low voice was filled with pain and scorn, and Abby loosened her grip so she could look up at him. "I need you because of what you do for me," she said, not letting her gaze waver from his. "You've shown me that I don't always have to be in control, that sometimes it's all right to let someone else be the strong

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one. No one's ever done that for me before, Damien. I was always the one who coped, the person who had the answers. You've been there for me when I needed you, and no one ever has before." She reached up and touched his face. "You're one of the strongest people I know. That's why I need you."

"I wish I could be stronger when it comes to you," he muttered. "It would be better for you if I was strong enough to walk away without a second look. But God help me, I can't do that." He brought both hands up to cup her face, to hold her still. "I want you too much, Abby. I've never wanted anyone as much as I want you."

"Then we both want the same thing," she whispered. "And there can't be anything wrong with that."

He looked at her for another moment, then bent his head to kiss her. Damien was a complex man, one who had been badly wounded. Was she strong enough to give him what he needed, to take what he had to give? She wasn't sure. But when he kissed her, all her doubts melted and flowed away like chocolate in the sun. Nothing had ever felt so right. She had never felt so whole.

"Please don't stop," she whispered, turning her head to press her lips against his throat. His pulse leaped against her mouth, sending ribbons of heat into her belly.

"Stop?" Damien's voice was shaky. "I don't think I could stop if my life depended on it. Do you know how scared that makes me?"

"We're safe now." She drank in the scent of his hair and skin, burying her face in his neck. "Nobody knows where we are." She lifted her head and stared at him, watching his dark eyes get even darker.

"We're all alone for the next few hours."

"Are you sure this is what you want, Abby?" He held her away from him with trembling hands. "Very sure?"

"I've never wanted anything more in my life." Very deliberately she reached out and began to unbutton his shirt. "Ever."

His hands closed over hers and stilled them. "Then I want to do this right. I want to take the time I didn't take the other night." Clasping one of her hands, he led her into his bedroom. "We're not going to rush today, Abby."

He bent his head and kissed her again. It started out as a gentle kiss, restrained and tender. His lips brushed over hers, tasting and lightly caressing. But the embers of desire roared to life inside her at his touch, and she opened her mouth to him with a little moan. He froze for a moment, then kissed her with a frantic need that swept away all thoughts of restraint and patience.

His tongue delved into her mouth, twining with hers in a dance as old as time. When he finally lifted his head, she was breathless, her legs trembling and barely able to hold her up. He lowered her onto the bed and followed her down onto the coverlet, reaching for the buttons on her shirt and pushing them through the holes with fingers that trembled.

"I don't know how patient I can be," he whispered. "Every time I touch you, I feel like I'm going to explode. I need to look at you, to see you in the

sunlight."

He eased the shirt off her shoulders and slid it gently down her arms. The lacy bra she wore didn't conceal much from his gaze, and she felt herself reddening as he looked at her. Finally he raised his eyes

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and touched her face. "Why are you blushing?"

"I guess because I'm not used to men looking at my body," she said tartly, trying to hide her embarrassment.

His eyes crinkled, and one of his too infrequent smiles lit his face. "Don't sound so deprived. I'm more than happy to make up for that lack in your life."

Feeling herself get even redder, she reached for his shirt. "I want to look at you, too," she whispered.

He stilled as she struggled with the buttons and finally pulled his shirt off his arms. Laying her palm on his chest, she felt his muscles jump beneath her fingers. His skin was smooth and hot, and when she tentatively flexed her fingers, tangling them in the black, coarse hairs, he closed his eyes and clenched his hands on her shoulders.

"You're making it hard for me to go slow, Abby," he muttered. Pulling her on top of him, he fumbled with the clasp of her bra until it suddenly opened and fell away. Sweeping it out of his way, he reached out and cupped her breasts in his hands, allowing his thumbs to brush delicately across her nipples.

Pleasurespasm through her, making her arch into him. He responded by bending his head and taking one nipple into his mouth, tasting her until she thought she would go mad with needing him.

"Please, Damien," she gasped. "You're driving me crazy."

He raised his head. "Please what, Abby? Please stop?" He lowered his head again and flicked his tongue across her other nipple.

She shuddered and reached for the button of his jeans, but his hand closed over hers and stopped her.

"If you touch me, this will be over much too quickly. And today I want it to last forever." He smoothed his lips over her neck, teasing her earlobe with his teeth as he deftly unfastened her shorts. In a few seconds he'd eased them down her legs. She heard him draw in his breath as he stared at her.

"You're so lovely," he murmured, trailing his fingers down from her breasts to her belly. Heat curled inside her at his touch, and she reached for him again. He managed to stay out of her reach as he bent to kiss her. By the time he raised his head, nothing existed but his touch and his kiss. All she could do was hold on to him as he moved his mouth over her, kissing and caressing every inch of her. She began trembling as sensation coiled tighter and tighter inside of her. Her whole world focused only on Damien and the magic he was working with his hands and his mouth.

Suddenly he sat up and unfastened his jeans. His breathing was harsh and jagged, and when she opened her eyes to watch him, she saw that his hands were shaking so badly that he could barely get the button through the hole. Before he dropped the jeans on the floor, though, he pulled something out of his pocket.

Catching her eye, he held up the square foil packet and smiled slightly. "I'm not putting you at risk a second time. When we stopped for groceries, I made a quick detour to the pharmacy department."

A few moments later he turned to her and kissed her again, his mouth hungry and urgent on hers. He touched her again, making her cry out his name. When he moved over her, she cupped his buttocks in her hands and lifted up to meet him. The world exploded in a blaze of light as he thrust into her.

All she could do was cling to him as she spun out of control, spasm after spasm racking her body. When he shuddered and groaned her name, she held on to him tightly, powerless to do anything but let the powerful currents tumble her head over heels into oblivion.

When she was able to sort out sensations again, she realized that his hand cupped her breast and hers curled around his buttock. Flexing her fingers, she felt his muscles relax under her hand. Utterly content, she wrapped her other arm around his back and held him close to her. As far as she was concerned, they could stay like this forever.

"Next time," his low voice murmured into her ear, "we really do have to take it slow."

Damien watched as she struggled to open her eyes. The smile she gave him was sleepy and satisfied.

"I'm not sure I know the meaning of that word when it comes to you," she said, her voice low and throaty. "I'm not sure I want to know."

Her words gave him a fierce pleasure, even though he knew the relationship wouldn't endure beyond the end of this case. Abby might think she needed him now, but when she was back in the rhythm of her daily life, she would realize how futile it was to think of a future together. He couldn't give her the things he was sure she needed and wanted, and he refused to allow her to tie herself to him out of gratitude.

But he didn't have to think about that now. Not with Abby lying so close to him, doing those interesting things with her hands. Not with the sun shining on the bed, gilding her skin with a gleaming color that seemed to match the liquid gold of her hair. No, he wouldn't think about the future today. Today belonged to him and Abby.

Raising himself on his elbows, he looked down into her face. Something moved in his chest at the trust he saw there, and the happiness. There was another emotion swirling in her eyes, one that stopped his heart, but he knew he had to be mistaken. Bending to kiss her, he said, "I've always said, if at first you don't succeed, try and try again."

He watched her eyes as she processed his words, and when her face turned a delicate pink, he bent to kiss her again. "What do you think?" he murmured into her mouth.

"I think I like your motto. Everyone should have something to aim for."

Rolling onto his back, he settled her on top of him. "I'm not going to make any promises, but let's see if we can go slow this time."

She smiled down at him as she trailed her finger down his chest. "I'm game if you are."

He moved against her, letting her feel how game he was. "What do you think?"

"I think I'm crazy about you, Damien Kane."

* * *

I think I'm crazy about you, Damien Kane.

Her words echoed in his mind two hours later as he watched her sleep. It was a casual phrase, he told himself, one that was essentially meaningless. People said it all the time, meaning nothing more than that they liked your sense of humor, or your sense of style or the way you dressed.

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Or the way you made love to them.

It didn't mean anything more than that. It couldn't. He didn't want Abby to feel anything more for him than a mild affection, because he didn't feel anything more than that for her.

Liar.

All right, so maybe he did. But that didn't mean it was right, or that he would allow it to continue.

Because he couldn't give Abby what she wanted most. And after seeing her with her nieces for the past several days, he had no doubt what that was. Abby hungered for a family and children of her own. It was on her face, in her eyes every time she looked at Maggie or Casey.

And Abby would be the greatest mother in the world. He knew it as certainly as he knew the sun would rise the next morning. So because he cared about her, he wouldn't hold her. Because he could never give her what she needed.

How could he ever have another child after what he'd done to Tyler and his unborn child? No, Abby didn't belong with him, not in the long run. Almost unconsciously he pulled her closer. But he would take everything she was willing to give until it had to end. And he would give her whatever was left inside him.

God knew it was little enough, but Abby didn't seem to notice. And if that made him a selfish bastard, so be it. That was old news anyway.

He must have woken her when he'd pulled her against him, because she opened her eyes and smiled up at him. "How did we do that time?" she whispered.

His heart trembled as he gazed down at her. Her cheeks were flushed and her hair was tousled. Her sleepy eyes were satiated and satisfied, and she looked at him as if he were the center of the universe.

"Better," he murmured. "But you know what they say."

Her lips curved into a smile. "What's that?"

"Practice makes perfect."

Stretching up, she kissed him on the mouth. "Then what are we waiting for?"

Reluctantly he eased himself away from her and sat up. "We're waiting for later. It's almost time to go and get the twins."

Panic flooded her eyes as she shot up beside him, grabbing frantically for her clothes. "Are we late? Did something happen while I was sleeping?"

He eased the clothes out of her clenched fist and kissed her hand. "Take it easy, Abby. Nothing happened and we're not late. But if we don't get up now, we're going to be." He pressed her hand against the throbbing evidence of his need for her. "There's something about the combination of you and a bed that does something to me."

She caressed him as she gazed down at him. When she met his eyes again, she was smiling. "Hold that thought, will you?"

"I'd rather have you hold it," he said as he pulled on his jeans. Easing them up over his hips, he tugged

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the zipper up gingerly. He stood, careful not to move, as he watched her dress quickly and carelessly.

"You'd better comb your hair before we go over to Laura's," he teased. "Or she's going to have a pretty good idea of how we spent the afternoon."

He watched her blush at his words as she headed for the bathroom, but it didn't stop her from turning around and saying, "Then you'd better wipe that self-satisfied grin off your face. That'd be even more of a dead giveaway."

She emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later, her hair neatly combed and her face washed.

Instead of the smile he expected, though, she looked solemn and almost scared.

"There's something I need to talk to you about," she said, licking her lips.

His heart contracted. Here it was, the 'it was wonderful but I'd rather be just friends' speech. Not that he hadn't been expecting it. He just wasn't expecting it so soon.

"Let's go sit down," he said, careful not to touch her.

She hesitated in front of the couch, looking like she'd rather turn around and ma out the door and never stop . "Are you sure we don't have to go over to get Maggie and Casey now? We could talk later."

"I'm sure." He glanced at his watch to reassure her. "They probably aren't finished with the movie. The twins won't want to come home yet."

"No. No, they wouldn't." She stared at him, and he could read the indecision in her eyes.

"Come here and tell me, Abby," he said, holding out his hand to her. "The anticipation is almost always worse than the actual event."

"Not this time," she muttered, but she sat down next to him on the couch. He tried to pull her close, but she deliberately moved away from him until he could no longer touch her. The bitter taste of fear rose up in his throat as he tried to tell himself it was for the best. It would save him the job of breaking it off later.

"I haven't been completely truthful with you about why I'm so protective of Maggie and Casey."

"What you said was explanation enough, Abby. You don't have to go into the details of your childhood."

She shook her head. "This isn't about my childhood, Damien. I put that behind me a long time ago. It may explain who I am, but I haven't let it rule me for a long time." She looked down, and he saw her swallow. "This is about me."

"What is it?" He longed to hold her, but wouldn't allow himself to move.

"I was engaged five years ago." Sadness flickered in her eyes.

Ignoring the jealousy that blazed up inside him, he said, "What happened?"

She faced him, although he could see that she wanted to look away. "I broke it off. He..." She paused, and pain filled her face. "He resented the time I spent with Janna and the twins. They were newborns, and Janna's husband had walked out on her. She was alone, and she desperately needed my help. So I

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told Bruce that I couldn't abandon them, and he told me to make a choice. He didn't want kids of his own, and he wasn't about to let his wife spend all her time with someone else's kids. It was him or the brats, as he called them."

Now she looked away. "I never saw him again. And I never regretted my decision for a minute. I couldn't have lived with myself if I had turned my back on Janna or Maggie and Casey. That's really why I'm so protective of them. I'm all they have. And they're all I have."

"You didn't have to tell me this, Abby."

"I know. But you were honest with me. Brutally honest. The least I can do is tell you the complete truth."

"This Bruce sounds like he was a loser."

She gave him a tremulous smile. "He was. I was young, though, and I trusted him. I don't regret any of it.

But it made me realize how few men there are who would be willing to take on that kind of responsibility.

The twins will always be a part of my life."

And he was a man who didn't want anything to do with children again. His mouth twisted. "I get the message. But don't worry, I already knew there was no long term when it came to you and I. I can't give you what you want, and no one can give me what I need."

She stared at him, appalled. "That's not what I meant at all."

"Then what did you mean?" he said, refusing to allow even a glimmer of hope.

"I simply wanted you to know all the reasons I've acted the way I did. I know you think I've been irrational sometimes when it comes to the twins. If I hadn't insisted on leaving Las Vegas, we wouldn't be here now."

"I don't regret any of this, Abby." And he realized it was the truth.

She looked away. "Whether you regret it or not, you deserve my complete honesty. I wanted you to know everything."

"I guess it's a good thing. I won't go getting any crazy ideas about happily ever after," he said bitterly.

She faced him again, her eyes drenched with pain. "Can't you accept that you deserve some happiness?"

"You're so good with them, Damien," she whispered. "They trust you completely. You have so much to give to a child."

"Not my own child, Abby. Never again."

Her eyes swimming, she reached for his hand. "Don't shut yourself off from life. Don't forbid yourself any pleasure. You don't deserve that kind of punishment."

"Punishment has nothing to do with it. I'm protecting myself from pain," he said, standing up and moving away from her. He couldn't accept the easy way out. He couldn't allow himself to accept the gift she seemed to be giving him.

"You didn't need to tell me this, Abby. You didn't need to apologize for taking care of Maggie and

Casey," he said. "The way you were willing to step between those girls and danger is the first thing I noticed about you." He felt his mouth twist into a bitter grimace. "There aren't too many people I respect or admire, but I respected the hell out of you when you told me to get lost. Not too many people are willing to take that kind of responsibility."

He watched her for a moment and felt part of him shrivel up and die. "I'm glad you told me, though. I want to know everything about you. And no matter what I think about children, I want you to know that I don't regret a minute of the time rye spent with you and the girls." Reaching across the gap that loomed between them, he pulled her into his arms and held her close. "If I hadn't spent these days with Maggie and Casey, I wouldn't have spent them with you, either. And I could never regret that."

She gripped him tightly, as if she never wanted to let him go. "I don't regret it either, Damien. No matter what happens. Never forget that."

"Nothing's going to happen," he said, deliberately misunderstanding her. He couldn't deal with the issue of what might happen between the two of them. Not just yet. "Maggie and Casey are going to tell me what they saw, we'll arrest the person who killed Joey and everything'll be fine."

Abby leaned against him and he was content to hold her close. After a long time he murmured, "You don't always have to be strong, Abby. Sometimes it's good to let someone else be the strong one."

At that she raised her head and looked at him. "I know," she whispered. "You've shown me that. But who's strong for you, Damien?"

He wanted to tell her that she could be. He longed to bury himself inside her so deeply that he could never find his way out, to lose himself to Abby. But instead, he stood up and pulled her to her feet to stand beside him. "It's about time we went and got the girls. I know you must be getting nervous about them."

She looked at him in surprise, then gave him a sad smile. "I'd almost forgotten they weren't here until you reminded me. I guess that means I really do trust you with their safety."

"Come on, let's go over to Laura's," he urged. There wouldn't be any more talk about what was happening between him and Abby once the girls were back in the house, and that was good. He couldn't bear thinking about it.

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Chapter 14

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An hour and a half later, Abby watched Maggie and Casey chattering to Damien about their afternoon with the Weston children. They had told the stories to both of the adults at least three times each, but Damien was listening intently, as if he'd never heard them before. Abby's heart expanded as she watched him with the girls.

She marveled at how well he was able to hide his pain. Now that she knew what had happened to his son, she was amazed that he could act so natural when he was with the twins. And as she watched Maggie and Casey stare up at him with adoring eyes, she felt her heart begin to break.

The girls would tell him what they'd seen. She knew it with certainty. They trusted Damien completely,

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and when he asked them what had happened, they would tell him.

She wanted him to solve his case. Truly she did. But a thick lump swelled in her throat when she thought about what would happen once the twins told Damien the truth.

Damien had been very careful not to say anything about the future, about what might happen after his case was solved and they no longer had any need for protection. Was he planning on disappearing out of her life forever? Would he give their fragile relationship a chance to blossom into something more permanent?

He would if she had anything to do with it, Abby vowed. Damien was a part of her now and always would be. She had discovered something when she woke up this afternoon and found him holding her so tenderly. She loved him and she always would. Damien had touched something inside of her

that she thought had died when she'd said goodbye to Bruce, and now she knew she could never live without him.

Maggie and Casey leaned against Damien, and Abby knew that with the least encouragement they'd climb into his lap. She saw the girls exchange a look, then Maggie leaned back so she could look at Damien.

"Jenny told us that you have a secret fort behind your house," she said.

Abby saw Damien freeze. Then he raised his hand and brushed Maggie's hair away from her face. Abby saw his fingers tremble.

"I do," he said softly. "Would you like to see it?"

"Yes, yes," Maggie cried.

"Me, too," added Casey.

"How about we take a look at it tomorrow?"

Maggie's lower lip protruded. "We want to look at it now." Abby hurried over to the girls. "Tomorrow, girls," she said firmly. "It's late and time for you to go to bed."

Their protests were halfhearted, and as she led them away she looked over her shoulder at Damien. He sat on the couch and watched them, agony etched on his face. His eyes haunted her thoughts as she watched the twins change their clothes and brush their teeth.

He was sitting at the table in the kitchen when she walked out of the twins' room, a glass of soda in front of him. He looked up when she walked into the room and gave her a strained smile. "I put a frozen pizza in the oven. I hope that's all right."

"I'm not particularly hungry. That'll be fine."

Abby sat down at the table and looked down at her hands, clasped tightly in front of her. "I'm sorry,"

she whispered.

"Don't be. It's perfect. The fort is a depression in the rock behind the house that Tyler and I discovered.

I'll take the girls there tomorrow, then they can tell me what happened that day at Janna's office."

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"There must be another way." She reached out and took his hand, needing to touch him.

He turned her hand over and twined their fingers, then brought her hand to his lips. "There might be, but this is the opportunity I've been handed. I'll make it work."

"Oh, Damien, I'd do anything to protect you from this pain," she said, her heart breaking.

"I don't want to be protected, Abby. This is my job, remember? This is why we came to Cameron, so the girls would trust me enough to tell me the truth."

"There are other things in life besides your job," she cried, tempted to shake him. "You don't have to tear yourself apart like this for your job."

"It's not just about my job," he answered, and his hand tightened on hers. "It's about you and Maggie and Casey. The sooner I find out what they know, the safer you'll all be."

"I don't want you to be hurt," she said, her voice a whisper. At that he stood up and gathered her into his arms. "It'll be all right, Abby. I can handle it. You and the twins are what's important."

No, she wanted to cry. *Your pain is equally important*. But she knew he would never agree. So she swallowed hard and leaned back to look at him. "Tell me what I can do to help."

He smoothed her hair away from her face, and she quivered inside at his touch.

"You don't have to do a thing, Abby. All I'm going to do is sit in an uncomfortable hollow in a rock and talk to them." His mouth curled up in a slight smile. "Although some cookies might help. The girls and I can bond over chocolate."

"I think I can manage cookies."

Damien gently set her away from himself. "Ready for that pizza?"

She nodded. He clearly didn't want to talk about tomorrow, so she grabbed plates and set the table.

For the rest of the evening they managed to avoid any talk about the case or what would happen the next day. After eating the pizza, they sat on the couch and talked about themselves and the books they liked to read, the kinds of movies they liked to watch and their opinions of the Californiasports teams.

They deliberately kept the conversation light, Abby thought as she watched Damien's mouth curl into a smile as he talked about a movie he'd seen recently. They both seemed to know that their time together was precious, not to be wasted on worrying about tomorrow.

Finally, stifling a yawn, Damien stood up and extended a hand to Abby. "I've had it for today. You coming up to bed?"

His eyes took on a gleam as he spoke, and Abby felt a sudden rush of heat. "What exactly did you have in mind?" she asked carefully.

Damien pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her. The kiss he gave her was full of longing and desire, but after a few minutes he pulled away. "That's up to you. I don't know how you feel about making love while the girls are in the house."

"It didn't seem to make any difference to you the first time," she teased.

His eyes darkened, and she saw the hot passion swirling underneath his carefully casual surface. "The first time I wasn't thinking about anything but you, and the fact that I would die if I didn't touch you. I'm trying to be rational while it's still possible."

Abby licked her lips as she watched him. Her whole body was throbbing with need. She wanted him.

How many more nights would they have together?

"The girls are very sound sleepers," she murmured. "But they do wander during the night, and sometimes they end up in my bed."

He swallowed hard. His hands tightened on her shoulders, then slid down to her hands. "Then I'll kiss you good-night at your bedroom door."

"That's not what I meant," she protested. Reaching for him again, she pulled his head down to hers.

"What I was trying to say is that I didn't think we should sleep together," she murmured against his lips. "I didn't say anything at all about what might happen before we fall asleep."

His hands framed her face as he stared down at her, hunger etched in the angles of his mouth and cheeks. "I can think of a lot of things to do before we fall asleep."

"I was hoping you might," she whispered.

He kissed her again as desire flared hot between them, pressing her so close that she couldn't mistake his need for her. Then he took her hand and led her up the stairs toward the bedroom.

Abby awoke to feel the sunshine streaming in through the window, warming her face with its early-morning heat. The house was silent, and as she turned over in bed the scent of her and Damien's lovemaking wrapped itself around her. Scrambling out of the covers, she hurried across the hall to look in the door of the twins' room.

"They're still asleep." Damien's voice came from the loft where he had slept. She spun around at the sound, only to look down at herself when she saw the light in his eyes.

Her nightshirt barely covered her, and her face flamed bright red as she turned to scurry into her room.

Damien's chuckling voice trailed her there. "Now, that's the way I like to start my morning."

As she changed into a pair of worn denim shorts and a light blue T-shirt, Damien's face lingered in her mind. He had propped himself up on one elbow on the couch, a wide grin crinkling the corners of his eyes. His face had looked alive and full of devilish amusement, without a trace of the shadows that usually haunted him

That's the way you should always look, Damien, she told him silently. Full of life, not pain. But would he ever be able to relinquish that pain? She didn't know. She only knew that she wanted to help him try.

When she emerged from her room a few minutes later, Damien was already up and dressed. But a light still lingered in his eyes. "Decide you could use some more clothes?"

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"I forgot that I wasn't wearing my pajama bottoms," she answered with all the dignity she could muster.

"When I didn't hear the girls, I was afraid something was wrong and I didn't stop to think."

"They're just tired. They were busy yesterday." The smile that still lingered in the corners of his mouth began to fade. "Let's go down to the kitchen so we don't wake them up."

She nodded and headed for the stairs, the bubbles in her mood beginning to flatten. Today was the day he would take them to the fort and question them, and she wasn't any more eager than Damien for them to wake up and set the process in motion.

An hour later she heard the sound of the girls' voices drifting down from the second story, and her hand tightened around her coffee mug. Then suddenly the twins were at the loft railing.

"Hi, Aunt Abby," Casey shouted as she ran down the stairs and skidded to a stop next to her aunt. "Hi, Damien."

Maggie followed her sister into the room and went over to Damien. "Can we go to the fort now?"

"How about we have breakfast first?" he said. Abby was amazed at how unconcerned he could act.

Damien smiled at the girls as they ate, telling them jokes and making them laugh. Tension hummed beneath the surface, but it was carefully hidden from Maggie and Casey.

When they finished eating, Damien said, "Who's ready for an adventure?"

"I am, Damien !I am!" both girls shouted.

"Get your shoes on, then, and we'll go find a fort." Abby's hands shook as she filled one plastic bag with chocolate-chip cookies and another with juice boxes. "Isn't there another way?" she said softly to Damien as he stared out the window at the hills behind the house.

"No, Abby, there isn't." His voice was equally soft, but he didn't look back at her. "This is perfect, in fact."

He slowly turned around, and she drew her breath in at the sorrow in his eyes. "Maybe it's time I faced the fort, anyway. I haven't been there since Tyler died."

"Oh, Damien," she whispered, and reached out to pull him close.

He resisted for a moment, then he wrapped his arms around her as if he would never let her go. They clung together until they heard Casey's excited voice at the top of the stairs. Then Damien stepped away, bending to kiss her cheek. "Thank you, Abby." He managed a smile. "It's all right. I'll be fine."

The next second he turned to Maggie and Casey and looked them over with mock seriousness. "Hmm, you look like you're ready for an adventure. I've got the supplies." He held up the bags with the cookies and juice. "Ready to go?"

Damien watched the girls race out the door, then followed them more slowly. His heart began to pound as he headed away from the house, but he ignored the pain that hovered around in his chest. It was past time he faced the bittersweet memories that Tyler's fort held. He tried to repeat the mantra that it was part of his job, but with a jolt he realized it wasn't true. He was facing those memories for Maggie and Casey.

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The two girls had sneaked past his barriers and burrowed their way straight into his heart. What had started out as an unwelcome part of his job, a necessary evil to find out who had killed Joey Stefanetto, had evolved into an obsession that these children not be hurt. And compared to that, facing down the ghosts that waited at the fort was insignificant.

He stood with the girls at the edge of the bowl-shaped depression in the rock that constituted Tyler's fort and waited for the pain, but it didn't come. Instead, he pictured Tyler, playing in the fort and inviting him in with his huge grin. A lump swelled in his throat as he remembered his son, happy and carefree, smiling at his father with love in his eyes.

"Is this the fort?" Casey asked, interrupting his thoughts.

"Yeah, it is." He turned to her with relief. "What do you think?"

"It's cool. Can we go in there?" Maggie asked eagerly.

"You sure can." He lowered himself into the depression, then reached up and lifted the girls down one at a time. Then he sat on one of the scooped-out areas on the side of the bowl.

The girls promptly sat down next to him. "What's this fort for?" Maggie asked.

"It's for secrets." Both girls stared up at him, and he felt his heart constrict again. But this time it wasn't with pain for his son. It was with love for these two children, and the need to keep them safe. "I come here whenever I have a secret I need to share."

He reached out and took their hands. "Once I've shared my secret with this fort, then it's not a secret anymore. And I don't have to worry about it. Then the fort has to worry about it."

Casey giggled. "That's silly, Damien. Forts don't worry."

He wrinkled his face. "Do you think the fort's been lying to me all this time?"

Maggie considered the question for a moment, then she shook her head. "I think it's the fairies who live in the fort that do the worrying."

He nodded solemnly. "I think you're probably right, Mags ." Drawing both girls closer, he pulled them against his side. "Why don't you try it? You have a secret you're sharing, don't you?"

For a moment he could see in their eyes that they wanted to deny it. But then Maggie slowly nodded.

"We have a secret, Damien. I think it's a bad secret."

"Can you tell me about it?"

Maggie looked at Casey, and once again he sensed a silent communication between them. Then both girls looked at him and nodded.

"If we tell you, will the fairies take it away?" Casey asked.

"If you tell me, I'll make sure you don't have to worry about it anymore." He pulled the twins closer, and suddenly Maggie climbed on his lap.

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"We were at work with Mommy," she began. Then she stopped and looked over at Casey.

"We went outside," Casey said. Her lip trembled. "We weren't supposed to. Mommy told us to stay in her office. But we saw a rabbit, and we wanted to catch it. So we ran outside when Mommy wasn't looking."

"And then what happened?" he prompted softly, tightening his arms around them.

"The rabbit got away." Maggie looked at him, and her hazel eyes filled with tears. "Then we saw the man in Mommy's office. He was there before, a long time ago. We don't like him, because he yelled. Some and Casey hid in the bushes."

"What did you see?"

Neither of the girls spoke for a moment, then Casey said, "He was talking to another man. Then he started yelling, just like he did that other time. Then there was a loud noise, and the other man fell on the ground." Her eyes filled with tears, too. "There was red all over the ground. He made some funny noises, then he was quiet."

"What did you do then?" Damien asked.

"We ran back to Mommy." Maggie looked up at him and the tears spilled over her face. "We stayed with her until it was time to go home, except for when the yelling man came to talk to her. Then we hid."

"Then Mommy told us we were going to stay with Aunt Abby, and we were glad. We thought Mommy would be with us, too, and we could tell her what happened. But then Mommy left. She had to go away for her job."

"Why didn't you tell your aunt Abby what had happened?"

Tears streaked down Maggie's face. "We were afraid that the yelling man would make a loud noise at Aunt Abby, too. We didn't want her to be all red. So we didn't tell her."

Damien crushed the girls against him, and when they twined their arms around his neck, he never wanted to let them go. They sat together for a long time, absorbing the heat from the rock surrounding them, until Casey leaned back and said, "Are those cookies you have in that bag?"

As the girls ate cookies and drank juice, Damien marveled again at the resiliency of children. They had witnessed a murder and been frightened for over a week, but now that they thought the fairies were going to worry for them, they were happy again. He'd make sure their mother got some counseling for them, but Maggie and Casey were going to be fine.

They stayed in the fort for the rest of the morning, playing the same kind of make-believe games that Damien had once played with Tyler. But instead of the pain he had braced for, it brought him a peace that was unexpected. Tyler seemed close to him here in the fort, and for the first time since the accident, his son's memory brought him comfort.

Finally he said to the twins, "Maybe we should go back and see how your aunt Abby is doing."

"Okay." The girls waited to be lifted out of the fort, then scrambled back down the hillside with him.

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As they approached the house, he saw that Abby wasn't alone. For a moment fear gripped him, then he realized that Laura Weston was with her. The Weston kids and the Johnson girl played on the patio and the twins ran up the steps to join them.

Abby stood up and took his hands when he walked in. He wanted to kiss away the worry he saw in her eyes, but instead smiled reassuringly.

"All three of us survived," he murmured.

Laura stood up. "I've got to get going. I just stopped over to see if Abby needed anything from the grocery store."

Abby turned to the other woman. "Thanks again, Laura. I enjoyed talking to you."

Laura's smile was understanding. "Me, too. We'll have to do it again."

They both watched Laura leave, then Abby turned to Damien. "What happened?"

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her, then told her what the girls had said. "They did see the murder. They can identify the murderer, and I think he knows it. But they're going to be fine now."

"Why didn't they say anything to me?"

"They were trying to protect you, Abby." He smoothed her hair away from her face. "They're smart girls.

They didn't want what happened to Joey to happen to you."

"Do they know that Joey died?"

He heard the horror in her voice and held her more tightly. "I don't think so. But they're smart enough to know it was something bad."

Abby stepped away from him and looked out at the girls happily playing on the patio. "What do we do now?"

"I'm going to call the office and tell them what I've found out. Once we've identified the killer and arrested him, I'll take you back to Las Vegas."

"What about Janna?" she whispered.

"From what the girls said, I don't think she has any idea what happened. As long as she doesn't know anything, Janna should be safe. And it doesn't sound like the murderer is someone she works with, although the twins said they'd seen him once before."

"But she sounded so funny when I talked to her."

"I know you're worried, but we can't think about Janna right now. We have to take care of Maggie and Casey."

Abby managed to nod. "I know you're right."

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He pressed a hard kiss on her lips. "Let me make that phone call, okay? I want to get this set in motion."

A few minutes later he was assured that another agent was on his way to Janna's office. With any luck they'd have the identity of the killer that day. They might even be lucky enough to arrest him on the site.

He was just turning back to Abby when the phone rang.

"Hello." His voice was cautious.

"Kane, this is Devlin McAllister. I thought you'd want to know that my deputies spotted two cars in town this morning with Nevada plates. The registration on both checked out to Las Vegas. And the men in the cars didn't look like tourists."

Damien's gut tightened. "Thanks, Devlin. I appreciate the warning."

"No problem. I'll stick close to your house tonight. If you need anything, you call. I'll be there in two minutes."

"I will."

He closed the phone carefully, then turned to Abby. "It sounds like our friends have figured out that we're not at Shea's anymore."

Her face paled. "Are they in town?"

"That was Devlin. He said his deputies have seen a couple of Nevada plates, and the drivers didn't look like tourists."

"What do we do now?" she asked, looking out at the twins on the patio.

"We wait."

* * *

Abby had wanted to leave immediately, but he'd convinced her to stay, at least for the night. If they ran now, they were at the mercy of the thugs who were after the girls. They could pick the time and place for a confrontation, and there were too many winding roads, too many steep drop-offs between Cameron and Las Vegas.

It would be safer to stay and face the threat here.

Now it was late, and the girls and Abby were sleeping. He'd insisted they all stay in one room, so Abby was sleeping on the bottom bunk and the twins shared the top. Their quiet breathing was the only sound in the dark house.

Damien sat on the floor next to the window, hidden in the shadows. If anyone tried to sneak into the house tonight, he would be waiting. He had vowed to protect Maggie and Casey, and protect them he would.

A soft thump echoed from the other room, and Damien's heart began to pound. But then Angus, Abby's cat, strolled into the room, and Damien

realized he'd merely jumped off Abby's bed. Relaxing back

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against the wall, he stroked the huge black animal. The sound of the cat's purring seemed to fill the room.

Suddenly the purring stopped. Angus flattened his ears against his head and growled, a low, eerie threat from deep in his throat. Then he shot silently out of the room.

Slowly and quietly Damien lifted his gun out of its holster. A moment later he heard a stair creak, and he knew someone was in the house. Moving as noiselessly as Angus had, Damien walked over to stand next to the door.

The intruder went into the other bedroom first. Damien waited, listening for the almost imperceptible sounds the intruder made. When he felt the presence of the intruder in the hall, he tightened his grip on his gun and tensed his muscles.

A black shadow stepped into the bedroom, and Damien shoved his gun in the man's back. "Freeze.

Don't move a muscle," he said, his voice cold and hard.

When the intruder tensed, Damien began to squeeze the trigger of his gun. "I'm looking for an excuse.

Go ahead and give it to me."

Slowly the intruder raised his hands above his head. The blade of a knife gleamed in the moonlight.

"Drop the knife," Damien said sharply. "Do it now."

The knife clattered to the floor, and Damien nudged the intruder in the back. "Hands against the wall, feet spread. One wrong move, one tic I don't like, and you're history."

The man, dressed all in black, pressed his palms against the wall and spread his legs. Keeping the gun against his back, Damien searched him and found another knife and a gun. Placing them carefully out of reach, he snapped handcuffs on the intruder, tightened them, then said, "Down on the floor. Do it now."

As the man struggled to lie down with his hands secured behind his back, Damien snapped another pair of plastic cuffs around his ankles. Then he stood up and turned on the light.

The man on the floor was the hiker, the same man Abby had seen watching them from the movie theater.

"Who else is in Cameron looking for us?" he demanded.

But the man stayed silent on the floor. Finally Damien opened his phone and called Devlin.

"I have a package for you to pick up," he said. "And come in quietly. He may have a friend waiting nearby."

The intruder tensed, and Damien added, "He's letting me know he wasn't alone. You can take your time and check the area surrounding the house. This dirtbag is secure for now."

When he looked over at the bed, Abby was sitting up, looking at the man on the floor. Her eyes were huge with fear and her face was white. Finally she looked up at him.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he said. "Our friend here came right on schedule."

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Abby's face became even more pinched. "You mean you expected this to happen?"

"Let's just say I'm not surprised."

She scrambled out of bed and looked in the upper bunk. "The girls are fine," he said. "They haven't even woken up." Slowly she eased back into the lower bunk, staring at him. She watched when Devlin showed up and told him he'd found someone in a car just down the block from his house. She didn't speak as Devlin escorted the intruder from their house, and she didn't say a word when Damien came back into the house. Silently walking out of the bedroom, she followed him into the kitchen.

Finally he turned and faced her. "What's wrong?" She took a deep, shuddering breath as she stared at him. "How could you?"

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Chapter 15

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Abby stared at Damien as he stood in front of her. He was so close she could hear him breathing, feel the heat of his body, but there was a huge chasm between them.

"How could I do what?"

"How could you let that man come in here and not warn me what was going on?"

His eyes softened. "I didn't know for sure he would show up tonight. How could I have known that?"

"But you had a good idea," she said angrily.

"I suspected he'd try to get to the girls. I didn't know for sure. And I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to worry. What could you have done?"

"I could have told you I didn't want them used as bait," she said, her voice fierce.

"I wasn't using them as bait, Abby. I was trying to protect them."

"We could have stayed somewhere else while you waited for him. Haven't they been traumatized enough?"

"They have no idea anything happened," he countered. "They're still asleep."

Somehow that just fanned the flames of her anger. "You were right, weren't you?" she said, her voice filled with bitterness. "They are just part of your job. You didn't hesitate to use them to catch that creep.

It didn't matter to you if they were hurt or scared."

"You know that's not true," he said, and his voice was filled with pain. "That hasn't been true for a long time."

"I sure can't tell by the way you're acting." She realized she was being irrational, but the honor of what had almost happened was overwhelming.

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"I promised to protect you and Maggie and Casey. I didn't promise to discuss all the options with you every time I had to make a decision."

"What if something had gone wrong? What if that man used that knife on them?"

"The only way that would have happened is if he'd killed me first. And I had no intention of letting that happen." His voice was flat. "I couldn't send you somewhere else, because then I wouldn't have been able to protect you. Once I knew they were in town, this was our only option."

"I wanted to leave," she said, not looking at him. "We could have gone somewhere else."

"Where?"

"Anywhere! Somewhere those men didn't know about." Damien reached for her, then let his hand drop to his side. "Abby, I know you're upset. I know you're frightened. But use your head. If we had tried to run, they could have pushed the car off the road. Those men didn't care how they did it. They just wanted the twins to die."

"Are they safe now?" she demanded.

He hesitated for an instant, then shook his head. "No, they're not. They're not safe until the man who killed Joey Stefanetto is in prison."

"So what do we do now?"

"You go back to sleep. We'll figure out our next step in the morning."

Damien walked throughout the house, checking the windows and doors. A few minutes later he walked back into the kitchen.

"I never asked. How did that man get in here?" she said in a low voice.

"He picked the lock on the patio door." His mouth twisted. "I didn't think we'd need a lot of security back when we inherited this house. Cameron is a safe town. But you don't have anything to worry about, now. You can go back to bed."

The lines on his face looked deeper, and purple smudges shadowed his eyes as he led her back to the bedroom. When he stood at the window, staring out into the darkness of the desert night, Abby could see the weariness etched in every muscle in his body.

Her anger dissipated as quickly as the air hissing out of a balloon, leaving her feeling flat and empty. "I'm sorry, Damien. I was out of line."

He turned and gave her a weary smile. "Go to sleep, Abby. It's late. We'll talk in the morning."

He switched off the light and went back to his post by the window. Abby watched him for a moment.

The accusations she'd thrown at him lingered in the air between them, and the room suddenly felt chilled.

After a while she lay down on the narrow bunk, but she couldn't sleep.

Damien stood at the window for a long time, then he sat down on the floor again. Abby knew he wouldn't sleep that night, and shame washed over her for the things she'd said to him.

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"I know you're doing your best to protect us," she said softly.

"Go to sleep," he said, his voice remote. "It's late."

* * *

The birds began to sing before she fell into a light, restless sleep. When she woke, the sun streamed in the window and Damien was gone.

She scrambled frantically out of bed, disoriented, but the twins were curled together in the top bunk, still sound asleep. Pulling her robe around her, she walked out to the loft. Damien was down in the kitchen, drinking coffee and talking on the phone. When he saw her above him, he said something into the mouthpiece, then snapped the phone closed.

"Good morning." His voice had no infection.

As she walked down the stairs, she let her gaze linger on his face. Underlying the weariness was a hardness that she remembered from the night they'd met. The hardness had gradually disappeared over the past few days, replaced by caring and concern. Now it was as if the past few days had never happened.

"You were right last night, and I was wrong." She stopped in front of him. "I'm sorry I questioned your judgment. Staying here in Cameron was the right decision."

She reached out and touched his arm, and he took her hand in his. But when he brought it to his mouth and brushed her palm with his lips, he curled her hand into a fist then let it go. When he turned away, she felt him draw his armor around himself.

"We're going back to Las Vegas."

"I thought you said it was safer to stay here in Cameron. Won't it be easier to notice strangers here?"

"Where would we go in Las Vegas?" She felt panic rising and tried to push it down. Cameron had begun to feel like home to her. She felt safe in this town. She trusted Shea and Laura and Devlin, and all the other people she'd met in Cameron who'd been strangers a few days ago and were now beginning to feel like friends.

"I talked to the office this morning. They still don't know for sure who the murderer is. Apparently there were several people who didn't work for the company at the site that day. But they say we need to come back. There's some crucial evidence they can't talk about on the phone, but our presence is required."

"What if it's a trap?" She said the first thing that came to mind.

Damien turned around then, and his eyes glittered with anger. "I thought about that. It's no secret that the mobsters who didn't want Joey to testify are powerful and desperate. But I've known my boss for a long time. I can't believe he'd turn."

"And you're willing to stake Maggie's and Casey's lives on it?"

His hand slashed through the air. "We have no choice, Abby. I have to trust Frank, because he's never given me reason not to. He said that this evidence is crucial and will convict the murderer, but he can't get

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it until you and the twins are back in Las Vegas. If you want this to end, we have to go back."

"You warned me all along, but I refused to listen," she whispered. "You said it was just a job, and you were right. I didn't want to believe you. I thought we all meant something to you." The hole in her chest got bigger and bigger, until there was nothing left but a gaping wound.

Damien opened his mouth, then his face closed and he stared at her with unreadable eyes. "Yes, Abby, this is my job. And you and the twins will be my job until the murderer is caught and they're safe. I'm sorry that we can't stay here in Cameron." For just a moment she thought his eyes softened, that the yearning she saw there was for her. Then it disappeared, and his face was a mask again.

"What do you want me to do?" She was numb, incapable of feeling anything. And she was glad, because the pain would come soon enough.

"Get your things packed. When the twins wake up, we'll have breakfast and leave. We can be back in Las Vegas by this afternoon."

"And then what?"

"Then, I hope, we find out who killed Joey."

She hadn't been asking about the case, and she was certain he knew it. Struggling to focus on Maggie and Casey, instead of herself, she asked, "Are we just going to walk into the FBI office?"

When he looked at her, his eyes softened marginally. "I have a plan, Abby. But you're going to have to trust me."

"I do trust you. Completely."

Damien jammed his hands into his pockets. "Never trust anyone completely, Abby. You'll end up getting hurt."

He walked out the patio door and disappeared around the corner of the house. She watched for a moment, hoping he'd come back, praying he'd take back his last words.

Because what he'd just said was as good as goodbye.

She should have known it was coming, she thought, turning to walk up the stairs. He'd told her enough times that he didn't ever want to fall in love again. So why did it hurt so much?

Because she hadn't wanted to believe it. This time they'd spent together in Cameron had been magical, and she'd believed that miracles could happen. Cameron was the kind of town that made a person believe in miracles. But their time here had turned out to be a mirage, a faint, fleeting image of something she wanted but couldn't have. And when she reached out her hand to grasp the mirage and hold it close to her, she found out just how insubstantial it had been.

* * *

Damien stood on the side of the house, out of sight of Abby and her imploring eyes, and cursed himself.

He never should have let things go so far. He'd known what Abby would think. He'd known that she

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would start to see happily-ever-after, but he hadn't been able to stop himself. He'd needed her, needed the goodness in her heart and the tenderness of her touch. He'd needed her generosity and her loving spirit.

And now he'd hurt her. But it was better that way, he told himself. It was inevitable that he hurt her, so it was best that it happen now, before any more time passed. Before she had a chance to convince herself that she really cared what happened to him. Now she knew what kind of man he really was.

Abby was better off without him. She needed a man who was whole, a man who could give her everything she wanted out of life. She deserved a man who came to her with an open heart, one that wasn't scarred and brittle. There would always be dark places in his soul, and Abby deserved better than that.

The sun was edging above the red rock that rose in the east, and it was time to leave Cameron. It was time to leave behind the forbidden dreams that had begun to seem possible here. It was time to go back to his own world, a place where his duty and his job were the only things that mattered, the only things that he could allow to matter. Striding into the house, he forced himself to ignore the sounds of Abby in her bedroom, packing her suitcase. He was leaving Cameron behind, and all the hope that had seemed possible here.

Three hours later they were almost to the Utah-Nevada border. He'd kept a close watch on the road behind them, but there had been no sign of anyone

following.

"I thought you were afraid to leave Cameron yesterday because you were afraid someone would try to cause an accident on the road." Abby's voice was low. She had hardly spoken at all during the trip.

He glanced in the rearview at the twins, who were busy playing with their dolls. "The people I was worried about yesterday are sitting in jail in Cameron today. And I didn't think there had been time for anyone else to get to Cameron. No one's followed us, Abby."

"What about when we get to Las Vegas?"

"We'll find out what's got Frank's shorts in a knot. After that, we'll see."

"You said you had a plan. What was it?"

He hesitated. He wasn't used to trusting anyone else. Then he said, "We're not going back to the office.

We're going to pick our spot and make them come to us. You and the girls will be safer that way."

"It sounds like you don't really trust your boss."

He tightened his hands on the steering wheel. "I don't trust anyone, Abby. Not when it comes to your life or the girls'. I was willing to come back to Las Vegas since Frank thought it was important, but that's as far as I go. The rest of the way has to be on my terms."

"Where are we going to go?"

Her voice still sounded stiff and forced. He didn't dare look over at her. He knew what he would see in her face, and it would eat away at his heart. "I have a friend who has a house in the desert, away from the town. There's nothing else around. We'll go there, and I'll be able to see everyone who approaches us.

I'm not going to let you walk into a trap."

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"I never thought you would," she said.

"But you thought all I was interested in was getting the job done, right?" He couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice.

"I don't know what I think, Damien." Her voice was low and tortured. "Are we more important to you than your job?"

"You know you are." He looked in the rearview mirror at the twins again, who were still involved in their make-believe world. "How can you doubt that?"

"I know how you feel about children," she whispered. "I know how hard it's been for you to be with us.

I wondered if you wanted to come back to Las Vegas so you could get away from Maggie and Casey."

"I wanted to come back here because I want them safe, and solving this murder is the best way to make sure they're safe. How I feel about children has nothing to do with it."

"Damien..."

There was longing in her voice, and a yearning for something that he knew could never be. Before she could continue, he said, "Let's concentrate on one thing at a time, Abby. Let's make sure Maggie and Casey are taken care of, then we can worry about other things."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw her turn and stare out the window. "How much longer before we get to your friend's house?" she asked.

"An hour and a half."

They didn't speak again until they reached the house in the desert. Abby had turned around and talked to the girls, and they had talked to Damien. But he

and Abby couldn't seem to find anything to say.

When he pulled into the driveway, he felt Abby tense beside him. "There's no one home. I called earlier,"

he said.

"So we just go inside and call your boss, then wait for him to show up?"

"That's it. I figure it should take him a half hour to get here."

"All right." She turned in her seat. "Girls, Damien wants us to go into this house for a while."

"Okay." The twins clambered out of their car seats, and the accepting trust on their faces made him want to reach out and hold them. But he couldn't allow himself to feel any emotion right now. Now they were back on the enemy's turf, and he had to be prepared to face a threat. So he waited for them to get out of the car, then he walked with them to the door of the house.

He found the spare key in a crack above the light fixture next to the door. When he swung the door open, a welcome blast of cool air swirled around them in the desert heat. "Stay right behind me," he said to Abby in a terse tone. He pulled his gun and searched the whole house, until he was convinced they were alone.

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Opening his cellular phone, he called his office. It only took a few moments to give his boss instructions.

When he closed the phone, he saw Abby watching him.

"What did your boss say?"

His mouth curled up in a smile that was without humor. "He didn't like it, but he's going to do it. He knew why I insisted that I meet him here. He'd do

the same in my situation."

"So we just wait?"

"Yeah. Now we wait."

He paced between a window at the front of the house and one at the rear. No one could approach the house without being seen. Abby sat on the couch and read to the twins, but he heard the tension in her voice. After the longest thirty minutes he'd ever experienced, he saw a cloud of dust far down the road.

Abby had seen it, too. "That must be them."

"Probably."

He felt her glance on his back. "Where should we go?"

"Stay right here for now."

The car pulled into the driveway of the house, and both front doors opened. His boss, Frank Cantrell, and a thin blond woman stepped out of the car.

Abby's gasp told him that she'd seen the woman, too. "That's Janna! Girls, your mommy is here!"

The twins ran to the front window, and Damien said sharply, "Get them away from the window."

"But that's my sister."

"You don't know who else is in that car."

Abby pulled the girls against her, and the joy in her eyes turned to fear. When Frank rapped at the front door, she shrank back against the wall.

Damien pulled the door open, and Frank and the woman stepped inside. The twins broke free from Abby and threw themselves at the woman.

"Mommy!Mommy!"

The blond woman bent down and swept them into her arms. The three of them stood locked together, tears streaming down Janna's face.

Finally Janna let go of the girls and leaned back to look at them, wiping the tears off her face. "You've gotten so big since I've been gone," she whispered. Smoothing the hair back from their faces with her hands, she pulled them into her arms again. "I missed you so much."

Janna's words appeared to jerk Abby out of her trance. Rushing forward, she grabbed her sister's arms.

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"Are you all right, Jan? What happened? Where have you been?"

Frank stepped forward. "Your sister will explain everything to you later," he said gruffly. He turned to Janna. "I kept my part of the bargain. I didn't say anything on the phone about you being here and you've got your kids back. Now give us the name."

Janna took a deep breath and seemed to hold more tightly to her daughters, then looked at Frank.

"Harry Potter murdered that Stefanetto man. He told me so himself."

Without waiting for an explanation, Frank plucked a phone out of his pocket and hurried into the next room. Damien heard him talking, his voice urgent.

"What's going on here, Janna?" Abby asked.

"I'd like some answers myself." Damien stepped up to stand next to Abby.

She spun around to face him. "Did you know about this?" she demanded. "Did you know Janna was here?"

"Do you think I would do that to you, Abby?" he asked. "Don't you think I would have told you if I had known what was going on?"

She dropped her gaze. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "Of course you would have told me."

He wanted to sweep her into his arms, to hold her until his pain and her fear disappeared, but instead he took a step away from her. Turning to Abby's sister, he said. "I'm glad you're here. We've been worried about you, Ms. Stewart."

Janna smiled shakily. "I know. I could tell when I talked to Abby." She turned to her sister. "Thank you for taking such good care of them," she whispered. "I would have died if anything had happened to them."

"What happened down in Mexico?" Abby asked. "You sounded so strange on the telephone. I was so worried."

Janna buried her face in her daughters' hair again, then stood up and faced Abby and Damien. "I thought it was just a business trip, although I was surprised it came up so quickly. For the first few days, that's exactly what it was. Harry is a business associate, my boss, so I didn't question his presence. We had meetings in the morning, then I did tourist things in the afternoon." A delicate pink color flushed her cheeks. "I was flattered when Harry wanted to tag along with me. He was very attentive."

As Janna paused, fear sliding over her face, Damien asked gently, "Then what happened?"

"You're going to think I'm the most stupid, naive person in the world." she muttered. "I certainly did, after I realized what was going on." She paused as if gathering herself, then continued. "Every day there was one meeting in the morning that my boss told me I didn't have to attend. He told me to go out shopping. Which I did until the fifth day. I had seen all the shops, and there wasn't anything else to do. So I came back early and sat outside the office to wait for the next meeting."

"What happened then?" Damien had grabbed a pad of paper and was taking notes.

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"The men my boss was meeting with began to shout, and I could hear them plainly." Janna swallowed, and fear crept into her eyes again. "They were talking about me. The men asked someone when he was going to get the information from me, and Harry told them to relax. He had it covered. But they started to press, and then Harry began to shout, too."

She looked around, and Damien nodded at her reassuringly. "Go on, Ms. Stewart."

Janna whispered something to Maggie and Casey, and the girls went into the kitchen. "Harry told the men that I always left my kids with my sister when I went on a business trip, and that was where they had to be. He said it wasn't his fault if their men couldn't take out one woman and two little girls."

"Then what?" Damien moved closer and took Janna's hand. "Then they started discussing the best way to dispose of the girls and make it look like an accident once they found them," Janna whispered, starting to cry again. "Harry told them I was scared to death of water, and they probably didn't know how to swim."

When I heard that, I tried to leave. All I could think about was getting back home, but they must have heard me. Harry came out the door and took me back to the hotel.

"He wouldn't let me out of his sight after that. He admitted he killed that Stefanetto man and told me that the girls had seen him do it. I knew he was going to kill me and the girls, too." She licked her lips and looked over at Abby. "The next day was when you called. I was frantic that you would tell me where you were and he would find out."

"How did you get away?" Abby asked, taking her sister's other hand.

Janna gave her a watery smile. "Harry still went to his meetings in the mornings, I guess to find out if his thugs had found the girls. He left a guard in the hall so I couldn't get away, but I was able to search the room and yesterday morning I finally found some money he'd hidden. I managed to pack a few things in my carry-on, then last night when he went into the bathroom I tied his belt to the door knob and fastened it to the coat rack. I started running and didn't stop until I was on a plane back to Las Vegas. And when I went to the FBI, I told Frank I wouldn't give him any information until I had my daughters back. He said they were with you and safe, but by then I didn't trust anyone."

Frank came back into the room. "He checked out of his hotel last night and vanished. There's no record of him arriving in this country."

"We used a private jet when we flew down to Mexico," Janna said. "My boss said it was owned by his business associates."

"Did you leave from McCarran?" Damien asked, certain they hadn't flown out of the Las Vegas airport.

"No, a private airstrip somewhere out in the desert. We had to drive for a while before we got there."

"Is that how you usually flew when you went on business trips?" he asked.

Janna shook her head. "We always used regular airlines. I guess I should have thought something was up when we took that private jet."

"Porter was careful to arrange it so that you wouldn't figure out anything was wrong," Damien said gently. "Don't blame yourself. That's why he whisked you out of the country so fast, before Maggie and Casey had a chance to tell you what had happened. It was probably the only plan he could come up with on the spur of the moment. He knew his only hope was to separate you, then get rid of the girls when you

weren't there to protect them."

"How could I have worked for my boss for this long and not known what kind of people he associated with?" Janna asked, her voice breaking.

"You saw the side of him he wanted you to see. And what reason would you have had to suspect otherwise?" Damien squeezed her hand, then let it go and stood up. "Don't beat yourself up, Janna."

You're as much a victim as your daughters are."

"What happens now?" she asked in a small voice.

"Yes, what do we do now, Damien?" Abby stood to the side and watched him. He couldn't read the expression in her eyes.

"Our first priority is keeping all of you safe." Frank Cantrell, Damien's boss, stepped forward. "I've arranged for all of you to be taken to a safe house out of state. Only Kane and I know where it is. Kane is going to find Porter, and in a few days you'll be back to your old life again."

Abby stood and watched Janna talking to Damien and Frank and knew that Frank was wrong. Her old life was gone, and she would never get it back.

And she didn't want it back. She had lived safely, teaching her classes, spending time with Janna and Maggie and Casey, and avoiding anything that could cause her the kind of pain that parting with her fiancé had caused. Then she had met Damien, and he had demolished all of the carefully constructed barriers around her heart. She loved him, and that was never going to change.

Would he ever love her back? Something in her would not let her give up on him just yet.

As Frank transferred their luggage from Damien's car to his, and Janna and the girls went into another room, she turned to him. "Why aren't you coming with us to the safe house?"

"I have to catch Porter, Abby. I'm the agent in charge of this case, and it's my responsibility. There will be U.S. marshals at the safe house to protect you, and Frank is going to stay there, too." She saw a muscle twitch in his jaw. "The only way the twins and you and your sister are going to be safe is if Porter is behind bars. And right now I won't trust that to anyone but myself."

"What happens after you find Porter and arrest him?"

"He'll be indicted and tried for murder. The girls will probably have to testify, but we'll make it as easy for them as possible."

"That's not what I meant, Damien. What about you and I?"

"Is there a you and I, Abby?"

"I think so." She watched him steadily.

His eyes softened. "You know I care about you, Abby. I care a lot. But I can't give you what you want.

I don't know if I ever could. I know you want a home, and children..." He turned away and shoved his hands into his pockets. "I don't know, Abby."

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"I'm not asking you to promise anything," she said, her heart breaking. "All I'm asking is that you'll give it a chance."

He stared out the window for a long time. "All right, Abby, after this is over, I'll come and see you," he finally said. "But this was a stressful time for you, and we sometimes do or say things under stress that we wouldn't do otherwise. I'm not going to bold you to anything right now."

"I'm not going to change how I feel," she said, feeling tears trembling in her throat. "I love you, Damien."

At that he turned around. His face was pinched and tight, and she saw the pain, deep down in his eyes.

"I know you think you do, but you don't know me. Not really."

"I know everything I need to know about you," she said, passion in her voice. "Enough to know I'm not going to change my mind."

He glanced out the window, and his mouth thinned. "It's time to go. Frank's waiting."

She wouldn't leave without one last kiss. Stepping close to him, she pulled his head down and kissed him with all the passion inside her. For a moment he stood stiffly, his arms hanging at his side. Then, with a groan, he wrapped them around her and pulled her close. She tasted desire, need and despair equally in his kiss.

"We're ready to go, Abby."

Janna's voice came from behind her, and Damien stepped away from her. "Take care of yourself," he said, then he opened the door.

She wanted to say something more, something that would bind him to her, some magic that would make him understand how much she loved him. Instead, she whispered, "Be careful, Damien. I'll be waiting for you when this is over."

He shut the door quietly behind them. As they drove away from the house, she saw Damien standing at the window. She watched him get smaller and smaller until he eventually disappeared.

Chapter 16

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Damien walked up to the front door of the tiny house and smiled as he heard the sound of childish voices drifting around the corner. Janna's car was parked in the driveway, and he noticed that the car seats were gone. Maggie and Casey were growing up. Pausing on the porch, he took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

It was opened almost immediately, although he noted with approval that Janna first looked through the spy hole he'd installed. "Hi, Damien," she said, pulling the door wide. "Come on in."

Out of habit she led the way into the kitchen, pausing only to pour him a cup of coffee. "The girls are in the backyard," she said over her shoulder. "Let me call them in. I'd never hear the end of it if I didn't."

Damien sat down in his usual spot at the table and absently drank from the chipped blue mug, the same

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one he'd used every time he'd visited Janna during the past few months.

He'd finally caught Porter, and the murderer had agreed to a plea bargain. He was now busy providing the kind of details that would eventually bring down many mobsters in Las Vegas.

But Damien hadn't been able to walk away from Maggie and Casey, and he'd visited them and Janna frequently. In a few moments he heard the excited chatter of children's voices as Maggie and Casey approached the house.

"Damien," they shouted in unison as they charged through the door. "You came to see us."

Damien opened his arms wide as they threw themselves at him. Their tight hugs brought him only joy now. The pain had been buried in the past, where it belonged. He would always grieve for his son and unborn child, but he had learned a few things over the past months. He had learned to cherish the present and hope for the future. And he had learned that some gifts are too precious to scorn. He tightened his arms around Maggie and Casey, then he let them go.

"What have you two urchins been up to?" he asked, wiping a smear of dirt off Maggie's face.

"We're building a bear trap," Casey said eagerly. "Just like we did at the cabin. Mommy promised we could make chocolate-chip cookies for bait, just like Aunt Abby did"

Damien's chest contracted at the sound of Abby's name, and his heart leaped with hope, but he asked casually, "Is your aunt Abby helping you with the bear trap?"

Maggie shook her head. "Aunt Abby had to go away. We haven't seen her in a long time."

The hope in Damien's chest shriveled into the dust of despair. He knew very well that Abby had gone away. He'd spent the past three months searching for her, to no avail. But he continued to hope she would be unable to stay away from her beloved nieces.

"I'm sure you'll see her soon," he said, trying to force a smile onto his face. "Your aunt Abby loves you very much."

"We talk to her on the phone all the time," Casey volunteered. "She says she misses us."

"I'm sure she does, Casey."

He talked to the twins for a few more minutes, then Casey squirmed off his lap. "We got to go work on the bear trap," she announced as she dashed out the door.

Maggie slid off his lap more slowly. She stared at Damien for a moment, then she took a step closer as if she'd made a decision. "We found a fairy tree behind our house," she told him.

Damien remembered the fairy tree they'd found at the cabin on Shea's ranch, and felt a lump forming in his throat. He only had one wish, and he'd give anything to have it come true. "I'm glad," he whispered.

"Have you made any more good wishes?"

"Only the same one I made at the lake. Do you want to know what it is?"

"I thought you couldn't tell or it wouldn't come true."

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"Sometimes it's okay to tell. You can tell if you've had the wish for a long time and it hasn't come true."

"All right, then, what's your wish?"

"You can't tell anyone else," Maggie warned, watching him solemnly with hazel eyes that were so much like her aunt's.

"Cross my heart," Damien said, doing so.

"I wished that you would be my daddy."

For a moment Damien couldn't answer as his chest expanded and his throat swelled. Then he pulled Maggie into his arms and against his heart. "If I could have a little girl, I would want one exactly like you,"

he whispered into her ear. "But I can't be your daddy because your mommy and I aren't married." Slowly he eased Maggie away from him and looked down at her face. "But can I tell you a secret?"

She nodded as her eyes lit up. "I like having secrets."

"Maybe someday I could be your uncle."

He watched her as she processed his words, then gave him a grin. "If you can't be my daddy, then being my uncle would be the next-best thing."

Before he could say anything more to her, she went skipping out the door. As he watched her go, he heard Janna move behind him and slide into a chair next to him.

"I guess you still haven't found her."

He shook his head, staring out the window at the girls as they played. "It's like she vanished off the face of the earth. Are you sure she didn't say anything to you?"

"She hasn't said a thing. She does call regularly, just like Casey said, but she won't say where she is or why she left. And when I tell her you're looking for her, she doesn't say a thing."

"I don't understand." The words felt like they were torn out of his throat. "She told me she loved me. I told her I would see her after Porter was caught. Why would she just disappear like that?"

"We talked a lot while we were in that house in Minnesota. You know she told me about what happened to your wife and son. Maybe she decided she just couldn't handle it."

"That wouldn't have made her run," he said fiercely. "Abby would have faced me and told me how she felt."

"Maybe she changed her mind after we got back to Las Vegas. The last couple of times I saw her, I thought she looked real worn down. Like she hadn't gotten enough sleep. Maybe she just decided that she didn't love you after all."

"Then why quit her job? Why disappear? All she would have had to do was tell me so." He tightened his mouth and looked out the window again. "And she knew I would have let her go. I told her so, the last time I saw her."

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Janna got up and poured him another cup of coffee. "I don't know, Damien. I have no idea why she would run away or where she would have gone. But if you were willing to let her go three months ago, why are you so determined to find her now?"

"I've had three months to do a lot of thinking. And a lot of time to realize what my life would be like without her, Janna. I'm going to find her if it takes the rest of my life."

She stared at him over the coffee cup, and slowly she smiled. "I think you will, Damien. And I'm glad.

Going to that little town in Utah with you was the best thing that ever happened to my sister."

Cameron! Why hadn't he thought to look there? Because Abby had only been there a few days. But she had loved the town and hadn't wanted to leave.

Jumping up from the table, he leaned over and brushed a kiss over Janna's cheek. "Say goodbye to the urchins for me. You've given me an idea."

* * *

Damien drove down the driveway to the Red Rock Ranch, hoping that Shea or Devlin was around. The leaves on the aspen trees were golden yellow, and the October sky was a bright, brilliant blue, but he ignored the beauty. He was right; he felt it in his bones. Abby had fled to Cameron, and he would find her here.

But Shea was uncooperative when he found her a few minutes later. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

He studied her eyes, then shook his head. "Forget it, Shea. I've known you for too long. I know when you're hiding something."

Her eyes narrowed. "Why are you looking for Abby, anyway?"

"Isn't it obvious? I love her."

"Does she know that?" Shea demanded.

Slowly he shook his head. "No. The last thing I said to her was that I didn't know if I could ever give her what she wanted."

"So what made you change your mind?"

"What is this, Shea, the third degree?"

She eyed him steadily. "If I did know where Abby was, and I'm not saying that I do, I'd have to have a pretty good reason for breaking a confidence."

"I just gave you one! I told you I love her. What more can I say?"

Unexpectedly she smiled. "You can grovel, but I guess you should do that to Abby." Her smile disappeared. "If you hurt her, Damien, you're going to answer to me and Laura Weston and Becca Johnson. And it won't be pretty. Do you understand?"

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"She's here, then?"

"She's here."

"Is she at your cabin?"

Shea shook her head, and for a moment he thought she looked nervous.
"The cabin wasn't available."

"And I didn't want her to be so isolated." Then she gave him an impish grin, and the nerves were gone.

"She's staying at your house. Laura has a key, and I figured that was the one place in the world you wouldn't think to look."

Damien planted a kiss on her cheek and loped back to his car. "You're a devious, dangerous woman, Shea McAllister, and one of these days you're going to get what you deserve."

He saw Shea laughing behind him as he drove away. He flew over the asphalt to Cameron, and in a few minutes he pulled into the driveway next to his house.

There was no answer to his knock. Walking around the side of the house, he stepped down to the lower level. The patio and yard were deserted, too. But she was still here. An empty mug of coffee sat on the kitchen table, next to an open newspaper.

He could let himself in with his key, but he was reluctant to invade Abby's privacy that way. Lowering himself into a chair on the patio, he settled back to wait for her.

His yard looked better than it had since his wife died. Abby had been busy, he thought, and his heart contracted as he pictured her working in his garden. It felt so right. As he gazed over the neat shrubs and the brilliant flowers, he heard a sound in front of him and Angus jumped onto his knees. The enormous black cat stared at him solemnly for a moment, then plopped himself down in his lap.

Damien reached out a tentative hand to stroke the cat. When Angus didn't object, Damien petted him again. "How's it going, buddy? Are you taking good care of her?" he murmured in a low voice, feeling faintly foolish talking to a cat.

Angus gave him a bored look, then closed his eyes and laid his head on his paws. Damien stroked him absently for a while, looking out at the red mountains behind the house as his hand lingered over the cat's sun-warmed fur.

He had no idea how long he'd been there when he saw Abby walking toward him, coming from the direction of Laura Weston's house. Damien sat up quickly. Angus jumped off his lap, gave him a disgruntled look and stalked away to groom himself.

Damien stood and watched Abby as she walked, his heart beginning to pound. What if she really didn't want to see him? What if she told him to get lost? What if she wanted nothing to do with him?

He'd make her change her mind, he vowed fiercely. He wasn't going to leave Cameron without Abby.

* * *

Abby edged through the shrub border, looking at the thriving plants with satisfaction. If she could give Damien nothing else, she had made his garden come alive again.

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Preoccupied with her plans for the afternoon, when the Weston children and Cassie Johnson were coming over to make cookies with her, she didn't notice the man on her patio until he stepped into her path. She jumped back with a startled cry.

"I'm sorry, Abby, I didn't mean to scare you."

Damien stood in front of her, his hands jammed into the pockets of his black jeans, his hair lifted by the wind, and an expression of uncertainty on his face.

Ignoring the excited leap of her heart, she dug her hands into the pockets of her jacket and pulled it around her. She tried to school her face to an expressionless mask. "What are you doing here, Damien?"

The uncertainty disappeared, replaced by a serenity she'd never seen in him. He said simply, "Looking for you. Like I've been doing for the past three months."

Her heart twisted in her chest as she looked away. She couldn't bear the tenderness she saw in his eyes.

It would make her break all her resolutions, make her throw herself into his arms and beg him to stay with her. "How did you find me?" she managed to ask.

"I'd looked everywhere but Cameron. When I remembered how much you loved this town, and how badly you wanted to stay, I came back."

"I'm sorry I borrowed your house. When Shea, Laura and Becca suggested it, I only planned to stay for a few days, until I found something else. I'll leave today." She had felt close to him here, and hadn't been able to tear herself away from a place with so many memories of Damien.

"I don't want you to leave, unless it's with me."

Abby clutched her jacket around her more tightly. Oh, God, if that was only possible. "You don't have to do this, Damien. You told me that stress and danger sometimes make us do things we wouldn't otherwise do. I'm not going to hold you to some promise you think you might have made at a very stressful time in your life."

He didn't move, just stood and watched her. "Are you angry with me, Abby?"

"Angry? Why would I be angry? You never told me anything less than the truth. And you never did anything that wasn't meant to protect the girls and I. How could I be angry with you?"

"Then why did you run away? I told you I would come to see you after Porter was caught. That did take a few weeks, but I went to your house the next day and you were gone. Why did you disappear?"

Abby took a deep breath. She had rehearsed this speech over and over, hoping she would be able to get through it. She needed to convince him now, before he began probing for other, deeper reasons. "I know you, Damien. You're an honorable man. We had made love and I told you that I loved you, and I knew you would do the honorable thing. I didn't want you to sacrifice yourself for me."

For the first time a smile curved his lips. It wasn't the cynical one she had expected, but a smile full of tenderness. "Why didn't you just stay and face me? Why did you quit your job and run away? Why did you cut yourself off from your sister and your nieces?"

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That's the one thing I can't tell you, she thought in desperation. Fighting to hold back the tears, she dug her fingers into the lining of her jacket. "I needed a new beginning." She smiled shakily. "Being chased by killers was a life-altering experience. I realized that I had let myself become too stuffy, too stuck in a rut. I wanted to see more of the world."

"So you came to an isolated little town in Utah, where the most exciting thing to do is dinner at Heaven on Seventh?" He narrowed his eyes at her. "What's going on, Abby?"

He stood in front of her, blocking her escape route. His eyes were calm and steady as he watched her, as if he would wait forever for her answer.

But she didn't have forever, she thought with a rising bubble of panic. Damien needed to leave, before he found out the truth. She said the first thing that came to her mind. "How do you know I quit my job?"

"I've been looking for you, Abby. That's all I've been doing since Harry Porter was caught. When I realized you'd left your house, the first place I checked was at your school."

Abby grabbed for the control of the situation that was rapidly slipping away from her. "I didn't quit. I just took a leave of absence. So you see, Damien, I'm fine. Now, will you please leave?"

"I'm not going anywhere. Why don't we go inside so we can talk?"

Abby remembered that implacable voice. Despair washed over her as he gently took her hand and led her toward the house. Once inside, she

wrapped her arms around herself and stood in the middle of the kitchen, waiting to see what he would say.

"I was wrong, Abby," he said softly. "The last time I saw you, I sent you away to the safe house without telling you how I felt about you. I've regretted that almost from the moment your car disappeared that day."

"No, Damien, you were right. It was the wrong place and the wrong time to make promises. We both needed some space to decide what we wanted."

"And you decided you needed to run away."

It was time to change the subject. "Thank you for being so good to Janna and Maggie and Casey the last few months. They've told me all the things you've done for them."

She heard the wistful sound of her voice and stopped abruptly. She could never let him know how much she missed her sister and her nieces. It would bring up more questions she had no intention of answering.

"I enjoy spending time with them." His face softened and he smiled. "Maggie and Casey are very special.

And so is your sister. She's done a great job with them. It couldn't have been easy, raising them on her own."

Abby's heart broke a little more. "No, it hasn't been. But Janna is strong. She can do it."

"I adore your family, but that's not why I'm here." Damien put his hands on her shoulders. His heat warmed her to the depths of her soul, but she fought to ignore it. "Sit down with me. We need to talk, Abby."

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"There's nothing to talk about," she said, backing away from his touch. "I'm sorry I borrowed your house. I'll leave right away."

"Neither of us is going anywhere until we talk."

He stood in front of her, and she could see the truth of his words in his eyes. Taking a trembling breath, she raised her head and said, "We can talk all you want, but it's not going to change anything."

"Take off your coat and relax, Abby." His voice was surprisingly gentle. "I'm not going to hurt you."

Of course he wasn't. But if he stayed, she'd deal him a mortal blow, she thought wildly. She huddled deeper into the jacket. "I'm still cold. Go ahead and talk."

He pulled her closer. "I can't talk to you while you're standing there in the middle of the room, stiff as a board. If you're cold, I'll keep you warm." He slid the jacket off her shoulders and down her arms, tossing it away from her body. "Relax, Abby, I'm not going to..."

His words trailed away as the jacket dropped to the floor. Seeing the shock in his eyes, her heart crumbled into tiny bits as she stood up straighter and laid her hands over her gently protruding abdomen.

"Now you know. This is why I ran away, Damien." Now that she didn't have to hide anymore, the calm of utter despair settled over her. "I couldn't face you and tell you I was pregnant. I couldn't bear to inflict that kind of pain on you. I know very well how you feel about children, about ever having children of your own again. I'm sorry," she whispered. "I never intended for you to know. I won't make any demands on you, Damien. You'll never have to know anything about this child."

Slowly he dragged his gaze from her abdomen up to her face. "Dear God, is that what you think, Abby?"

"Is that really what you think of me?" he whispered. "That I wouldn't want to know you were having my child, that I wouldn't want you to come to me for help? That I wouldn't want to know about my child?"

The shock in his eyes had turned to pain, and she looked away.

"I saw how hard it was for you to be around Maggie and Casey. I felt your pain every time you looked at them. And after what you told me about your wife and your son, I understood very well why you didn't ever want to have children again." She closed her eyes and swallowed. "The last thing you said to me was you didn't want any more children. I didn't want to hurt you again."

He gripped her shoulders, forcing her to turn to face him again. "You kept this from me to protect me?"

He sounded dumb-struck. "You didn't intend to tell me because you didn't want to hurt me? There are laws about child support, you know. At the very least you could force me to support our baby."

Her heart surged painfully at the words *our baby*. Then she pushed his hands away. "I don't want money from you," she said, her words whipping at him. "All I want to do is protect you. I don't want you to be hurt anymore."

"You're doing it again, Abby." Instead of the anger she expected, his words were a gentle sigh of reproach, and she looked up at him, startled. "Don't you remember that you don't have to be strong all the time? Once in a while you can lean on someone else."

Abby bit her lip before she could tell him that the only person she wanted to lean on was him. Her hand hovered protectively on her abdomen as she watched him.

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He cupped her face in his hands and looked down at her, and she drew in her breath. Instead of the pain she'd expected to see, there was only understanding in his eyes. "A few months ago I would have been appalled at the idea of having another child. I would have fought the idea with everything inside me. But that was before I met you."

He slid his hands down her arms and curled his fingers around hers, holding on tightly. "You made me come alive again, Abby. I was living in the darkness of my own hell, and you made me come out into the sunshine, let it burn all my bitterness away." His grip on her hands tightened, became more desperate. "I'll always feel the pain of Tyler's loss, and that of my unborn child. I'll never forget them, but now I have the sun in my life again and I never want to let it go. I want you, Abby, and I want our child. I love you."

Abby turned her hands in his, gripped him until her knuckles turned white. "I love you, too, Damien."

That's why I couldn't tell you about the baby." Letting go of him, she smoothed one hand over the hardness of her belly. "I wouldn't have been able to bear seeing the pain in your eyes every time you looked at me, knowing that I was the one responsible for it."

A small smile crept into his eyes as he looked down at her belly. "The way I remember it, you weren't completely responsible for that."

"You know what I mean," she cried, trying to pull away. "I know what kind of person you are, Damien."

You would do the right thing, even though it would kill you in the process. And I couldn't do that to you.

I couldn't bear to watch you die, piece by piece, as I got bigger and bigger with your baby." She tried to pull away, but he wouldn't let her go. "And I didn't even want to think about what it would be like after our baby was born. I couldn't do that to you."

Her expression softened. "But as soon as I knew I was pregnant, I wanted this baby more than anything in the world. It's a part of you, Damien. Even if I couldn't have you, I wanted your baby."

"You can have me, Abby." He took her hands again, brought them to his chest. "Please take me. I love you. Marry me, Abby. I want to share my life with you, grow old with you, die with you in my arms. I want everything we

can have together, including children." He laid his hand on the swell of her abdomen, and she felt warmth move through her. "Especially this baby."

She searched his face. "Are you sure, Damien?"

"I'm sure." Slowly he drew her close and wrapped his arms around her. "I had a lot of time to think during those three months I spent looking for you. During the night, when there wasn't anything except my thoughts to keep me company, I faced a lot of things. You were right. I was using my regrets about my marriage and my guilt at Carol and Tyler's deaths as a shield to protect myself from being hurt again. If I told myself I didn't deserve any happiness, then I didn't have to worry about losing it. Once I realized that, it changed the way I thought about a lot of things."

He paused and gave her a blinding smile. "Two of the most important are named Maggie and Casey."

Maybe saving them makes up, just a little, for not being able to save Tyler. So if you insist on running away from me and make me follow you, consider yourself warned. I'm going to have to drag you home again because those little girls need their aunt. And their uncle. And I need those little girls."

A huge ball of tears lodged in her throat as she held him more tightly. "And I need you, Damien. I love you so much," she said fiercely. "I don't understand the miracle that happened, but I'm not going to give you another chance to get away from me."

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He leaned away from her and smoothed the hair away from her face. "As if I would want one. And there's nothing to understand. There was only one miracle all along, and that miracle was you, Abby."

"Are you sure you don't mind about this baby?" she whispered. "Really sure?"

"I'm thrilled about this baby," he assured her, laying his hands on her belly. "The best things in life come along when you least expect them." His smile was infinitely tender, and she knew he wasn't talking only about their child. The two of them had been gifts to each other.

He kissed her once, a long, lingering caress, then said, "Given a choice, I would have preferred to wait a while to have children, but only for selfish reasons. I'd like to have you to myself for as long as possible."

Reaching up, she wrapped her arms around his neck. "We have about five months," she whispered. "So we'd better make the best of it."

"Shall we start right now?" he murmured into her ear.

"You must have read my mind." She pulled him closer and kissed him again, pouring her heart into him.

In answer he swept her up into his arms and climbed the stairs, not stopping until he came to the bedroom. He lowered her onto the bed like she was a precious, fragile treasure, following her down and covering her body with his.

She tried to go slowly, to let the fire build gradually, but all the need and desire she'd suppressed for three months came roaring into life. Frantically she pulled at his clothes, needing to touch him, to make sure he was real. When all their clothes lay on the floor, flung in every direction, she pulled him to her.

"I need you, Damien. I've needed you for so long. Don't make me wait any longer."

"Abby," he groaned, trying to resist her seeking hands. "I wanted to be careful, to go slow."

"We have the rest of our lives for slow," she whispered, drawing him into her. "I can't wait."

As he surged into her, the tiny ripples of desire exploded into a huge fireball, blinding her to everything but the taste and feel and sound of Damien. Somewhere in the flames their souls touched and twined together, fused into one by the heat of their love. Wrapping her arms around him, she held him tightly as he murmured her name, over and over.

They lay on the bed for a long time, arms and legs tangled, sunshine warming them. Finally Damien moved, easing away from her and studying her face. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Focusing her eyes, she saw the worry on his face and smiled. "I don't think I've ever been better in my life."

"I mean the baby. I wasn't exactly careful. We didn't hurt the baby, did we?"

Her heart moved in her chest as she watched him. Then she felt an answering flutter in her abdomen.

Smiling through the mist that filled her eyes, she took his hand and laid it on her belly. "The baby is happy, too," she whispered. "Can you feel her?"

Damien was motionless for a moment, then suddenly looked up at her, awe and wonder in his eyes.

"Yes," he said, his voice barely louder than a single breath. "She kicked me."

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"I think she's saying she's glad to meet you," Abby whispered, pressing her fingers into Damien's.

Through his hand she felt the faint flutter and roll of the baby, binding them together. It was the feel of forever.

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