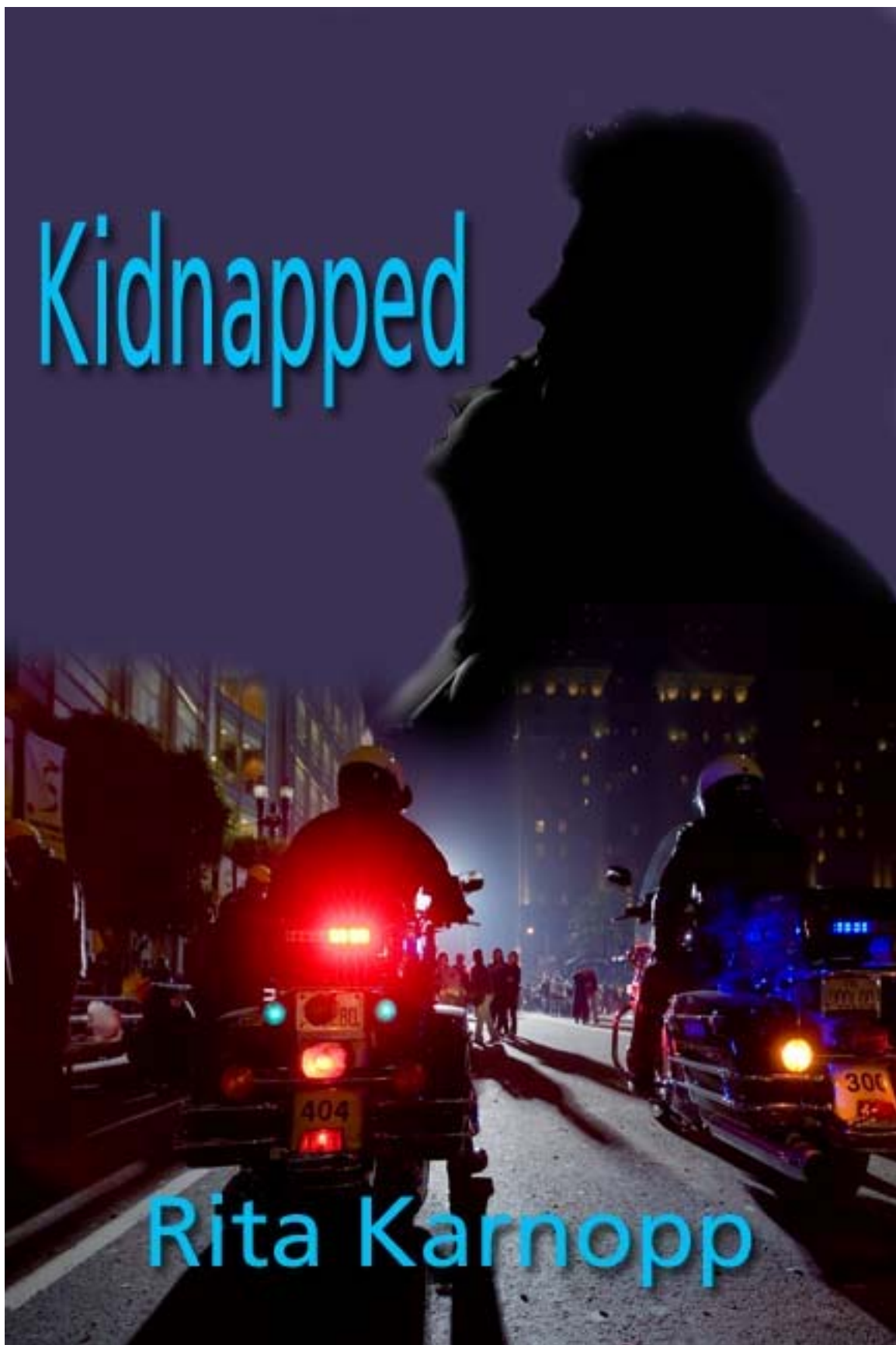


Kidnapped

Rita Karnopp



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Chapter One

This time she'd been so sure. But then every time she'd been so sure. Instead Laura Palmer read the word *negative* through her tears.

"Laura, are you listening, dear?"

She adjusted the receiver on her shoulder, cleared her throat and answered, "Yes." Her voice sounded shaky and high-pitched even to her own ears. Her mother-in-law meant well, but her words didn't soothe the ache Laura felt inside.

"You've been through this before. You know how to handle it. Just be grateful you have little Amie now. Aaron told me he's never seen you happier. If he saw you now, he'd be very disappointed. You dry those tears and count your blessings. Not everyone is fortunate enough to adopt a baby without waiting years and many never even have that chance."

Mother Palmer may have thought her words came across sympathetic, but Laura knew it was the opposite. At times like this, she found herself being none too subtly reminded she was the *in-law*. Mother Palmer's first thoughts were for her son. No matter what happened he would always be perfect in her eyes.

If only she knew the truth. Her perfect son had both a wife and a girlfriend. Laura wanted to scream at her mother-in-law, "I'm going to divorce him as soon as I can!" She remained quiet. No one could know the truth, not until the one-year clause on the adoption papers was satisfied. Laura felt grateful that Aaron agreed to go along with the adoption for her sake. If she could never have a child of her body, at least she had a chance to have a daughter. And Laura had to grasp this one chance, even if it meant bargaining for a year of Aaron's life.

"Are you there? Laura?"

"Yes, I was collecting myself," she lied. "I suppose you're right, Mother. I just... I want...I want to be pregnant like everyone else. I want to feel a baby grow inside me. Don't misunderstand, Amie is wonderful and I love her. The past six months have proven how much I've wanted a child." Laura paused to swallow the lump that rose.

"Of course you have needs," Mother Palmer stated. "But don't dwell on them. You'll get yourself all upset, then it'll create problems just like before."

Laura took a deep breath. "What do you mean by that?"

"You know what I'm talking about, dear, all those fits of tears and depression because you couldn't get pregnant nearly destroyed your marriage. Aaron couldn't have taken much more. I'm glad you have Amie and you're happy. Things are going so well for the both of you."

If only she knew, Laura thought. Pausing for control, she snuggled the remote phone against her chin and shoulder, while dropping a small log into the Franklin stove. She loved the smell and sounds of burning wood. It had a warm, welcoming feel to it, unlike the voice on the phone. "I don't think you're being fair," she stated, closing the door handle with the sole of her Nike.

"What do you mean, dear?"

"Aaron created a lot of that unhappiness." Laura rubbed her hands in front of the crackling fire. "It wasn't just me!" she added, sitting back on the couch with a defiant bounce. "He volunteered to do all that traveling. He was gone more than he was home." She looked out the family room window. The snowy caps of the Little Belts rose like large, pointed breasts of Mother Earth.

"Now, dear, don't get upset with me. I agree he did add to the problem by not being there for you, but you must admit, it must have been hard for him with all that crying of yours. Men hate tears. I don't think you should blame him for being absent. It would have been nice had he been able to give you more comfort, but men aren't like that. It's all in the past now. You have Amie and it appears you and Aaron have patched things up."

"Yes, we are both trying," Laura lied. "Saturday and Sunday he's going to an archery show in Chicago," she added, changing the subject from her empty marriage.

"That's wonderful, Laura. Why don't you bring Amie over here? I don't have a thing planned and—"

"Thank you, Mother, but I'm not going," she stated, firmer than she'd meant to.

"Why not? You don't really have a good reason not to go. Besides, think about Aaron! He needs a wife, which you've neglected for some time—"

"I don't deserve that, Mother Palmer. I'm a very good wife. Has Aaron complained to you?" she asked in a choked voice.

"Well, certainly not, dear. I just meant... well, you know, a man has needs. I think he wants you with him because he needs attention, too. You seem to be too absorbed with Amie."

Laura tucked her legs up under her and reached for her lukewarm, herbal tea. The usually soothing huckleberry flavor had turned bitter; like the conversation. "Has Aaron complained?" she asked again, setting her cup on the saucer with a loud clank.

"You know Aaron, he doesn't really complain. Never did as a boy either. He gets that sullen look and I know what's wrong even without asking. He's unhappy about something. You need to spend time together. Bring Amie here for the weekend."

"I'll think about it, Mother. Thanks for the offer," she added, an edge to her voice. "I'll call you after I've decided."

"What's there to decide, Laura? It's simple, you don't want to admit Amie would be fine with me—"

"That's ridiculous!" Laura interrupted. "I haven't considered going, that's all. Like I said, I'll call you later and let you know."

"It might be just the thing you and Aaron need. When couples adopt a child they're relieved from the pressures of trying and many times pregnancy is the result. Go with Aaron, you never know."

"I'll give it some thought. Bye, Mother," Laura added before slamming the receiver down into the phone base. She didn't want to let Mother Palmer have a chance to add a few more words of aggravation.

Damn! Why did she always have to find fault? Would it ever occur to her that her son might be the one with the dark moods? He kept so much inside; it wasn't easy to penetrate the protective shell he'd put around himself. Laura was at the point where she didn't care

anymore. She looked forward to when it would be just her and Amie. No fighting, no sneaking around, and no pretending.

It'd been over a month ago that she'd found out Aaron had a girlfriend. The slightly plump, twenty-three-year-old didn't look his type with her pouting lips and bleached blonde, spiked hair. Then again, maybe Sandy Knight was Aaron's type. He certainly didn't find his wife of any interest, Laura thought. Jealousy seeped into her consciousness before she shrugged the feeling away. Perhaps he had a right to have a relationship with another woman. After all, he stayed only to satisfy the adoption requirements.

It seemed Amie had softened Aaron's hardened exterior. Since her arrival, he spent more time at home, if Laura could stretch the truth into calling it home. He did seem interested in Amie. A time or two she'd caught him rocking her while they both slept.

"Are you going to answer me?"

Laura looked up into Aaron's icy, blue eyes and jumped slightly. "Oh, you startled me. I didn't hear you come in."

"I was wondering if the office called?"

She sensed his dark mood. "Yes. They said you can pick up your tickets and everything is all set at the Hilton."

"Finally. I was beginning to think they hadn't accepted my registration. I'll be gone all weekend. Not that you care."

"Are you trying to pick a fight?" she asked, watching him loosen his tie.

"You could show some interest. This is a dream of mine, you know."

"I showed interest. You told me to mind my own business." Laura curled her feet under her thigh aware the gesture aggravated him.

"I don't recall saying anything like that. You have a way of exaggerating."

"Exaggerating, my eye. You never remember the hurtful things you say when you've been drinking and arguing."

"I haven't had a drink since—"

"We made love? Is it that hard for you to admit?" She hated the bitchy way she sounded. He brought out the worst in her.

"Sex. I don't think love had anything to do with it."

Laura choked back the hurtful feelings that threatened to surface. "Six more months, Aaron, then you won't have to keep up this charade. You can hate me as much as you like, and you won't even have to hide it."

"I don't hate you, Laura."

"Really? Could have fooled me." She bolted from the couch and ran up the stairs to Amie's room. Laura didn't wait for his answer.

Aaron stared up the stairs, long after he'd heard Amie's bedroom door close. Why did he taunt Laura? Because he resented she could move on without him? Because she blamed him for not giving her a baby of her own? He'd agreed Laura could have Amie after they split. That meant Laura would have what she wanted... but what would he have? What did he want after their marriage was finished?

There were days, like today, that he wished he'd never agreed to this pretend marriage. Then, there were times when he watched Laura with Amie and couldn't imagine a prettier

picture. Laura was a wonderful mother. She could learn a thing or two about being a wife, though.

Maybe what bothered him most was the fact that in six months Laura would be taking Amie away from him. Laura acted as though the child was hers alone. Didn't it occur to her that he might have feelings for the child? He'd seriously considered asking for joint custody when they filed for divorce.

The word *divorce* stopped him cold. Where had they gone wrong? Was it his endless nights spent away from home? He traveled a lot with his work. He knew it was an excuse, and he hated himself for using it. If he were honest with himself, he'd admit Laura had needed him and he'd successfully run away from her and his responsibilities as a husband.

He glanced up the stairs, then slowly took them, one after another. At the top landing he glanced left toward Laura's bedroom, then turned right to head for his own. This was a damn ridiculous setup. Unfortunately it was one he'd suggested in a fit of anger. One mouthy comment he regretted more than most.

Tossing his shirt and tie on a chair, he headed for the bathroom, leaving a trail of slacks, socks, and jockey shorts. He stepped into the shower and turned on the water. The spray pounded down on him, beating him as though he'd been a bad boy.

Was it guilt that made him agree to stay for the one year? Or did he use the clause in the adoption papers as an excuse to stay in the hope things would change between them? Aaron adjusted the water to a gentle cascade.

He wished he hadn't made the *sex* comment earlier. He knew what he was doing the night he'd made love to her; he'd only hoped she wanted him as much as he wanted her. In the morning she seemed to have turned to ice. Her reaction left him feeling as if he had violated her. Taken advantage of her. How could he have misread her intentions?

He'd turned to Sandy for...what? Reassurance he was a desirable man? To prove he could still get a woman to want him? Maybe he wanted to make Laura jealous. Damn, he didn't know himself. Sandy meant nothing, yet everything.

He was a king in her eyes, so she said. She said he was the best lover she'd ever had. A man needed to hear things like that. A man needed to... shit! Why the hell was he trying to justify his own actions to himself?

He only knew he didn't want to make any more mistakes. He wanted his wife back.

Stranger Abductions, Laura read, tucking her feet under her

She always first flipped to the glossy back page of her magazine that offered reviews of the latest romance novels. The current info on writers and their latest novels could wait a few minutes as she studied the pictures and accompanying information on missing children. She never stopped hoping one day she'd recognize one of the little, smiling faces. How incredible it would be to actually be an integral link to unite a lost or stolen child with his or her parents. Laura drew in a long breath. Maybe it was her need to know parents cared for their children; that they didn't desert them, like her mother had.

Laura glanced over at her precious Amie. Her round cheeks were flushed with sleep. Her dusty blue eyes matched Aaron's. Her round, small face looked just like a picture of Laura at age one and a half. She and Amie shared a special connection. Their mother had deserted them. "I won't desert you, Amie," Laura whispered to her daughter.

The slippery magazine slid from her grip and dropped to the floor. Laura glanced down, then stared in disbelief at the dusty blue eyes of a child staring up at her from the glossy page.

Laura felt a rush of heat race across her cheeks. She found it hard to catch her breath. *It couldn't be!* she told herself. Laura read the words under her breath, "*Stolen from Jorgenson Grocery shopping cart, one-year-old Michelle Berkhart. Last seen in Chicago, Illinois, April 13, 2005. Pale skin, blue eyes, soft brown hair. Distinguishing marks: Scar line underside of chin and small, round blemish just below right eye. Reward for any information. Donna and Ken Berkhart.*"

"No!" Laura cried out, yet she was positive the picture was of Amie. Who could play such a cruel joke on her? The shrill ringing of the doorbell startled Laura. She grabbed the magazine and stuffed it under the sofa cushion. Shakily, she walked to the front door.

"Yes?" she asked, looking through the peephole.

"It's me, Lor! Jeez, what's got you so jittery?" Sharon asked, barging through the slightly opened door.

"Nothing. Amie and I were taking a nap. I don't suppose you could come back later or tomorrow, could you?" she asked, realizing her tone sounded strained, but she couldn't help it.

"You're not fooling me one bit. I know you too well. One, you don't take naps, this is your reading time, and two, I can tell you're hiding something," Sharon announced, sitting on the blanket next to Amie. "Gosh, she's so cute. I wish she were mine!"

"Not funny!" Laura snapped.

"God! You and Aaron have another fight? That's got to be it. Might as well tell me, you know I'm not leaving 'til you do," she stated, leaning over the sleeping bundle. "I just love how little kids smell. You still use that Love's baby bath and shampoo, don't you? It smells so innocent and fresh."

"Sharon, I'm really not in the mood for company. I need some time to myself," Laura said, struggling to contain the panic that rioted within her. She sat down on the couch, hoping the magazine stayed hidden beneath the cushion.

"I'm not company, Lor. I'm your best friend, remember? You don't have to talk to me, if you don't want to. But, it's obvious something is dreadfully wrong. You know you can trust me and I won't betray you. Talk to me!"

Tears stung Laura's eyes, then rolled down her cheeks. "Aaron and I are beyond repair, that I accept. But, Amie has been everything I've ever wanted," she sobbed.

"Right. So what's the problem?" Sharon asked, leaning back against the edge of the coffee table. "He isn't backing out on your deal, is he? God! That's it, isn't it? He went to an attorney to file divorce now, didn't he? I should have guessed it—"

"Stop it! Aaron isn't backing out on our agreement." Laura felt her friend's gaze burning into her. Just thinking about the picture of Amie in the magazine shattered her composure. She needed to think this through. Dare she tell even Sharon? Laura's mind fluttered away in anxiety.

"Well?" Sharon prompted.

Looking up, Laura read the confusion and genuine concern in Sharon's expression. Compared to Laura's short and petite frame, Sharon was rather tall and large-boned; yet, she had a shape to die for. She had the oval face of a model, unlike Laura's own round, young-girl

look. Sharon's long, blonde hair made Laura's brown, very short style lack any glamour. Sharon never looked anything but first class. They were opposites in personalities, too. Maybe that's what made them such good friends.

Laura reached under the cushion, opened the magazine and tossed it to Sharon. She watched her friend in silence as she looked down at the open page.

"God! Oh, God! It can't be!" she stuttered, looking down at sleeping Amie, then back to the picture. "Oh, God, Lor! I can't even begin to imagine what you're going through. It's impossible! But if it's not you know what this means?"

Like a broken dam, tears streamed down Laura's face. "I don't... haven't..." Smothering a sob, she looked at Sharon. "I love her." Tears blinded her eyes and choked her throat. She felt the comforting arms of her friend surround her, and allowed herself to take the offered strength and support.

Laura gulped hard, then moved back against the cushion. "I haven't had time to think this through. I just read it before you came. How will I ever tell Aaron? I mean... I'll lose everything."

"Don't tell him!"

"What? You can't be serious!" Laura stated, rigidly holding her tears in check.

"She's your daughter now. You and Aaron have nothing to salvage. The next six months is all you have to be concerned about. What if you'd never seen this?"

"But I have. I can't ignore the fact Amie's natural parents didn't desert her. They're looking for her. Can you imagine how they're feeling right now? Their one-year-old daughter was stolen and they haven't seen her for six months!" Laura's voice broke miserably. She lifted her gaze to Sharon, pleading for an answer.

"It might be best for Amie to never know the truth. Think about it, Laura, how would you ever give her back?" Sharon asked, gazing down at Amie.

Laura stared at her sleeping daughter. The realization that, lawfully, Amie wasn't her *daughter* tore at her heart. "I can't give her back. She's mine! I don't know what to do."

"God, Lor, this means... oh boy, do you realize what this means?" Sharon asked, turning toward Laura, a hint of nervousness in her gesture. "Someone stole Amie and sold her to that adoption agency! I never asked before, but how much did you and Aaron pay for the adoption?"

Laura bit her lip in dismay. She'd never given it much thought before. All adoption agencies charged for their services. "Well, we paid the agency ten thousand dollars. But I paid an additional five thousand dollars in cash. Oh, don't look so shocked. Dr. Jennings told me he understood our situation. The additional money would guarantee we'd get the next child or baby available. I understand that's a bit higher than some agencies, but it's still in the ballpark," Laura said, dropping her lashes quickly to hide her discomfort.

"In the ballpark! Damn, Lor, I'm sure it isn't even close. You may be one smart library research tech, in my opinion, and I might be a simple gynecologist's receptionist, but I'd suspect something was wrong if they even hinted they wanted five thousand dollars cash on the side. Even if they're reassuring you it's only to secure being put at the top of the list. I'm not even sure ten thousand dollars is a normal adoption charge. Of course I know diddle about these things. Didn't you or Aaron even question it?"

"No," she had to admit. "We... I wanted a baby so bad. Aaron agreed to whatever I wanted. It's my fault! He's going to hate me even more when he finds out what I did. He'll think I knew it was wrong and that I didn't care that I put him in an illegal situation. I can't even begin to think how angry he'll be, or what he'll say. I didn't tell him about the cash payment," Laura admitted. Deep sobs racked her insides. She glanced up at Sharon and watched her shaking her head, knowing what this new information meant.

"How could you have kept that from him? Hasn't he noticed that large an amount missing from your account?" Sharon asked.

"I withdrew it from a personal IRA. One I had before we got married. He would never have known... what am I going to do?" Another hot tear rolled down her cheek.

"First of all, you're not going to say one word to Aaron," Sharon announced.

"What? I can't keep this from him. I'll never be able to pretend nothing has happened—"

"Stop it!" Sharon shouted, then glanced down at Amie afraid she'd awakened the baby. "Just listen for a minute. Let me contact a friend of mine. He's more in touch with this sort of thing. I'll give him the name of the adoption agency. Let Brett investigate before we decide what to do."

For the first time since seeing the announcement, Laura felt a ray of hope. "You think this ad could be wrong? I mean, if the mother was a good mother, no one could have stolen Amie from a grocery cart."

"You really don't believe that, do you?" Sharon asked.

Laura looked down at her clenched fists pressed into her lap. "No. It wasn't a nice thing to say. Actually it sounds awful. I'm sure any stolen child puts the parents through a guilt trip and unthinkable pain. Whoever kidnapped Amie had to have been a pro and knew just how and when to strike. My heart cries for every parent who has lost a child like this and now my heart is crying for me!" Laura wept aloud, rocking back and forth. She allowed Sharon to comfort her.

At this moment, it seemed impossible she could pretend everything was fine. How would she ever keep Aaron from finding out the truth? And how could she ever give Amie back?

Chapter Two

"Mother told me you'd decided to come with me. She thinks we've returned to wedded bliss and trying for another kid. What made you change your mind?" Aaron asked, careful not to let any signs of disappointment edge his words. He'd noticed a sudden change in Laura's attitude over the past few days. She appeared nervous and sullen. She jumped at any noise, and it seemed she constantly fought back tears.

"I thought about going along with the charade... well, I... you wanted me to be interested in your work. I thought the change of scenery might be good, too," she babbled, scrambling for an excuse he'd easily believe. "But lately, I haven't been feeling all that well. You know how these headaches hang on sometimes. Besides, you didn't seem all that glad I was thinking of going. Maybe I ruined some other plans you might have had for Chicago."

He noticed she avoided any direct eye contact except for shooting him several quick glances. She sat on the edge of his bed, her back straight and tense. Something was wrong, he felt certain of it, but after everything that's gone on between them he doubted she would confide in him. "If you're staying home, why don't you still take Amie over to stay with Mother? You can sit around, read or even work on a plot for your new novel. You didn't ruin any of my plans, as you called them, I'll be too busy with business to have much free time." He watched for her reaction out of the corner of his eye.

"I don't need to take Amie to Mother while I get rid of my headache. She is soothing and a comfort to me," Laura broke off with a sob.

He studied her thoughtfully for a moment. "Mother won't be happy you changed your mind. I told her she could have Amie for the weekend. It wouldn't hurt to give her up for two days, would it?" he asked, watching the play of emotions on Laura's face. He'd struck a chord, but which one, he wasn't sure. "Is something bothering you, something more than usual, Laura? What I mean is, you seem upset. Maybe you ought to come with me and get away from here," he suggested, hoping she might agree. Her quick negative left him feeling rejected and angry.

"I plan to spend a mother/daughter weekend with Amie," she answered.

He noticed her attempt at a half-hearted smile. "You can be angry with me, for whatever reason, but my mother has been nothing but nice to you. It wouldn't hurt to give her some happiness for one weekend. She has a right to get to know her granddaughter. Our divorce is going to upset her more than you can imagine. Would it hurt you to let Mother have Amie for the weekend?" he asked, studying Laura with curious intensity.

He slipped his palms around her slender waist and pulled her up against him. Feeling no resistance, he shivered with want and it warned him to be cautious. She melted against him and he leaned down to capture her lips in his. She tasted good, better than good. She answered with a need that surprised him. Dare he believe she knew what she was doing?

Gently he eased her down onto the bed. He kissed the quickened pulse at her throat, and then recaptured her full lips. He kissed her with a hunger, demanding a response, a reassurance she still wanted him. She answered with a tenderness that excited him.

"Tell me you don't feel it," he whispered. She tensed beneath him. He bolted from the bed and her. He turned around to hide his hurting pride.

"Aaron? I'm sorry."

He felt her palm brush the top of his shoulder. He turned around and noticed she'd put several steps between them. "I won't try that again. I don't turn on and off like a light bulb. Obviously I misread something. Now, I suppose you're pissed because I broke your sacred *don't touch me agreement*! Damn it, Laura. It's this kind of crap that makes me realize that out divorce can't come soon enough." Aaron wished he could have shut up way before the hurtful words came out. He wanted her. He could tell from her kiss, she wanted him too. Then what was wrong? Why did she turn away from him—reject him? He wanted to tell her he was wanted to give their marriage another try. But how could he? She had rejected his attempt to make love to her, so she sure as hell wasn't going to agree to their trying again.

She refused to look directly at him. "It's not you. It's me. I have some things to work out. You may be free sooner than you think."

Aaron wondered what she needed to work out. Free sooner than I thought. Could there be another man? The thought hadn't occurred to him before. Damn, he didn't want to imagine her in the arms of another man. Did that mean he still loved her? Or did he want her only because she didn't want him? Suddenly Aaron didn't want to go to Chicago, but he had no choice. "If there's something you need to tell me, come out with it, Laura. I hate games, you know that."

"I'm not playing games, Aaron. I need some time alone."

"So you can play house with some other man?" He blurted it out without thinking. He watched her startled expression. "That's it, isn't it? Christ! You could have been honest with me."

"Honest? You've never told me about Sandy. Is that being honest?"

Aaron stared at Laura in disbelief and even shame. He turned his back to her, unable to face her. Their marriage was a shambles and had even turned into a farce, but the fact was, they were still married. He despised cheating husbands and also cheating wives. He felt like scum because that's exactly what he'd turned into. And now she knew, and that was the worst feeling of all. "You know?" he managed to ask.

"For over a month. The way some people look at me, I'd guess they know, too. I wish you could have kept the zipper up for at least my sake, but I guess that was too much to ask. Maybe you should have offered me just the sex part, then you wouldn't have needed to find a mistress to satisfy you."

He heard the bitterness and hurt in her words. He felt ashamed he had caused those emotions. He should never have hurt her that way. "Sandy doesn't mean a thing to me. We understand each other."

"Like *we* understand each other, right?"

Unable to face her any longer, Aaron grabbed his suitcase and headed for the door. "I never meant to hurt you, Laura. I wish things were different between us. I've tried to make them better. Maybe I haven't tried hard enough."

He paused in the doorway, setting his suitcase down. "I'll be back Sunday night. Maybe we can have a talk? What would you think about calling a truce and giving us another try?" He searched her face and struggled to reach into her thoughts, but got no answers. He held his breath.

"I'm afraid it's too late," she answered.

He watched the tears spill down her cheeks. "Only if you say it's too late. I'm trying here, Lor."

"I know, but, something... I wish... that's your taxi honking its horn. You'd better hurry or you'll miss your flight."

He paused, grabbed his suitcase and hurried down the stairs. He didn't hear her following him, and it saddened him. Something serious had happened. What, he had no idea. But when he got back, nothing would keep him from finding out. She had responded to his kiss. He'd felt it. If there was even a slightest chance they could salvage their marriage; damn, he suddenly wanted to try.

Laura rushed to the window and watched Aaron toss his suitcase into the taxi's back seat, then get into the front. He glanced up her way. She wondered if he saw her from the dimly lit street.

Without knowing what upset her, he'd still offered to help. Maybe she should have told him. She hated keeping it to herself. What if Sharon was wrong about advising her to not tell Aaron? If only she hadn't paid the five thousand dollars without telling him. She'd never done anything deceitful in her life before, and now the one time she did, it backfired. Because of it she could end up losing both Amie and Aaron. Fear gripped her like a vise. When would this nightmare end?

He'd mentioned he wanted them to try again. Did she want to take that chance? He'd been making love to some other woman. They'd said so many hurtful words to each other over the past few years. It hadn't always been like that, but she found it hard to remember when it wasn't.

The doorbell jolted her from her thoughts. It had to be Sharon. Laura ran down the stairs two at a time. Finally she'd have some answers.

"You're just in time," she greeted, swinging the door open, then backing up in surprise as an unfamiliar man smiled at her. "Who are you?" she asked, breathless.

"Brett Hooper. Sharon sent me," he stated in a deep tone that matched his massive frame.

"Where's Sharon?" she asked, looking up and down the dark, silent street. "She's coming, isn't she?"

"She should be here anytime. I could wait in my car until she arrives, if you like," he offered.

Laura paused, then shook her head. "I'm sorry, my manners are deplorable. I'm Laura Palmer, please come in," she offered, opening the door wider. The sound of a sporty Jag squealing to a stop announced Sharon's arrival.

"Hi! Sorry I'm late. Traffic jam and all that," she shouted, sliding out of her car.

Laura couldn't help laughing. "Right! Anyone hear you talk about a traffic jam in Great Falls, Montana, especially this time of night, would laugh you out of the state. Get a life, Sharon," she teased, closing the door behind her friend.

"You've met Brett? Good," Sharon said, rushing past Laura to grasp him by the arm and guide him into the family room. "Is our little lady down for the night?" she asked, sitting beside him on the sofa.

"Yes," Laura answered, impatient for the chitchat to end. She sat on the edge of the recliner, across the coffee table from them. "Well? What did you find out?" Laura asked, staring at first Sharon, then Brett.

"It isn't pretty, that much I can tell you," Brett responded. "Even though I was careful I'm afraid I might have raised some suspicions. We need to get the hard facts without anyone getting the wiser," he added, pausing to pull a small notebook from his inside suit pocket.

Laura couldn't help noticing the fine quality of his clothes. They appeared the latest of fashion and he definitely wore them well. When Sharon mentioned her private investigator friend, Laura had expected a frumpy, middle-aged man with a potbelly and trench coat. Brett Hooper fit more in the Magnum PI category.

"My first advice to you is that you need to tell your husband," he stated in a firm tone.

"No!" Sharon squealed. "He won't understand. He'll hold it against her. Brett, there has to be another way. Aaron is difficult and he and Laura are filing for divorce in six months. If he finds out about this he'll never forgive her. He'll blame her for everything. We have to find out a way to resolve this without his knowing. What if he tried to use it against her and managed to get full custody of Amie?"

"No! Aaron wouldn't do that to me," Laura stumbled over the words. Fear filled her. "You think Aaron would try to get custody of Amie?"

"I don't see how that's possible. Amie needs to be returned to her natural parents," Brett answered, and then paused. "I'm sorry, Laura, but it's a plain fact. I'm interested in finding out who is behind the kidnapping and the selling of these kids. We get the one in charge and we could have a solid case. No matter what we do, Amie still has to be returned to her natural parents," Brett said, flipping pages in his notebook.

"What if I say and do nothing? I can't lose Amie," she whispered, staring at him, only wanting to hear him say she could keep her daughter.

Aaron hurried past the flight attendant and quickly found his seat. If only crowded his mind. If only this trip hadn't been so important. If only Laura would have come along with him. They might have had a chance to change what's happened between them. What could be bothering her? He didn't want to think that he might be right about another man being in her life. Jealousy warred with fear. Could Laura be ill? The thought hadn't occurred to him before. God, what if she had cancer or some other terminal disease? She'd said he might be free sooner than he expected. What did she mean? The possibilities were driving him crazy.

Aaron gritted his teeth. He'd offered to give their marriage another try and she didn't seem to even care. But, she had kissed him back, that he knew for sure. Maybe she was afraid to give them another try. But, this distance between them wasn't the biggest problem right now. He could tell something serious was on her mind.

He braced himself against the plane take-off. He usually enjoyed flying, but not today. He thought of Amie and couldn't help smiling. He'd always be grateful that Laura gave him something he'd never felt before, a need to be a parent. He never dreamed it could feel so powerful, so special. He wanted it all again. He wanted his wife back and he wanted them to be a family. He only hoped it wasn't too late.

A thought jarred him. The five thousand dollars! Could Laura possibly have found out he'd paid the adoption agency an *urgency* price of five thousand dollars cash? But how could

she have found that out? If only he hadn't felt guilty for having a low sperm count. She had such a need to have a baby, but he felt incapable of giving her what she wanted most.

He'd have paid more than five thousand to make Laura happy. Dr. Allen Jennings assured him the payment would lessen the waiting time for their baby, and he came through. Maybe it was wrong to pass money under the table to get put in front of the adoption list, but Laura was so unhappy he wanted to do whatever it took.

Why had they been in such a hurry to decide their marriage was over? It seemed by the time they got Amie, there weren't any hateful, hurting words left to say. They'd built an impregnable wall between them.

He couldn't ask for a sweeter daughter than Amie. She warmed his heart with a single hug. He couldn't get enough of watching her and feeling her chubby arms around his neck. It never occurred to him that he could feel this way. If he faced the brutal truth, he'd admit Sandy didn't fill the void in his heart. She turned out to be a mistake from the beginning. He wanted Laura and Amie in his future. Not his past.

Aaron snapped open his briefcase and shuffled through the impressive *Archery Tech* brochures for his sleek new Cougar bow. He, and the entire Braddock-Palmer Archery Tech Company, stood to make a fortune on this new hi-tech bow.

He grabbed for his notes, then paused. He was unable to do anything but stare at a black and white picture of a baby he knew to be Amie. He picked it up and held it toward the light. It had been cut from a milk carton. Who could have put it in his briefcase? Laura? No, it had been locked when he had it at the house. But, someone at the office could have done it. It had been left open on his desk all day.

He read the Burkhart's' desperate plea for the return of their daughter. She'd been stolen from a grocery cart! Good God! How would he tell Laura about this? Aaron covered his face, his eyes brimming with tears. How stupid could he be? The five thousand dollars wasn't to move him ahead of the adoption list. It was to buy a baby!

Aaron reached for the barf bag, holding it tight against his mouth. Nausea assaulted him. Fear filled him. He'd have to tell Laura the truth. They'd lose Amie and in the process he'd lose any chance of getting Laura back. How could things have gone from bad to total disaster?

What if someone had sent Laura the same milk carton picture? That might account for her earlier strange, cryptic comments. It would explain why she said he might be free sooner than he thought. And could have something to do with her total rejection of them working to repair their marriage. It would clarify a lot of things if that were the case. A cold wave of fear washed over him. If Laura found out would she take Amie and run? The thought echoed in his mind. He knew his wife. She'd never give Amie up. The five thousand dollars cash he'd paid up front made him an accessory to kidnapping. He could go to prison—couldn't he? Would his actions implicate Laura? If she didn't know about the money, would it release her from being an accessory? *What had he done?*

The plane had landed. When? Aaron wasn't sure. Dazed by what had been running through his head during the flight, he followed the stream of passengers out into the terminal and down to the baggage carousel. He needed to talk to a lawyer. He knew of only one he could trust. His brother would keep things under wraps until they figured out what to do.

"Aaron! Hey, over here!"

He glanced across the crowded lobby to locate his older brother, Ryan, and nodded an acknowledgement. They hadn't always seen eye-to-eye, especially when Ryan's law school fees took most of the college fund the folks had put away for the two brothers, leaving little for Aaron. He'd gotten over it some years back, suddenly realizing he liked his life and if he had gone to dental school, he would never have created the exciting Cougar bow.

A hug wasn't exactly their way, yet Aaron felt a need. He found himself surprised by Ryan's warm response.

"Hi, guy," Aaron stated, stepping back. "You look like a successful lawyer. You won the Albright case, didn't you?" he asked, leading the way to the baggage area.

"Matter of fact, little brother, I did just that. Most complex case I ever tried. Put the bastard behind bars and the ex-wife and kids are in the Witness Protection Program. Speaking of kids, how do you like being a *dad*? Must admit Laura sounds great on the phone. Say, where is she? Thought she was coming with you," he said, looking around.

"She developed one of those dreadful migraines. She might even take Amie over to Mother's and take advantage of the peace and quiet. She promises to be well by the time I return," he said with little enthusiasm.

"What gives? You seem a hundred miles away and you didn't bring Laura. Don't tell me you're divorcing after finally getting a kid! Here I thought things were going—"

"We're not divorcing," Aaron interrupted, hoping there was a strain of truth in the words. "We're doing okay. Let's stop for coffee before heading to your house. I need to talk to you, and I don't want Doris involved." He stated, grabbing his suitcase off the baggage carousel.

"Sure. I must admit my curiosity is piqued. Doris hates airports so she's busy making hors d'oeuvres. She'll be disappointed Laura didn't come," Ryan said, holding the door open.

Aaron half-listened to Ryan's conversation. He felt a knot tighten in his stomach. He considered telling no one. By remaining silent he might have a better chance of keeping both his wife and daughter. He knew the answer to that lame scenario, but how the hell was he going to explain the situation without sounding like a complete fool?

Why did it seem easier to develop a complicated compound bow and a cutting-edge arrow release, than a solid, loving relationship with his wife? He had no trouble wining, dining and winning over major business accounts, but he couldn't win the affections of his own wife. All his accomplishments and dreams felt empty if he couldn't share them with Laura. She'd been his strength and support in the early years. Now he'd finally achieved his dream, and it seemed barely important without her. Why couldn't he tell her that?

"Mrs. Palmer, do you realize what you're saying?" Brett asked, inching closer to her. "Amie is not your daughter. Her parents are looking for her. You keep silent and one day Amie will find out what you did. You'll lose her and it'll hurt so much more then. You can be sure of that."

"I love Amie. She has been my daughter for six months. I just can't turn it off. It'll destroy me if I have to... if she..." A spasm of grief shook her body. "I'm sorry. This is difficult for me. I know I should return Amie to her natural parents, but what if *my daughter* is better off with Aaron and me? I mean, maybe they don't have the means to properly take care of her and Amie would be happier with us... with me?"

"You're grasping at straws, and you know it. Oh, it's possible she'd be better off with you, but that doesn't change the fact they didn't give her up for adoption. If Amie's parents didn't want the child, you wouldn't have found that ad. I know it sounds harsh, but you're just going to have to face it."

"You have no idea what you're asking me to do. I've wanted a baby for so long. I just can't give her back... like a cup of borrowed sugar," Laura sobbed.

"Let me fill you in on a few facts," Brett stated. He rose from his chair, pacing in front of the expansive windows facing the mountains. "I checked out your gynecologist, Doctor Charles Henderson. He's an interesting fellow. He has a half-million dollar home here in Great Falls. He also has a two-million-dollar estate in Kalispell, Montana. My sources state he has a real swank place on the Big Island, in Hawaii, too. This alone is suspicious. Gynecologists make great money, but not that great. He doesn't come from old money, either."

Laura listened to the large, even-speaking man with interest. "What does that have to do with Amie?" she asked.

"I called in a few favors," Brett continued, "and I learned this guy is more colorful than a kaleidoscope. It's rumored he's seeing someone, but I haven't discovered who ...yet. There's talk he's been hinting at marriage."

Laura gasped, then closed her mouth. She glanced at a pale, unusually quiet Sharon. Why didn't she admit to her involvement with the good doctor? Laura remained silent.

"Doctor Charles Elliot Henderson is clever though. Both properties, the Kalispell and Hawaii, are secured under the name Charlie Elliot. The guy's only thirty-five years old, but he's managed to create quite an empire for himself. That tells us one thing," Brett stated, pausing to look at the two women. "He's important and clever enough to be dangerous."

"You think he's behind the adoption scam?" Laura asked, breathing deep with frustration.

"Of course not," Sharon stated, jumping up from the couch. "As a gynecologist it's natural he would meet women who want kids and can't have them, but that doesn't make him guilty of an adoption scam. He probably refers those patients, like you, to this adoption agency. Maybe they pay him for his referrals. That could explain a lot of his wealth. You're good, Brett, but you've jumped to the wrong conclusion about Doctor Henderson. I've worked for him for almost ten years. He's a good man and he couldn't be involved in this," Sharon stated.

Laura watched a stain of red darken her friend's cheeks. It confirmed Laura's suspicions; Sharon is or was Doctor Henderson's lover. She never seemed to pick the right man. Laura glanced at Brett and wondered what relationship, if any, he had with Sharon.

"No?" Brett asked. "Don't be so sure. I think he's an integral part of the plan. It wouldn't even surprise me if...never mind; I'll keep my suspicions to myself until I find rock-solid evidence. This thing is big. I've got a friend who's in the FBI. Dan Karhu helps me with a touchy case from time to time. I'm going to have a talk with him about this one. The FBI has to be called in on this anyway, since Amie was stolen from Illinois. By rights, we should have called them already. That's another reason why I need to talk to Dan. I'm hoping he can buy us some extra time, before the lid blows on this thing."

"Have you found out anything about the adoption agency itself?" Sharon asked, patting a spot on the couch.

Laura silently watched Brett cross the room and sit down, entwining his fingers with Sharon's.

"Dr. Allen Jennings runs things there." Brett stated. "He's also a gynecologist. It seems the average age of his patients is fifteen years old. My money is on this guy. I'm damn certain all evidence will lead straight to the good Dr. Jennings.

"That's who arranged for us to get Amie. He seemed like a really nice man," Laura offered.

"I think *seemed* is the key word here," Brett interjected.

Laura took an unsteady breath, and then continued. "Jennings told us that Amie's parents died in a boating accident. We didn't much care she wasn't a newborn. I don't think Aaron really wanted to adopt, but one look at Amie and he changed his mind on the spot."

"There isn't anything I can say to lessen your hurt, Mrs. Palmer—"

"Laura," she corrected.

"Laura. You're going to have to pretend you know nothing about what I've just told you about Dr. Henderson or Dr. Jennings," Brett said, standing once again.

"I don't think I can do that. I'm no good at acting. Besides every time I look at Amie I think about never seeing her again," Laura paused to gain control of the emotions that threatened to explode. "I don't know if I can give her back. I think you should investigate her biological parents. If they really don't want her or if they can't give her the kind of love and life that I can, than I want to know." Laura swallowed the lump in her throat. "I won't... I can't send her back to an unloving home."

"Laura," Brett's voice faded to a hushed stillness.

She looked up at him with tear filled eyes.

"You won't have a choice. Amie doesn't belong to you. The sooner you accept that, the easier this is going to be on you. Again, I think you ought to discuss this with your husband, and only your husband. Work it out together. Support each other in your loss."

"I know," Sharon said, adding a touch of excitement to her words. "Take Amie to stay with Mrs. Palmer and you go join Aaron in Chicago."

Brett turned to face the women. "That's a great idea. Get away from here for a while and spend time with your husband, Laura. I know you can't forget all of this, but maybe some time away will give you a chance to look at it in the proper perspective. I should have more answers for you by the time you get back. Things will work out, you'll see," he said, heading for the door with Sharon now clinging to his arm.

Laura wondered if Brett was trying to convince her or himself. His words sounded hollow to her. How could things work out? From what he said Amie would have to go back to her natural parents. Things wouldn't change, even if she went to Chicago to be with Aaron.

Mimicking Sharon's gesture, Laura wiggled her fingers goodbye before she shut the front door and locked it. Silence fell around her. She stood, staring out the window at the Little Belts. Her head ached with confusion. Her heart ached with the idea of loss.

She thought about what Brett said about going to Aaron. Their time together might be as limited as... their time with Amie. Laura realized she had to go before he found out the

truth. She owed him that much. Maybe she should give him the time of his life. The *try again* he wanted. When they divorced, at least she'd have one last weekend to cherish.

Chapter Three

Aaron stalled, waiting for the hostess to leave. He took a long swallow from his beer, before he turned to Ryan. "How am I going to explain what's happened? I wish I could back and undo it, but I can't. Here, this might help," he said, tossing the folded milk carton across the table. He watched an expression of disbelief wash over his brother's face as he stared at the picture.

"Good, God! Tell me you and Laura didn't steal Amie," he said, a glaring accusation darkening his tone.

"Don't be ridiculous, of course we didn't. I found this in my briefcase. Someone from the office must have put it there. We adopted Amie, *above-board*, but now I'm not so sure about the adoption agency. God, Ryan, I'm sick over this. I love having Amie in my life. I never knew what being a father would feel like. Now that I know, I can't imagine my life without her in it. She has twisted her little smile around my heart. I can hardly wait to get home from work so I can listen to her babble. It's an incredible feeling to rock her in my arms and watch her sleep at night." He paused and gave his quiet brother a quick glance.

Worse, if we have to give Amie back to her natural parents, I'm pretty sure I'll lose Laura. Things haven't been good between us. Shit, they've been damned awful. I asked her to give our marriage another try. I know I haven't shown it much lately, but I do love her. I don't deserve a second chance, but I'm trying damn hard to get one. I don't want to lose her." Aaron knew he wasn't telling Ryan everything. What would he think of his brother if when word *infidelity* surfaced? He prayed no one in the family would ever know about his fling, and how he'd hurt Laura with it. Heaven help him, if she did give him that second chance, he'd never hurt her like that again.

"This isn't your fault. You thought the adoption agency was legit. I've suspected things weren't all that good between you and Laura. Maybe if you pull together on this thing, it'll strengthen your marriage," Ryan stated, reaching for his beer.

"I need your advice. I...well...there's a catch. Laura was so unhappy, and well, I didn't want her to have to wait years to adopt. You should see the list. It's pathetic. I engineered something on the side. You gotta understand I thought it was kinda wrong, but I, hell, I was thinking of Laura. I gave Jennings, the owner of the adoption agency, five thousand in cash to put us at the top of the list." Aaron swallowed a swig of beer fast and hard. It left a bitter taste in his mouth. He guzzled more, hoping it would get better as it went down. It didn't.

"Easy with that. You don't usually drink. It'll hit you like a sedative pretty soon. Here come our burgers. I suggest you eat before you end up drunker than a skunk," Ryan said, snickering in spite of the unsettling information. He stared down at the picture of Amie. "There's no doubt, is there? The baby shown here is your daughter?"

"No doubt. God, how could this be happening? I've been such an asshole and now that I realize it, I think it's too late. When Laura finds out I'll lose her. I don't even want to think about it. She'll think I bought Amie. I didn't, Ryan, I swear it. I just didn't want Laura to have to wait. She's wanted a kid so bad. My sperm count is so low, hell, I couldn't give her one any other way." Aaron took a bite of the burger and found it as tasteless as the beer.

"You realize you can't keep Amie. No matter what happens, your adoption isn't legal. Lord, this isn't going to be easy. You need to tell Laura. Keeping this from her could only make things worse. Like I said before, if you work on it together, you might still salvage your marriage."

"Amie was kidnapped here in Chicago. I want to see her folks," Aaron stated.

"No. That's the worst thing you could do. Until we get proof that the agency is stealing kids, there's no proof you weren't in on Amie's kidnapping. Which, I might add is a Federal offense. You could find yourself facing prison time! As it is, I'm an Officer of the Court. I'm bound by law to report this."

"What? You can't be serious?" Aaron slammed his hand down on the table. "I'd never do a thing like that," his voice rose. He looked around the restaurant, before he leaned forward, speaking in a lower voice. "You know I'm not capable of anything so vile."

"I know, Aaron, but it's not me you'll need to convince. These people obviously aren't amateurs. They can twist things around and you'll be left taking the blame. Listen to me, you stay clear of ..." he glanced down at the milk carton, then continued, "Donna and Ken Berkhart. I'll get some people checking on this Dr. Jennings at the adoption agency. You keep a low profile until we know something. But when you get home, you have to talk to Laura about this."

Aaron reached for his beer but picked up his burger instead. "I don't think I can tell Laura. She loves Amie, and I'm not so sure she has any love left for me."

"I don't know what to tell you. You can't keep it quiet forever. I won't say anything about it for now. Let me check things out," Ryan stated again.

"I wonder who put that picture in my briefcase. If only we could ride it out and no one would have to find out. Amie has adjusted to us as her parents. Christ, Amie is all we have," Aaron said with a bitter edge to his words.

"Listen to what you're saying. You'd knowingly keep some other folks' kid? They're out there searching for their daughter. They're probably sick, worried and heart-broken. They have no idea whether Amie is alive or dead. Tell me, is that fair?"

Aaron shook his head. "I'm sorry, Ryan. I didn't mean it. It's just that I love her. God, I love that little girl with my whole heart." He choked back his tears, embarrassed by his lack of control.

"I know. I'm sorry, Aaron. There's no doubt this situation stinks. For your own sake, start adjusting to the fact that Amie will have to be returned to her natural parents," Ryan whispered, then stood, reaching into his pocket for his wallet. "We'd better get going. Doris will be angry if we get there too late."

"I'm not going to be good company. I think I'll go back to the hotel and study my notes for tomorrow's meeting. I'll have a taxi bring me to your house for dinner tomorrow. I wouldn't miss Doris's Chinese cooking for anything." Aaron adjusted his jacket, grabbed his suitcase in one hand and briefcase in the other, before following Ryan out of the restaurant.

"I'm going to talk to Doris about this. She might be able to help with Laura, if you need it. Like I said, I'll keep this under wraps as long as I can. But being a State Attorney doesn't give me the right to withhold evidence on a kidnapping. We're talking FBI on this one, my friend. You're into some serious shit here, Aaron. I'm your brother and I'll do all I can to help."

We'll talk more about it tomorrow. Maybe I'll have some good news when you come for dinner," Ryan stated in a hopeful, upbeat way.

"It's not likely any good news could come of this," Aaron snapped, pressing his shoulder against the door, then pausing to hold it open for his brother. He shivered from the damp, night air. "Damn, I forgot how piercing cold it gets here. We have low temps, but this dampness sure seeps through a person."

"You've turned into a pansy with those warm Montana Chinook winds. You need to toughen up."

Aaron tossed his briefcase and suitcase into the taxi. "See you tomorrow," he shouted, giving Ryan a slight wave of his hand before disappearing into the cab. His brother's words echoed in his ear; *you need to toughen-up*. It was truer than Aaron cared to admit.

Leaning forward, he cleared his throat. "You got a phone book?" Aaron asked. "I have some old friends here in Chicago, but I don't know their address," he lied.

"Sure," the robust man answered, then flipped the thick book over his shoulder toward Aaron.

"Looks like you've practiced that move a time or two," he remarked with a slight chuckle. "Donna and Ken Berkhart," Aaron mumbled out loud, snapping the pages and running his finger down the list of names. "Here it is. 3902 Fern Street. Would you take me there?" he asked, looking up.

"Sure. It's a swanky part of town. Mostly doctors and lawyer types live there. You a doc or lawyer?" he asked, snapping his gum.

Aaron glanced up, shaking his head. He wished the driver would simply shut up. The drone of his voice continued. Aaron stared out the window at passing houses, hearing nothing the man had to say.

"Here you are," the driver stated, pulling up in front of a large brick, two-story Cape Cod-style house. "That'll be twenty-two fifty," he added.

Reaching into his pocket, Aaron pulled out a twenty and a five-dollar bill and handed them over the seat toward the driver. "Keep the change," he said, sliding his briefcase under his arm, then grabbing his suitcase, while opening the door with his free hand.

"Want me to wait and make sure they're home before I leave?" the driver asked.

"No. I see lights on, so go on ahead," he answered in a rush. Aaron stared at the house. He heard the taxi move down the street and almost felt compelled to run after it, but his feet somehow seemed frozen to the cold sidewalk.

What the hell am I doing here? Aaron asked himself. Ryan had said to stay away from these people.

Aaron couldn't help himself. Glancing around the neighborhood, he quickly moved into the shadows of a tree. He set his suitcase down on the ground, placing his briefcase on top of it. He blew warm air into his cupped hands, while inching his way closer to the house.

This could be described as nothing but stupid. He knew it. But a gut feeling wouldn't let him stop. He had to see what kind of people Amie's natural parents were. He'd hoped for a dumpy house and a couple struggling to keep their heads above water while trying to feed a passel of kids. Selfishly he'd considered buying them off. Laura would never have needed to know.

Stop it! Aaron told himself.

Seeing the nice house put things into perspective. He wanted to keep Amie, but he wouldn't resort to anything underhanded. It just wasn't his way.

Muffled symphony music caught Aaron's attention. Pressing his back against the brick structure, he moved closer to the window. Taking a deep breath, he inched his face over until he could look inside. His breath frosted the window. He quickly moved his palm over his mouth to keep it from happening again.

Awkward as it was, Aaron peered into the window. A woman sat with her back against a couch pillow, her legs tucked off to the side, while she read. It could easily have been Laura. Across the room a man sat in a recliner. He wore a headset, and his attention was focused on the Green Bay Packer and Chicago Bear game. A man who loved football couldn't be all that bad.

A shiver gripped Aaron, reminding him of his foolishness. Taking a quick glance, he paused to stare at a picture hanging above the fireplace. Amie's soft blue eyes and round angelic face stared back at him.

He glanced back at the woman, then the man. Something was wrong with the scene in the warm, well-decorated room—they were both involved with their own interests. Together but alone. Aaron recognized it all too well. He thought of Laura and wondered how he'd ever make this up to her. His biggest fear is that he never would.

Aaron bolted from the window and ran to the tree. He paused, listened to the faint sounds of a violin sonata, then grabbed his bags and hurried down the street. He'd watch for a gas station or pay phone. He needed a taxi before he froze to death.

Laura listened to the moving rhythm of Big Bad Voodoo Daddy. Normally it made her feel like dancing, but tonight it played without any effect on her.

She had to snap herself out of the depression that had settled over her. Her mother-in-law had been so pleased to take Amie, even at the last minute. Laura considered herself lucky to catch the last connecting flight to Chicago.

She knew Aaron would spend time with his brother and Doris. She didn't expect he'd get to the hotel until eleven or so. She adjusted the blanket around her chilled skin. She questioned her decision to greet him at the door naked. It certainly was in line with giving him a weekend to remember. Maybe he could even make her forget about Amie, for a little while at least. She hoped he could.

The sound of the door key card inserted in the lock caused Laura to tense. What if it wasn't Aaron? She peered around the short divider and recognized his handsome face as he turned to lock the door behind him. His expression startled her. Was it anger or despair?

She moved silently off the bed, striking a pose a few steps from the bedroom entryway. She felt chilly and awkward. It seemed too... blatant. What if he wasn't in the mood and it angered him? What if he wished she hadn't come after all? She glanced at the bed and considered a quick retreat under the covers.

"God, Laura!" he whispered, dropping his suitcase and briefcase onto the carpet. "I didn't expect..." he paused to slowly and seductively allow his gaze to slide downward. "You're beautiful," he said in a husky tone. "I can't tell you how much it means to me that you're here," he added, taking a step closer.

"You said we should give our marriage another try. If you still don't feel that way, I'll understand," she stated, powerless to move from his heated gaze.

He worked the buttons of his overcoat, pulling it off before tossing it on the floor. Without taking his gaze from her brazen stance, he eagerly shed his tie, shirt, and slacks. "A freezing husband gets in the mood quickly when his wife shows up to warm him with her burning fire," he stated, tossing his final sock onto the heap of discarded clothes.

"I know you didn't expect this. I mean I'm sure you're tired..."

"Look at me." He gave a throaty laugh. "Do you question whether you've excited me? I couldn't get anymore aroused if I tried," he chuckled. "I've dreamed of you coming to me like this, but I never thought you would. I like it," he added. He brushed his palms across the top of her shoulders moving them down the sides of her arms.

She trembled from his touch; confident he'd soon find the distance between them too much.

He lifted her into his arms, and cradled her against his chest. In a few short strides he was by the bed. He lowered her to the soft surface and followed her down. She lay beneath him, soft, willing and loving. He fought the urge to take her quick and hard. He needed the intensity, the burning need to be in control.

She longed for the protectiveness of his arms. She listened to his labored breathing and felt his chest heaving. Realizing she'd already brought him to a state of urgency made her smile. She welcomed his hungry mouth, returning his efforts with reckless abandon.

He kissed a trail down her neck, and then tenderly flicked his tongue over the hardened nipple she offered. He felt her response as he continued tantalizing the bud that had hardened under his moist caress.

She felt her breasts swell at the intimacy of his touch and she moaned softly.

He fought to take time to explore, to arouse, and to give her pleasure. Her response excited him, especially since she had never let him touch her so freely before. Even on their honeymoon, he couldn't remember her reacting so strongly to him. He'd always felt her holding back. But not tonight and it brought out a need even more to touch, kiss, and taste her.

He rolled her onto her stomach and gently pulled her up to her hands and knees. He found himself panting. He reached down and moved his fingertips into her opening. It jolted him to find her moist and ready.

He guided his erection into her willing softness and she moaned in pleasure. He bolted against her. Her cry asked for more and he found himself driving into her with such fury he felt on fire.

She'd braced herself to receive him, raspy moans of pleasure falling from her lips. It seemed he couldn't move into her fast or hard enough. She met his thrusts with equal power.

Together they found the tempo that bound their bodies in a heated frenzy. She gasped in sweet agony and he moaned in the height of his passion. The turbulence of their coupling bolted them into a unified release.

It was a raw act of possession, and she savored the feeling of satisfaction he left with her. She'd given him her all, and he'd responded with fire, passion and she hoped love.

He reached down and pulled a sheet and blanket over them, keeping her tucked into the protective curve of his heated body. Exhausted, they both drifted off into a satisfied sleep.

Laura awoke to silence. She drowsily scooted her buttocks back to nestle against Aaron. Cold sheets told her he'd already left the bed. She rose up on her elbow and realized she'd slept most of the morning. The clock read eleven fifteen.

She bolted from the bed. Amie would be... she stopped in her tracks. Amie wasn't there, and soon she wouldn't be a part of Laura's life. How empty the house would sound. No more stories before bed. No more little feet to tickle while she sat in her high chair watching Mama do the dishes. Amie had become an integral part of Laura's existence. Would Aaron miss Amie that much? Amputating a hand, or leg, would be no less painful than severing Amie from Laura's life.

She forced herself to go into the bathroom. Would it always be this difficult to continue on? She paused at the marble sink and reached down to pick up a peach-colored rose. She drew in the scent and allowed a smile to tip up the corners of her mouth. She flipped open the small card and recognized Aaron's handwriting. *Laura, your joining me here means more than you'll ever know. P.S. Meet me in the lobby for lunch at twelve. I'll be the man with the happy grin on his face.*

Twelve! That was thirty minutes from now. Giddiness filled her. She felt like a teen getting ready for an exciting date. She quickly jumped into the shower. She dropped first the shampoo bottle, then the conditioner container. Lord, she couldn't wait to see him.

Dressed in a soft, cream angora sweater over black jeans and leather ankle boots, Laura left the hotel room. She was glad she'd kept her hair short; it took little time to brush and style, leaving it with a wet-look. She fancied it stated chic and sexy. She hoped Aaron thought so, too.

A quick glance at her watch indicated she had just enough time to catch the elevator and be only five minutes late. She dug in her purse for the sample bottle of Dream Angels Heavenly perfume by Victoria's Secret. She spritzed her wrists and throat with what she knew was Aaron's favorite scent.

Her heart pounded and she felt way too warm as the elevator descended. Laura had decided she needed to tell Aaron about Amie before she lost her nerve. She had even folded the article and put it in her purse. Then doubts clouded her thinking. Things were going so well between them. Perhaps she should wait and see what Brett found out when they got back home. She wanted this weekend to be for her and Aaron.

Aaron waited, folding and unfolding his napkin. He should have left a wake-up call for Laura. He felt like bursting with pride over the reception of his new bow. He had merely touched on a few points of interest of his upcoming release and found the reaction overwhelming. He'd worked hard to get to this point in his career. He loved it, and it appeared the buyers as well as the public did, too.

If only his personal life was such a success. His thoughts halted. Laura stepped through the door, and like a high-school boy he felt an erection swell beneath his napkin.

She looked incredible, soft and sexy. Why hadn't he noticed her like this before? She spotted him and smiled. He felt a flush of heat crawl up the length of his neck. He wanted her! God, he wanted her more than ever.

"Hi!" she said, sitting across from him. "Thanks for the rose. It was sweet," she added, sliding her fingers over his.

He gasped her hand, then leaned forward to place a soft kiss across her lips. "You're welcome. You look...incredible. I'm famished, but it has nothing to do with food," Aaron whispered. He watched her blush, and knew she understood his meaning.

"You men think of only one thing. I happen to be completely starved," she said with sincerity. She brazenly brushed her boot up his leg, pushing her boot tip along his inner thigh. She giggled at his shocked expression.

"Maybe we should have met for lunch in our room. You want to—"

"Don't be silly, Aaron. I truly am hungry." She moved her foot back to the floor and looked down at the menu, struggling to hide a smirk of triumph.

"Have I ever mentioned you're a tease, Mrs. Palmer?" he asked, opening the wine list.

"I don't believe you have, Mr. Palmer. How did the meeting go? They loved your new, slick bow, didn't they?" she asked, encouraged by his excited expression.

"We're going to be rich! The first thing I want to do is take you on a real honeymoon. How about the Bahamas or a cruise? Not only did they love the bow, but they also gobbled up the action release. When they hit the market, we'll be able to sit back and enjoy life," he said with more excitement than he felt inside. His money couldn't buy him Amie. The thought made him choke. That's what got him into trouble in the first place. How could he have been so stupid? He always thought a successful business with his own line of bows was what he wanted out of life, now he realized he'd give it up in a minute, a second, if the choice gave him Amie in the balance. He glanced up into the soft gaze of his wife. He almost feared she read his mind.

"Deep thoughts? I expected you to be dancing with joy over your success. Is there something you'd care to share or are there a few business snags you're keeping from me?" she asked, picking his hand up and brushing her cheek against it.

It took more control than he thought possible not to pick her up and carry her from the restaurant. His heart ached for her.

What would happen when he told her the truth about Amie? How could he possibly steal that from her? God, he couldn't begin to imagine her pain when they had to give Amie back to her birth parents.

If Laura turned against him again, he'd never be able to stand it. He loved her, more than he ever knew. He stretched across the table and brushed her lips with his own. She looked up at him. Was that love and passion he read in her eyes.

He pressed his napkin into his lap. His heart pounded in his ears. He couldn't love his wife more than he did this very moment. Why hadn't he realized it before? Her gaze said she felt the same. Would it be enough to keep them together?

He couldn't help wondering why Laura flew out to be with him and initiated what happened last night. Was she willing to give their marriage a second chance after all or was it her last farewell? Why hadn't he taken her headaches more seriously? Day after day she'd mentioned them, and he chalked it up to her excuse for steering clear of him, which he couldn't entirely blame her for. What was he thinking? There had to be a reason for this abrupt change in her. Would he lose her before he had a chance to make amends?

Could he keep the truth about Amie from Laura, so she would never have to find out the truth? He hated himself for speculating. Not knowing was worse than any reality he could deal with.

Chapter Four

"It's too bad we have to go to see Ryan and Doris," Aaron said, pulling his jacket on. "I could go for a couple drinks, a little music, and you," he mumbled over his shoulder.

Laura shook her head. "I thought the way to a man's heart was through his stomach," she teased. "Doris is famous for her wonderful Chinese meals. I haven't eaten one I haven't liked. I can hardly wait," she added, then poised her lips for a touch of Milano Tile lipstick.

"You've found the way to my heart, and it has nothing to do with my stomach," he said, pushing his fingers through his thick crop of dark, curly hair. "But you're getting close," he added, patting her on the butt.

She laughed. "I haven't seen Doris since Nancy was born." Laura grew quiet. Thoughts of how rude she'd been to Doris surfaced. Jealousy could be cruel, Laura thought. "I actually owe her an apology. I wasn't very nice during her pregnancy. I had a hard time accepting she could have two children and I couldn't have any." Laura paused, thinking of Amie. She banished the tears threatening to surface.

"If Doris was angry about that, she wouldn't have asked us to be godparents, now would she?" he asked, taking her by the shoulders and pulling her back against his chest. He kissed the top of her head, then the side of her neck. He immediately felt her quick intake of breath.

He moved his palms down to her thighs then slid them upward. He moved over lacy stockings and garters. He looked at her reflection in the mirror and caught her smoldering expression.

"You like?" She grinned mischievously.

"I more than like," he answered without taking his gaze from her. He continued his pursuit and quickly found his breathing increase with anticipation. He moved his fingers over lacy panties, discovering crisp curls covering her center instead of silk. "I think your seamstress failed to finish making your pantaloons, ma'am!"

"Oh, heavens! And to think I already paid her!" she murmured, laughing. Amusement flickered in the eyes that met hers.

"Might I ask when you bought these?"

She couldn't escape his expression of hunger and lust. It was worth the money she'd spent. Laura turned in his arms, facing him, allowing his palms to now rest on her bare bottom. His soft moan made her smile.

"Control yourself, dear. We have a whole evening to get through before dessert is served," she teased. His look was one of faint amusement. She stretched to give him a soft, sensual kiss. She smiled as he gripped her bottom and pressed his erection against her.

"I don't think so, Mrs. Palmer. We'll have to be fashionably late for dinner," he informed her, pulling her closer.

"You're wrong, Mr. Palmer. I'd say, 'I wear the pants in this family,' but at the moment it wouldn't apply. Let's just say, a little anticipation will do you some good. In my writing we call it *sexual tension*," she explained, giving him a smile as intimate as a kiss.

"So that's it!"

"What?" she asked, uncertain of his outburst.

"All the teasing. The different positions you're eager to try. Your suddenly sensual actions. Your writing has released your fears of being sexy. I'm right, aren't I?" he asked, pulling her against him.

"I suppose that could be a part of it. I ... you just seem so masculine. The results of your workouts looks good on you. I get excited looking at your muscles." He gave her a smile that sent her pulses racing. She kissed him, long and sensual. He responded with an eagerness of his own.

"I'm afraid we've wasted a lot of good years. I don't know why I haven't seen you this way before," he admitted, moving his palms up and down her buttocks.

She moaned, pressing closer. "Maybe I wasn't this way before. You weren't either. I admit, I can't seem to get enough of you now," she whispered in a soft and throaty tone.

He brought her lips to his, licking the edges of them with his tongue. He caught her breath—they breathed as one and it became as intimate as entering her. There weren't words to express what he felt. He watched a smile tremble over her lips.

"We need to go now or we'll never get out of here," she whispered.

"Let's stay," he coaxed, moving his fingertips between her legs.

She wiggled, laughing soft and sensual. "No. Let's go. You need to squirm a little longer," she teased, moving back from his touch.

"You aren't serious, are you?" he asked, burning with a need to feel, taste and possess every inch of her.

She smiled, taking another step back. "Very serious. Take count, I can touch you without being noticed more times than you can touch me. Remember, you must be discreet or it could prove to be quite embarrassing," she stated.

He moved up to her with a grin of amusement. "You don't think I can be discreet? You just watch me," he responded, flicking her nipple with the tips of his fingertips.

She laughed out loud, enjoying his response to her challenge. "I used this game in one of my novels. A friend of mine said, 'No man would ever agree to such a game! I guess I've just proved her wrong.'"

"Don't sound so cocky, you might find it's too much for you to handle," he bantered. "Who won the game in your book?" he asked, watching her face split into a wide grin.

"I'll tell you in the morning," she answered, moving her palm down the front of his pants before turning toward the door.

He laughed, flipped off the bathroom light and followed her. "I assume you're just warming up," he said, chuckling. "Would stepping into the elevator constitute a good starting point?" he asked, then grabbed her small waist and pulled her into his arms. He moved his mouth over hers, devouring its softness. He intended to leave her breathless, but he'd managed to find his calm shattered by the hunger of her response.

"I have a feeling this will be a night to remember," she said, the words sounding breathless. She smiled into his heated gaze.

He opened the door for her, then quickly pulled his coat in place. Damn, she'd managed to bring him to a full arousal with just a kiss. He felt like a damn schoolboy, eager for the night to be over, in anticipation of possibly getting *something*. He'd get it all tonight; that he knew to be a certainty. He wanted to see her standing before him in nothing more than

those lace garters and crotchless panties. Pressure against his trousers told him to quickly change his line of thought.

"Did you call ahead and confirm we're coming?" she asked, leaning into him after they entered the elevator car.

He felt a slight pinch to his buttocks and gave her a quick startled look.

"Point one for me," she whispered, and then looked over at the unknowing elderly couple standing across from them.

He threw back his head and laughed, loud and rippling. "I'd never have believed this. You amaze me! I love you!" he stated, kissing her hard and fast on the mouth. Before parting he tweaked her nipple. Her sudden squeal made him laugh once again. "Point one for me," he whispered, and then nodded a slight acknowledgement to the couple staring straight at the elevator door. The woman's face turned a bright pink.

Laura smothered a giggle as the elderly couple hurried out of the elevator. "I don't suppose they'd believe we're married," she commented, stepping into the lobby.

"I'm sure they believe you're either my secretary or a classy date I've hired for the evening. I think it excited the old guy. I'm not so sure about her," he said, chuckling under his breath.

He slid in next to Laura in the cab. "3257 Norrrth," his voice broke off in mid-sentence. "Kostner," Aaron finished calling the address to the driver. She moved her hand off as quickly as she'd squeezed him. He adjusted his slacks and cleared his throat. Leaning closer, he gave Laura a tender bite on her lobe. "Point two, I presume," he said for her ears only.

She smiled to herself. Was he enjoying the game as much as she was? Laura hoped so.

"Cold night, ain't it, folks?" the driver asked. "It's the dampness."

Aaron pulled Laura closer, ignoring the driver.

"Say, didn't I drop you off at...let's see, yes, a friend's house last night? Were they surprised?" the cabby asked.

Aaron glared at the driver. "You're mistaken. I just got in last night and only saw my brother," he offered, attempting to cover his startled reaction by sliding his palm up Laura's stocking. She shuddered against his touch.

"Could have sworn it was you. I see lots of folks every night. I'm not usually wrong. Got a great memory for faces and addresses. Could have sworn ..."

In an attempt to ignore the man, Aaron kissed Laura long and demanding. She seemed not to hear the continued jabbering of the annoying man. Aaron inched his fingers further up her leg. Her warm, quick breathing told him she liked it. He slid his tongue into her mouth. She responded with a soft moan.

"Well, here you are. That'll be eighteen dollars, folks," the driver said, stopping the cab.

Aaron handed over a twenty. "Keep the change," he said, helping Laura from the vehicle. He glanced at the apartment complex and slipped his arm protectively around his wife's shoulders.

He wondered if Doris and Ryan would be able to keep silent about what he'd learned about Amie. Damn, he wished he'd kept his mouth shut. It just might have blown over and no one would have been the wiser. But Aaron knew he deluded himself with such foolish thoughts.

"Losing interest already?" Laura asked, kissing his throat.

"Not likely. I kinda lost myself thinking of you standing in front of me without that black angora thing," he teased.

"This *angora thing* is a sweater dress and you'd have more respect for it if you knew what it cost," she bantered.

Aaron chuckled. "Well, I still prefer to imagine you standing brazenly over me with nothing on but your hot and sexy lace!"

She faked a shock tone. "Such talk. Do you talk to your mistress like this?"

They stopped walking, her playful words striking him like a lightning bolt.

"I'm sorry, Laura. I know this sounds empty, but Sandy meant nothing to me. It's over."

"I didn't mean to mention it. It just slipped out before I realized it."

"I know I don't deserve a second chance. I want you to know I'm damn thrilled you showed up here. I don't know what brought this change in you, but I'm happy you're willing to give me the chance to make things right. Is there something I should know about? What I mean is why?"

"For me."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll explain some other time. Right now I'm freezing to death. I'm not really wearing all that much."

He smiled at the reminder. "So I've noticed. A bit airy, is it?" he asked, knocking on the door.

"Come in!" Ryan said, holding the door open. "You must be frozen. I think the wind-chill is at least twenty below."

Laura considered the information and smiled. "Gee, I didn't even notice," she smiled, giving Aaron a slight pinch on the buttock. He gave her a quick glance, then shook his head with a knowing smile.

"Laura, it's great you were able to come," Ryan said, leaning over to give her a warm hug. "Hand over those coats," he prompted, leading the way into the living room.

"Laura, Aaron, hello, hello! I'm so glad you came," Doris called out, rushing in to give them both a brief hug. "I was worried you'd cancel at the last minute," she said, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Sorry I didn't come for hor d'eurves last night," Aaron apologized.

"You didn't come here last night?" Laura asked, surprised. Hadn't he come in late and spoke as though he'd been with Ryan and Doris all evening? Laura felt Aaron tense.

Aaron glanced at her. "Ryan and I met for burgers and a beer. We got carried away with conversation and ..."

"I didn't mind, honest. You're getting the same ones tonight. They didn't go to waste at all," Doris interrupted. "Besides, I had a dreadful headache last night, I'm glad you boys stayed away. You wouldn't have liked my mood," she teased.

Laura sensed an undertone among the three. She hoped she was only imagining the looks that passed between them.

"Why don't you boys go fix us all a drink? Laura, you want to come to the kitchen and help me fry some won tons for these hungry boys?" Doris offered.

"Sure. I've been meaning to ask for your recipe for years," she admitted, following Doris. "Before I lose the nerve, I've been meaning to apologize to you."

"Apologize? Whatever for?" Doris asked, facing Laura, a look of confusion across her face.

"When you were pregnant with Tyler," she paused before admitting, "I really treated you badly."

"Laura, you don't honestly think I'd hold that against you, do you? I prayed every night that you would get pregnant. It didn't seem fair that I was having my second baby and all you wanted was one. I felt guilty. When you placed your hand against my stomach and felt Tyler move against your hand, I knew you had to be his Godmother. Don't give up, Laura. It still could happen, you know."

Laura looked down at her twisting hands. "I have a tipped uterus and my pelvis is the size of a twelve-year-old's. My tests show that I ovulate possibly two times a year. Aaron's sperm count is low, too. The chances of my getting pregnant...let's just say it's short of a miracle." Laura swallowed hard, fighting for control.

"Miracles have been known to happen. I thank you for the apology, but I'm a woman and I do understand. I took no offense to your feelings. Now, let's cheer up and feed our hungry men," Doris said, moving to the stove.

"Where are Nick and Tyler?" Laura asked, realizing all sounded quiet upstairs.

"They're asleep. Even though tomorrow's not a school day, they have to get up early to go with their Uncle Dennis, Brian and Julie. He has the kids this weekend and usually he includes my boys in with his plans. It works out great for all of us. They're going ice-skating, then to a movie to warm up. The boys can hardly wait."

"How's Dennis taking the divorce?" Laura asked, looking around the homey room.

"I never thought Lynn and Dennis would split. She started drinking and running around, well it shocked the whole family. Ryan said she never drank even as a teen. I think Dennis got her hooked and now she has a problem and he feels guilty. He bends over backwards to make things easy on her. I'm sure it's just as hard on Aaron, as it is on Ryan, to have a sister who's an alcoholic. I understand she's going to meetings now. That's a really good start toward recovery."

Laura heard Doris, yet she didn't. It seemed everyone had problems. She wondered what they'd all say if they knew about the truth about Amie.

"Laura, how's Amie doing? Are you feeling all right? You look slightly pale," Doris asked, pausing for an answer.

"I'm sorry. Jet lag, I'm sure. Amie is just fine. Growing too fast. It's a shame they can't stay little," she answered, looking everywhere but at Doris. "I'm afraid I need the bathroom. Would you excuse me?" Laura asked, hurrying from the kitchen.

A rush of heat washed over her. Laura quickly closed the bathroom door before she collapsed onto the toilet seat. A wave of nausea came and went. It had to be the smell of cooking oil. Hot cooking oil always bothered her, especially on an empty stomach. She thought of it as a curse of a family she didn't know.

"It doesn't look good, Aaron. The Berkharths have offered a fifty thousand dollar reward for any information leading to the recovery of Amie," Ryan explained.

Aaron took a generous sip from his gin gimlet. "Is he a doctor or a lawyer?" he asked, avoiding his brother's glare.

"Actually, he's a psychologist with political aspirations and seems to be doing rather well. He specializes in government communications. Sounds like he has a lot of clout in his profession. Third generation uppity-uppity."

Wheels turned inside Aaron's head. "Do the Berkharths associate with Jennings?"

"What?" Ryan asked.

"Humor me. Call it a gut instinct or paranoia. It might be interesting to know if the Berkharths are acquaintances or friends with Dr. Jennings." Aaron took another sip, then looked at Ryan. He watched his brother thinking it over.

"You have a lawyer's mind. I'll check it out first thing in the morning. Don't worry about Doris letting on that she knows about Amie. Doris is as worried as we are. She can be discreet when it's needed."

"I appreciate your help and support. I'll be glad when it's all settled. I just hope I don't lose Laura in the process," he admitted again. "We've decided to give *us* another try."

"Glad to hear it."

"Aaron, you might want to check on Laura," Doris interrupted. "She looked a bit pale and she's been in the bathroom for some time. I just thought maybe you ought to see if she's okay," she suggested.

Hurrying toward the bathroom, Aaron drew in a deep breath. He'd pictured an altogether different evening for them. He wondered if Doris had slipped about Amie.

"Laura?" Aaron called out, knocking softly. "You alright? Doris said you looked peaked."

"I'm fine. You know how my stomach gets when I'm hungry," she said, opening the door.

Aaron pulled her into his arms. "I suppose you're afraid I'll win the game, so you're going to fake illness on me," he teased.

"Not on your life, Mr. Macho Man," she whispered, trailing the tip of her tongue around the crevice of his ear. She giggled at his growled response.

"I'm beginning to think those writer friends of yours are a bad influence," he said, guiding her down the hallway.

"Are you complaining?" she asked, glancing at him. He turned and kissed her. She felt a warm glow flow through her.

"Not likely, Mrs. Independent Woman!"

His eyes seemed to undress her. "You keep looking at me like that and I could have you arrested for indecent exposure," she chided.

"Look who's talking? You started this—but I'm going to finish it," he promised.

He slid his hand to rest on the curve of her buttock as she walked slightly ahead. Laura smiled.

"Wow, you look much better," Doris said, watching them return. "Did he have a magic cure?"

Laura laughed. "Don't all men think their touch is magic?" she teased. Everyone laughed, and Laura realized she truly liked Ryan and Doris. She felt a part of their family. She leaned into Aaron's shoulder. He hadn't removed his hand.

Ryan extended a gin gimlet her way, and she sipped on it, allowing the liquor to take off the edge.

"Wish you two would just bunk down on our couch," Doris stated one more time. "It's cold and late."

"No, but thanks. The wife and I have plans, and they don't include an audience upstairs," Aaron stated with emphasis.

"Aaron!" Laura stammered. "You're losing your smooth talkin' ways." She clung to him, feeling giddy and happy.

"He lost that after the third drink!" Ryan claimed, laughing at his own cleverness. "I'll get your coats," he stated, leaving them standing at the door.

Laura felt her bra release. Aaron had unhooked it without detection. A hot stain rushed up her neck and across her cheeks. She glanced at him and noticed he proudly displayed a smile of triumph.

"That's an even ten," he stated proudly.

"What's with this counting thing? It's driving me nuts trying to figure it out," Doris said, looking from one to the other.

Laura smothered a smile. "I'll tell you about it some day, but I don't think now would be a good time," she giggled. "I will tell you my score is thirteen, and that's a pretty lucky number for me." She giggled once again.

"It's me who's gonna get lucky," Aaron stated, boastful and proud.

They all laughed. Once again Laura felt the stain of embarrassment heat her skin, yet she found she enjoyed the candid joking. No one seemed to mind, especially Aaron. The sound of a taxi horn had them all hurrying to say goodbye.

"We'll spend some time this summer in Montana, I promise," Ryan said, giving his brother a giant hug. "You keep him out of trouble, Laura," he added, giving her an equally warm hug.

"I'll send you all my Chinese recipes. You take care and give Amie a hug for us," Doris said, a smile pasted on her face.

Laura sensed a sudden sobering, but dismissed it. Good-byes were always a bit sad for her. They inched toward the door running together toward the taxi. The cold winter air nipped at their overly heated bodies. They slid on a patch of ice and held each other up, then giggled at their united effort. Finally they climbed into the back seat of the warm car.

"O'Hare Hilton, please," Aaron stated, wrapping his arms around Laura.

He quickly found her warm, moist lips and shivered for want of her. He kissed her tenderly, demanding, persuasively, with heady sensations, and with passion. She met each of his demands with equal response.

Laura wasn't sure if the taxi driver spoke at all on the way to the hotel. She didn't even know when they arrived, only that Aaron suddenly opened the door and they hurried through the large hotel entryway.

The elevator doors opened one flight short of their destination. A portly man stepped in and moved to stand behind them.

Aaron reached inside Laura's jacket and caressed her free breast, then smiled and did the same to the other. He glanced back at the other passenger, then leaned down and whispered, "Eleven and twelve."

Laura shook her head and leaned into her husband. It had truly been an exciting night. Their game was both challenging and stimulating. If ever there was a time when she felt *in the mood*, tonight was it.

They bolted from the elevator the moment the doors opened. She stood waiting for Aaron to open the door. He dropped the card and Laura couldn't help laughing at his clumsiness. Again he struggled to slide the key card across the opening, only to realize the card was upside down.

"Would you like me to give it a try?" she offered.

"The day a woman has to open a door for me, is the day I'm too drunk for anything else," he stated, laughing at her worried expression. "Don't worry love, I'm far from too drunk for that!"

Laura laughed, moving her palm across the front of him. "You're right, nothing has changed since we left earlier tonight."

Aaron opened the door, and pulled her against him, moving them into the dark room. "I've been waiting for this moment all night. I'm going to kiss every inch of you. I'm going to make you beg. Then I'll love you, Laura."

"How touching!"

Laura and Aaron jumped from the deep, bold voice. They sobered cold.

"Leave the light off and remain silent. I'm going to say this only once."

Aaron pulled Laura against him. He wrapped protective arms around her, feeling her tremble in fear.

"I'm here to warn you," the deep voice said. "Stop the investigation. Don't go to the premises again. Go back to Montana and let it rest. Do as you're told and nothing will happen to you or Amie. Resist and you'll pay... most likely with your lives."

"Who are you? Who sent you?" Aaron asked, taking a step to his right, pulling Laura with him.

"My name isn't important. You don't even need to know who sent me. You need to know you're getting into something deeper than you know. You need to realize we aren't giving you an option."

"If you've harmed Amie —"

"Amie is safe with her Grandmother Palmer. You'd be wise to make sure she stays that way. Stop the investigation. Slide on that bed and stay there," the man ordered.

Aaron guided Laura to the head of the bed. Straining, he heard the stranger move across the room, heading toward the door.

"If you're considering attacking me, think twice. I have a gun and it's pointed at your wife. The choice is yours," the man said, a trace of dare to his voice.

The stranger opened and closed the hotel door before Aaron could get even a slight glimpse. He held Laura against him, uncertain what to say or how to react. He needed a *story* for now. One she'd believe, but would protect her from the truth. The less she knew about where Amie truly came from, the safer she'd be. That he felt certain of.

Chapter Five

"What was that all about?" Laura asked, her voice trembling.

Aaron held her against his chest. "It must have to do with Ryan. He'd mentioned his latest case was high profile and that his investigation revealed some sensitive material. I never imagined anything like this." He paused, feeling her relax slightly. "They must have been watching Ryan's house and followed us back here. Who knows how they managed to get up here ahead of us."

"That's what they meant about not going back to the premises? If that man hadn't scared me so much, it would almost seem funny. It's straight out of a James Bond movie. Things like this just don't happen," she admitted, shaking her head. "Do you think Mother Palmer and Amie are in any kind of danger? We need to call them right away!"

"No. I think that man was more concerned with us. We'll be leaving tomorrow anyway. It's strange they'd come after us so quickly. I didn't notice anything suspicious, did you?"

Laura shook her head once more. "I did think Doris acted a bit tense at first, but she relaxed more as the evening progressed. When we first arrived there seemed to be something in the air. Do you think they've been threatened?" she asked, considering the possibility it had nothing to do with Amie and her *suspicious* adoption. Laura felt anxious to find out whether Brett or Sharon had been threatened. More importantly, would these people really hurt a little girl? "We still should call Mother, just in case!"

"I agree. Mother won't like our calling. She'll see it as our not trusting her to take proper care of Amie. Maybe I'll call Ryan first."

"We still need to call your mother. I won't be able to rest until I know Amie is okay." She watched him dial his cell phone.

"Ryan, yes, we're at the hotel. When we got here a guy was in our room waiting for us. Yes. Shit, I don't know. I thought it might have something to do with your big case. Maybe they followed us here."

Laura listened and waited.

"Well, they asked about Amie and Mother. Scarred the shit out of us. Yes. I'm calling there after I hang up here. I will. Bye."

"Well? What did he say?" Laura asked, fear in her voice.

"He said most likely they wanted to show him they're watching his house. I think he's calling the police."

"Maybe we should call them too." She suggested, watching Aaron's worried expression.

"I'm calling Mother," he said, dialing the phone. "Mother, it's Aaron."

"Good Lord, Aaron, do you know what time it is?"

"Yes, it's really late and I'm sorry. I had an uneasy feeling and just wanted to call and make sure everything is okay with you and Amie."

"Of course everything is just fine. Is Laura there with you?"

"Yes, she made it here just fine."

"Well I'm glad, dear. Are you two having a good time?"

"Yes, we are having a good time. Mother, is everything okay there?"

"I just told you things are fine here."

"Well, would you go take a look at Amie, just so we feel better?"

"Why? Is Laura worried I can't take proper care of my own granddaughter?"

"That isn't it, Mother. You know that we trust you. It's just that I can't shake this uneasiness. And as a new dad, I guess I'd feel better if you'd check on her for me."

"Well honey, I'm looking at your little girl right now and she's sleeping as sound as I would be, if you hadn't awakened me!"

"Again, I'm sorry we woke you. Thank you for checking on her for us."

"Tell Laura Amie's fine and that she needs to relax."

"I'll tell her. Thanks, Mother."

"Bye. I love you both."

"Bye, Mother. We love you, too."

"Well? What did Mother say?"

"Calm down, Laura. Everything is fine there. She checked on Amie and she was sleeping. They're just fine."

"Thank you, Aaron. I had to know. Mother didn't believe you were the one who was worried, did she? I knew she'd feel it was me. It doesn't matter. I feel better now."

"Me, too," Aaron said in a husky voice. Through the material of her soft dress, he cupped Laura's breast in his palm. Her body heat warmed his hand. "I think we should help each other forget this ever happened," he suggested, rubbing his thumb across an already taut nipple.

"I'm sorry, Aaron, I'm suddenly exhausted. Would you be dreadfully disappointed if we just went to sleep?" she asked, moving from his embrace. She hated herself for her sudden change, but how could she possibly enjoy herself with Aaron, knowing Amie might be in danger?

"Nothing has changed, Laura. You've been teasing me all night and I still want you. Mother said they are just fine. Now it's time for us to be just fine," he suggested.

"I know, Aaron...if something was wrong with Amie, I think I'd feel it," she explained, and then wondered if a woman could be that in-touch with her adopted daughter.

"I can make you forget your worries, Laura," he offered, rubbing her arms with his palms. He stole a soft kiss that burned a trail the length of her neck. "I want you," he stated, recapturing her lips in a heated assault.

She smiled, allowing her senses to be rekindled by her loving husband. Hadn't this been her plan? She reached over and snapped on the low-cast light in the corner of the room. She pushed the button on the radio, and Roy Orbison's *Falling* filled the silence. She smiled, knowing there couldn't have been a better choice.

Stepping back, she slid a button free. She noticed his respiration had already increased. Keeping her gaze on his lusty expression, she proceeded to undo the oversized buttons that ran the length of her dress. She dropped the material to the floor and heard his gasp. She smiled, swaying her hips to the music.

"Lord, I can't believe this is truly you," he said in a throaty tone. "You ..." he paused, watching her lacy bra drop.

She continued her movements, keeping just far enough away from his grasp. She danced in a slow circle, giving him full view of what she had to offer. She felt his burning gaze kiss every inch of exposed flesh.

Unhooking a garter, Laura leaned forward to slide the stocking down her leg. His large hands moved hers aside; she paused, looking into his smoldering gaze.

"Allow me," he offered. "I've thought of nothing else all night," he whispered, his voice deep with emotion.

"I'm all yours," she responded, pulling his face against her swollen breasts.

The sharp ring of the phone made them both jump. "This better be important," he snarled, reaching for the receiver. "Yeah?" he answered, revealing nothing in his tone.

Laura watched, tensing with his expression and posture.

"He said what? Did he give you a name?" Aaron asked, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Any idea who it could be? I don't suppose the voice was familiar? Tell you what, Mother. Ignore it. Kids find this kind of thing funny. No, I agree there's nothing humorous about it. But to a teenager and his buddies, it's a real kick. I see. Well, it's new. I gave it to Amie before leaving for Chicago. Mmm. Yeah. Of course I trust she's in good hands. Hmmm. Okay. Well, I'm glad you called, one never knows about these things," he said, drawing a breath. "Thanks, Mother. We'll see you Sunday. Good night."

Laura watched him hang up the receiver and slowly turn to face her. She read fear and anger in his gaze.

"A man just called Mother and asked her if she's certain her granddaughter is tucked away safe and sound."

Laura gasped, sitting down on the bed. "She's fine, right?"

"Yes. Mother said she rushed up to check on her again, and she was sleeping. What alarmed her was a clown doll she didn't remember Amie having—"

"What clown doll?" Laura asked. "She doesn't have a clown doll," she said, panic taking over.

"I know. It's got me worried, too. I told Mother I gave it to Amie, but I didn't," he added.

"Why'd you lie? I don't understand." Laura reached for her robe.

"I don't want Mother worrying, especially after my calling her a little while ago. It's better this way. I think whoever is behind this wanted us to believe they're serious. I'll give Ryan a call first thing in the morning," he said, heading for the bathroom.

Laura watched him. She wanted to go to him, comfort and love him, but the feeling had passed. She quickly stripped off the other stocking, garter belt and panties. She grabbed the lacy items up and tossed them in the small, lined trashcan. It seemed unlikely she'd ever need them again.

Thoughts of Amie caused Laura's eyes to brim with tears. She shouldn't have come to Chicago. She should be home rocking her baby in her arms. Laura brought the image of her daughter in her mind's eye, all sweet, smiling and happy. Laura's heart ached.

Pulling on a pair of teal silk boxers and a v-necked top, she slid beneath the covers. Loneliness filled her. What was taking Aaron so long? No doubt he needed time to think—without her.

Aaron sat on the edge of the tub, holding his head in his hands. How stupid could he be? Why hadn't it seemed illegal to pay five thousand dollars on the side? His actions may have put Laura and Amie in danger.

Thoughts of Donna and Ken Berkhart surfaced in Aaron's mind. If he went to them, would their excitement of getting Amie back make them sympathetic to his situation?

The stranger had said; *don't go to the premises again*. Someone had watched him peeking in the windows of the Berkhart's house. The knowledge embarrassed him. Lord, he could be accused of being a Peeping Tom.

Who had put that milk carton clipping in his briefcase? Aaron thought about the office on Friday as he reviewed his entire day. The first time he'd left his briefcase unattended was when he attended a meeting at ten. No one went in or out of his office or he'd have seen her or him through the conference room windows.

He'd eaten a sandwich at his desk, going over his notes for the Cougar Bow Line. He paused, realizing only one person could be responsible. Rosemary had asked him to check the company samples before she packed them for the flight. It had taken no more than a few minutes, but he remembered seeing a phone message on his desk when he returned. She had been in his office.

He hadn't realized it before because his secretary came and went pretty much without notice. Rosemary had a mothering personality more than an executive secretary persona. She had no qualms about bringing him lunch when he stayed in or fix him hot chicken broth when he had a cold.

He could imagine her shock when recognizing his daughter's picture on the back of a milk carton. She wouldn't have been able to face him with it, but she might have slipped the information into his briefcase so he'd surely find it. Efficient, yet, discreet. He needed to know. He would talk to her first thing Monday morning.

Glancing at his watch, Aaron realized it was almost two in the morning. Drained, he rose and stretched his stiff limbs. He'd been terribly unfair and insensitive to Laura. He wouldn't blame her for being damn steamed with him in the morning. He hoped she wouldn't confront him with questions now—he couldn't possibly hold up for anything more.

With silent movements, Aaron undressed in the dimly lighted room. He slid under the covers and paused to watch her sleeping form. Her short, brown hair framed her small face. He lovingly watched at her. Why hadn't he noticed how cute and young her nose made her look? He noticed her long eyelashes and how they fanned out like Amie's, why hadn't he seen them before? He rested his gaze on her full lips, realizing he'd paid far too little attention to them the past few years. His wife was beautiful. When had he stopped truly looking at her?

He'd been so busy with his career and with staying clear of her absorption of wanting a baby. He'd experienced his own dark moments, and it never occurred to him that Laura might have had them also and needed him. He wanted kids, too, but not to the degree Laura did, until they adopted Amie. His urge to hold his daughter in his arms made his heart ache.

He'd had everything he could have wanted in life these past six months, and he hadn't even realized it. Now, he stood to lose it all. He'd call Ryan in the morning. If he advised that Laura know everything, Aaron knew he would tell her.

Snapping off the light, he slid his legs close enough to outline her shapely bottom, then pulled her into him. She molded against him like a warm, comforting blanket. He wrapped a protective arm around her – and slept.

Laura heard the muffled voice of her husband and quickly realized he was speaking on the phone. She remained still, so he would think she was still asleep.

"We can't drag our butts. I hate keeping this from Laura and I'm worried about Amie. Hmmm. I have to go back to the convention for most of the day. Our flight leaves at five-twenty this afternoon. Why don't you meet me in the hotel lobby ... say three o'clock? Find out what you can, but be careful."

What was he keeping from her? Did they get another threat? He was obviously worried about Amie. Laura stretched up on her elbow, catching a glimpse of Aaron entering the bathroom. He closed the door and her heart sank. He'd closed her out again. For one night and day they'd managed to find a way to open that door, and now, as quickly as it had opened – it now slammed shut.

She slid back under the covers. She heard the shower and found herself imagining him standing naked, water streaming down his firm, tan skin.

She felt her body respond to the image. Although the images were in her mind, she felt the sensual tingling of rubbing her bare breasts against his chest. She would see the lust in her husband's eyes. She imagined him entering her with urgency, a need, and excitement. He wanted her and the knowledge thrilled her.

Laura breathed hard. It saddened her to know her husband stood a door away – and she could only imagine his touch. She considered going to him, giving him comfort and support – and receiving it at the same time. Her thoughts had left her with a yearning, a need only Aaron could satisfy. She stared at the closed door. She feared taking a chance would only net her a rejection.

Listening to him dress, Laura struggled with her emotions. Maybe she should grab the picture from her purse and show it to him. If she told him everything, maybe, just maybe, he could see beyond his anger to understand the reasons. She listened to him do everyday things of his keys and wallet going into his pants pocket.

She loved the scent of his cologne, a dry touch of the woods. She thought it masculine. She heard his footsteps on the carpet coming closer. She struggled to keep her breathing slow and steady, pretending to be asleep. She held her breath, received his kiss on her cheek, then the gentle tucking of her blankets around her shoulders. She listened as the door snapped shut. Once again she felt alone.

Laura reached for the phone and dialed. It rang and rang. Finally a winded, "Hello," echoed through the line.

"Sharon? Is that you?" Laura asked, wincing as she realized how stupid it must have sounded.

"Yeah," she answered, giggling, then clearing her throat.

Laura felt a warm blush sweep across her cheeks. "Am I... did I call at a wrong time? I'm not interrupting anything am I?" Laura stammered for the right words.

"Laura! How's it going? How'd Aaron like the garters and lace?" Sharon asked, giggling once again.

"Why don't I take a shower, then call you later?" Laura offered.

"No! Don't be silly. This can wait." she giggled. "Tell me how's the seduction going."

Laura thought about Sharon's choice of words. "The seduction went great, but the ... oh, Sharon," Laura sobbed. "You should have been here. A man was in our room. He threatened us and asked us if Amie was safe. He even called Mother Palmer and scared her!"

"What on earth are you talking about, girl?" Sharon blurted into the receiver. "What man was in your room and what threats? Wait a minute, Lor, I want Brett to get on the other line and hear this."

Laura waited while Sharon mumbled something, gave a quick giggle, before muffling her words by placing her hand over the receiver. "Brett is with you?" Laura asked, then wished she hadn't. It wasn't any of her business who her friend chose to sleep with.

"Hi, Laura," Brett said, clearing his throat.

"Morning, Brett. I'm sorry to be calling so early. I need to know if you've found out anything more," she explained. Taking a deep breath she prepared for the worst.

"I believe we've uncovered a very sophisticated black market baby organization."

"What?" Laura burst out. "You're joking, right?" she asked, questions filling her mind.

"I wish. I've put two of my best men on it. I spoke with Dan, my friend in the FBI. He's more than interested in this case. To be honest, he's the one who said this thing's *big*. He said you're to keep quiet. Tell no one, that includes Aaron."

Laura shook her head. "I don't know if I can do that, Brett. Some man came to our room last night. He threatened us. He told us to stop investigating or it might cost us our lives. He called Mother last night and asked if she was certain Amie was safe. There was even a strange toy in Amie's crib that none of us had given her. I'm scared!"

"God! How in the he... sorry, how did they find you two in Chicago? Something doesn't fit here. According to that picture you found, Chicago was the last place Amie had been seen. Don't tell me you looked up the kid's parents?" he asked with a hint of irritation in his tone.

"No, I didn't go anywhere near them. I never thought about it. Maybe I should check them out. Can you imagine what they've been through worrying about their daughter?"

"Stop, Laura. You're not to step a foot near those people. We don't want them to know anything yet. I want the man responsible for this organization. You and Aaron will lose Amie no matter how this goes down. Look at it this way. You'll get more time with your daughter if you do what I say. Until we uncover what's going on, you get to keep her."

Laura swallowed hard. "I don't think she's safe. They know where she is and they followed me to Chicago. Aaron thinks this is all happening because of a case his brother, Ryan, is investigating. It doesn't seem right not to tell Aaron everything," she admitted.

"I see your point. Don't say anything until you get back here. I've got some leads to follow-up on today. Give us a chance to put two-and-two together before you make the wrong move and tip our hand."

"Lor?" Sharon asked in a soft voice. "It's going to work out okay. I'm here for you and I'm sure once Aaron realizes what's happened, he won't hold it against you."

"I only hope you're right. I don't know how I'm going to bear losing Amie. If Aaron leaves, I'll have no one."

"You'll be okay," Sharon responded.

"Call me when you get back," Brett said. "We'll go over what happened in Chicago and sift through all the information so far. I'll ask Dan to join us in case he has a few questions to ask. We're going to get these bastards, Laura. Hang in there. I know it isn't going to be easy, but what you're doing is right," he added. "Talk to you on Monday."

"Hang in there, Lor. Bye."

"Bye," Laura said, still holding the phone. By hanging up she would lose a connection she didn't want to lose just yet.

Chapter Six

"Damn, you're late!" Aaron nearly shouted at Ryan. "I've been pacing for the past hour.

"Calm down," Ryan said, sitting across the small table from Aaron. "Can't ever remember seeing you this worked up."

Aaron took a deep breath. "The more I think about the balls of that man waiting for us in our hotel room, the more ticked off I get. I should have pounded the hell out of him and made him tell me who sent him."

"I'm surprised you didn't," Ryan admitted.

"I would have, but he warned me not to. Said he had a gun aimed at Laura. The lights weren't on so I couldn't tell for sure. I couldn't take a chance he was telling the truth," Aaron stated, leaning forward on the table. "Did you get any closer to what this is all about?"

Ryan placed his briefcase on the table. He clicked it open then paused, glancing at the cleavage of a serving girl standing by the table. "I'll have a tap beer," he ordered. "You want another?" he asked, looking at Aaron.

"Sure. I'd like another bowl of pretzels, too," he said, smiling.

"Lord, you see that cleavage? Never mind. Cute girl," Ryan added, smirking. "Noticed you and Laura shared a few sparks last night. Looks like you are doing a good job at that second try. I'm glad to see it," he added.

"Might be too late to enjoy it. Once she finds out about my part in this mess, and when we lose Amie because of this, it will be over. I think I just blew my second chance. I'd give anything to do it all over again. I wouldn't take her for granted either. I really saw her for the first time last night and I'm not ashamed to say that lady lights my fire."

"Damn, lucky guy. Not that I don't find Doris exciting, but it's been some time since I've been ... motivated," Ryan said, glancing back at the waitress. "She certainly could get the old motor going."

Aaron chuckled. "When I see Doris, I just might mention that."

"You do and I'll see you rot in jail!" he joked. "Don't look so serious, I was teasing," he said, taking a notebook and some papers out of his case. He snapped it shut and slid it under his chair.

"You found out something, didn't you?" Aaron asked. "I can tell by that smug look. Some things just don't change."

Ryan dropped several papers on top of the table, stacking them into a neat pile. "I'm going to start with the best. I sent a few of my buddies up to your hotel room for a quick look while Laura was out of there. They dusted for fingerprints and guess what we lifted off the arms of that chair in the corner of your room?"

"The stranger sat in it! Damn, never thought of that? Who is he?" Aaron asked, leaning forward, his heart beating fast.

"A thug by the name of *Black Angel*."

"Never heard of him," Aaron interrupted, then leaned back to allow the blonde bombshell to set the drinks and bowl of pretzels down.

"Eight-fifty, please." She smiled at Ryan, leaning forward more than necessary to set his beer down. "I've seen ya in here before, haven't I?" she asked, her tone high and giddy.

"It's possible. My wife and I were in here with friends a couple weeks ago. Maybe that's when you saw me," Ryan said, laughing at her sudden disinterest.

Aaron watched her wiggle away, then laughed. "You handled that well."

"It's hard on a guy these days. Women seem more forward than men do. It gets tempting, but when I think of what a terrific gal Doris is, and our boys, it's not worth screwing it up, excuse the pun," he added.

Aaron smiled to himself. He'd give anything to have the family life his older brother had. He should have been enjoying Laura and Amie as a family. Shit, he'd made things downright miserable. Now that it's too late, he realized it. Life stunk. In fact it downright reeked. "Tell me about this Black Angel fella," Aaron prompted, changing the subject.

"If I started at the beginning it'd take all night to describe all his nasty deeds. His reputation is doing anything for money. He's wanted here in Chicago, but it seems he's quite a chameleon. I wouldn't put it past him to steal babies from their mothers, if that's what you're wondering."

"It was. How does he tie in with Dr. Jennings and his adoption agency?" Aaron asked, running his fingers through his hair. It'd been a long day and without much sleep, the beer had a relaxing affect on him.

"Dr. Jennings is a piece of work. He associates with two major adoption agencies. One is in Chicago and the other is in L.A. As of today, his contacts in each city are unknown. With a little more digging we'll find out what we need. He's been a careful puppy. I think his loose ends are taken care of by Black Angel," Ryan said, leaning back in his chair. He took a long drink on his beer, then looked over the rim at Aaron.

"You're not telling me everything. I can tell. What is it?" Aaron asked. His interest peaked.

"It seems Mr. Ken Berkhart has some political aspirations. He's running for Governor of Illinois. One of his biggest platforms is increased crime and abducted children. When his daughter was stolen, his popularity shot up eighty percent. They say he brings his audience to tears with the story of his great loss."

"I can't blame him," Aaron stated, feeling drained. Heat rushed to his face. He'd soon have his own story of loss.

"You're not hearing me, brother. Amie's abduction is looking almost too convenient," Ryan explained.

"No. You should have seen Amie's picture above their fireplace. It's a regular damn shrine! No way in hell would parents put themselves through the horror of an abduction even for a short time, just to get more votes. I wouldn't believe anyone could be that cold." Aaron paused, looking at Ryan's expression. "What?"

"How do you know about any picture of Amie over their fireplace? Damn it, Aaron! You went over there, didn't you? Shit. And after I told you not to. Little brother, that was really stupid. Never mind. We can't change it now. Why did you do it? I guess that's all I want to know. Why?"

Aaron rubbed his palms over his face. He shrugged his shoulders in mock resignation. Tears blinded his eyes and choked his voice. He swallowed hard and bit back his tortured

emotions. "I wanted to buy them off. I thought if they were poor with a passel of kids, they'd allow us to adopt Amie legally. I would have found a way to get it all done without hurting Laura. We'd get to keep our daughter and this nightmare would be over."

"Jeez, Aaron, I'm sorry. I can't begin to imagine what you're going through. I'm sure it's been hell trying to keep this from Laura, too. That's what Black Angel must have meant when he said you'd been to the premises and to stay away."

"Yeah. I wished I'd listened to you. I suppose this puts me in deeper shit. Trespassing and all that," Aaron stated, his mood darkening even more.

"I wonder why Black Angel has been watching Berkhart. I don't think you were followed to Chicago, Aaron. I think you caught this thug's attention when you went to Berkhart's house. He figured out who you were and with a quick call to Dr. Jennings, he'd have Mother's phone number."

"You might be right. Do you think they want Amie so they can blackmail the politician?" Aaron asked. Icy fear twisted around his heart.

"Good question. Maybe they're trying to *own* a politician. He's their puppet as long as they know where Amie is and make sure Berkhart doesn't," Ryan reasoned. "I need to have this possibility checked out."

"What do I do now? Should I tell Laura so she's aware of what's going on?" Aaron asked, afraid of the answer.

"No. The less she knows the more natural it'll all seem. She gets uptight or paranoid and it wouldn't be good for Amie either. You better keep in mind that Amie will have to be returned to the Berkharts. I'm sorry, Aaron. I'll keep searching for a loophole, but as it looks right now, there isn't a way around this."

Aaron's spirits sank even lower. "Amie is the daughter I wanted to give Laura. How can I take Amie away from her?"

"I don't know. I wish I had an answer for you, but I don't," Ryan offered, his tone sympathetic. "You're going to have to carry on as though nothing is wrong. Once you return to Great Falls, life has to appear unchanged. They warned you to go home and you will. If you stay quiet and lay low. We can run the investigation from here. Dr. Jennings won't have an inkling something's amiss until it's too late."

"I don't just want Dr. Jennings for this. I believe there's someone higher. I want him. I'll do what it takes to get these bastards. I'll protect Laura and Amie. You do what needs doing," Aaron stated between clenched teeth. "I just hope to God it doesn't cost me my wife and daughter."

Laura shivered as moist, cold air penetrated through her layers of clothing, chilling her to the bone. She sat in her rented Pinto, knowing she shouldn't be sitting a block away from the Berkhart's house. If Brett knew what she was doing, he'd probably quit the case. But she couldn't help herself.

When would she get another chance to see the natural parents of her daughter? The neighborhood told her they had money and could easily afford to give Amie a good life.

Guilt ridden, Laura scanned the premises with her recently purchased binoculars. The front door opened, revealing a slender, well dressed woman. Adjusting the binoculars for the

distance, Laura zoomed in on the woman's face. She was unmistakably beautiful. Her curly, blonde hair instantly reminded Laura of Amie.

She should leave, Laura told herself. But she couldn't draw herself away from watching the woman who would soon be Amie's mother ... again.

Laura's teeth chattered and her body trembled, but the cold temperature had nothing to do with it.

She watched a man hurry from the house, rushing to get to the car in time to open the door for the woman.

How nice, Laura thought. She focused the lens on him and found herself looking at an incredibly handsome man. His compelling blue eyes, firm jaw, and the confident set of his shoulders told her he considered himself a man of importance. His features were so perfect, so symmetrical, that any more delicacy would have made him too beautiful for a man.

She stared at the house long after they drove away in their silver Lexus. Knowing Amie came from money should have made her feel better, but it didn't.

Laura realized she better get back to the hotel. She reached for the keys and the car door suddenly opened. A dark figure loomed at her. Laura pushed and jabbed with her left elbow, then reached for the ignition keys with her right. He snapped her back hard against the seat. Laura resisted him with a quick, forward jerk. She slid down to her right, raising her leg enough to kick at him several times.

She felt a cloth move over her mouth and she blindly punched him with her fists, feeling a connection with bone. Her next breath brought a dizzying darkness.

"I'm telling you, Ryan, she hasn't been back to the hotel room all day," Aaron shouted into the phone.

"Did you ask the main desk if they saw her leave with anyone?" Ryan asked.

Aaron fought the fear that filled him. The manager questioned the staff and no one noticed her going or returning. Our plane leaves in an hour. What should I do?" he asked, panic rose in his tone.

"Damn. We could call the police, but since we have no proof she was abducted they won't do anything until twenty-four hours have passed. I'll be over there to pick you up. We'll check the area restaurants and even around the block. She might just have gone for a walk," Ryan suggested.

"Maybe you're right. Her unpacked suitcase is here and I know she wouldn't have left without me. Her note says she went shopping, but she hates to shop. You don't think she ... no," Aaron answered himself.

"Think she what?" Ryan prodded.

"Do you think she found the milk carton picture of Amie? She has no idea what's going on. What if she went to check out the Berkharts, after reading Amie was stolen from them, like I did? I wouldn't blame her. I couldn't stay away and I knew better. She thinks that guy warning us last night was directed at you. What have I done?" Aaron asked, a stab of guilt twisting his nerves into knots.

"Pack your stuff, check out and wait for me at the front entrance. Leave Laura a note to call Doris if she gets in. We're going to drive around the Berkhart's' neighborhood and see if anything looks suspicious," Ryan said, taking charge.

"I'll be waiting. Ryan?" Aaron paused.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks. I mean that," Aaron said, his voice gruff with emotion.

"What are big brothers for? Get your butt moving, I hate waiting," Ryan said, evading the sentimentality of the situation.

Aaron hung up the phone feeling more worried for Laura with each passing minute. He wished he'd wake up from this nightmare. The phone rang, jolting him.

"Yeah?" he stated in a bellowing tone.

"You always answer the phone like that? I thought I taught you better."

"Mother? What's wrong?" he asked, fear gripping him beyond imagination.

"Wrong? Why would you ask? Everything is fine. I thought I'd call and tell you your flight has been delayed, in case you hadn't heard. We're having quite a blizzard here. I doubt you'll even leave Chicago tonight. You may want to check with the airlines there. Are you listening, Aaron," she asked.

Exhaustion overwhelmed him. "Yes, thanks for letting me know. I just got to my room and I wasn't aware there's a storm out there," he confessed.

"You sound awfully tired. Did it go well?" she asked.

"It went great. I'll tell you all about it when I get home. I'd better get in touch with the airlines and see what's going on. Give Amie a hug and kiss from Mommy and Daddy," he said, a sadness sending a chill through him.

"I sure will. You might want to pick up a little something at a gift shop for her. She's been talking about your bringing her a Green Bay Packer football doll. Must be something you told her about. She's talked so much about it, well, I don't want her to be disappointed."

Aaron fought to keep himself still. His mother meant well, but there were times, like now, that he found her detailed explanations trying. "Thanks for the reminder. I'll tell ... Laura. I'll give you a call when we have our flight figured out. Gotta go, Mother. Tell Amie we love her," he added, realizing it sounded like something Laura would say.

He didn't have time to worry about his flight. He'd check with them later. Aaron rushed into the bathroom and tossed their stuff at random into the suitcases. Then stopped. What was he doing? Their flight into Montana was cancelled. He jotted Laura a note telling her that he was out with Ryan and that she should check with Doris when she got in. He laid it on the smooth bedspread, then rushed out of the room to the elevator. Impatiently he waited in line to extend their room for one more night. In what seemed forever, Aaron finished at the front desk and hurried out the main entrance door. A blast of cold air and whirling snow told him Chicago had her own blizzard brewing.

"Get in," Ryan shouted from his car.

Aaron could tell by his brother's tone, he'd been waiting some time. He slid into the front bucket seat. "Sorry. Mother called just as I was starting to pack. I extended our room for another night."

"What happened? Amie —"

"Everything is fine," Aaron interrupted. "She wanted to tell me about the blizzard," he stated, looking around, then chuckled.

"Sounds like Mother. We'll always be her little boys in her mind," Ryan said, pulling into the middle lane.

"Sixteen sounds good to me right now. Remember the time we slipped out of the house through your bedroom window to see the fireworks from the water tower? That's still the best seats I've ever had to watch fireworks on the Fourth of July," Aaron said, and then fell silent.

"The roads are getting pretty bad," Ryan said, turning on the windshield wipers. "I can't believe this is happening. Doris is beside herself with worry, too. I shouldn't have told you to keep Laura out of this. If anything happens to her —"

"It's not your fault," Aaron interrupted. "I started this whole thing by not thinking. I'm sure somewhere in the recesses of my thick skull I knew that paying out that cash wasn't above-board. I never imagined anything like this would happen, but I think inside I knew it seemed shady."

"You've got to stop punishing yourself. You can't go back and change your decision. At first I thought, *how stupid*. Now, I understand. Laura seems like a different person now," Ryan admitted.

"That's the house," Aaron said with excitement, pointing to his right. "Looks like no one's home," he added.

"Let's park a ways up the street and watch for a while. I doubt they'd keep her here, I mean, if she were taken. I don't think the Berkharts would have anything to do with it."

"They had to have found us by my coming here. I think this is a good place to start," Aaron said, glancing around. He stared at the back end of the car in front of them. "What's Rent-A-Lemon?" He stared at the bumper sticker.

"It's a cheap car rental agency. Wait, you think Laura rented a car? It doesn't look like anyone is in it." Ryan said, looking over at his brother.

Aaron bolted from the vehicle, running and sliding in the mounting snow. He opened the passenger door without much effort, then looked up at Ryan as he slid in on the driver's side.

"Be careful not to touch anything. Damn, you shouldn't have opened the door! Fingerprints and all," Ryan said, looking around.

"I'm wearing gloves. Give me some credit," Aaron snapped at his brother.

"Anything about the rental in the glove compartment?" he asked.

Moving around inside the small Pinto made Aaron feel like a twelve-year-old trying to ride a tricycle. "The rental slip is for Laura Palmer. Damn!"

"Now, don't get all worked up. She could have gone over to talk to the Berkharts. Heck, they could even be out having dinner together right —"

"What's this?" Aaron asked, holding up a folded piece of cloth.

Ryan snatched it from Aaron's hand and sniffed at it. Choking, he handed it back. "Chloroform."

"Chloroform? Christ, Ryan, chloroform! Shit, I shouldn't have listened to you. If Laura had known the truth, she wouldn't have come here."

"But she doesn't know the truth, so what is she doing here?"

"I think she must have found that the milk carton article. It's the only reasonable explanation," Aaron offered. "I thought it was locked in my briefcase, but maybe it wasn't locked. She must have found it last night when I was in the bathroom."

"Maybe you're right, but —"

"Maybe? We're standing here talking about maybe, freezing our asses off, and Laura is hell knows where."

"Calm down, Aaron. I'm sorry, I really am. But you need to get a grip here. We'll find her."

"Where do you suggest we start looking? Christ, I don't believe this."

"We'll call the police. This chloroform soaked cloth is kidnapping."

"Look," Aaron said, watching a car pull into the Berkhart's driveway. Aaron observed a man run around the vehicle and open the passenger door. An elegantly dressed woman stepped out, turned and looked around the neighborhood. After what appeared to be several comments, she grabbed the man's arm for stability as she walked in the snow. "What woman living in Chicago doesn't know better than to wear those God-awful heels in the winter?" Aaron asked. He shook his head at the spectacle she caused slipping and sliding up the walk.

"If things weren't so serious, I'd ... do they look like the couple you observed the other night?" Ryan asked, giving the man and woman another good look.

"I think so. I was a lot closer and they were inside under the lights. Why?" Aaron asked, confused by his brother's train of thought.

"I can't rule any possibility out. Someone has Laura," Ryan stated, glancing at the back seat. "It doesn't seem likely the Berkharts would have any reason to want to harm her. They have nothing to lose and everything to gain, namely, their daughter. But the people handling the abduction and the adoption proceedings have everything to lose. I get the impression they'll stop at nothing to keep a lid on things."

"What's this?" Aaron asked, lifting a purse from under the driver's seat. "It's Laura's, I'm sure of it. This confirms she was grabbed. What woman goes anywhere intentionally without her purse?"

Ryan took it from Aaron and dug through the contents. He opened the wallet and found Laura's driver's license. "It's hers alright," he said, shoving the wallet back down into the bag. He grabbed at a folded, glossy paper, pausing to stare at the picture of his niece.

Aaron watched Ryan's expression, then snapped the paper from his brother's hand. "God! It's another ad. How many of these damn things are circulating?"

"What if Mother sees one or someone tells her before we get a chance to talk to her?" Ryan grabbed the picture back.

"Mother, hell! You know what this means? Laura knew. She knew and she didn't say one damn word to me!"

"Well," Ryan answered, "You knew and you never said a word to her either. She may have had good reasons, like you. Did that ever occur to you?" he asked, pausing to read the ad through. "It strikes me as strange. Six months have gone by since Amie's abduction. Suddenly her picture seems to be circulating everywhere. What are the chances?"

Aaron watched his brother considering the information. Lawyers always seemed to be sifting data, considering if it's evidence. "Without having to dissect and analyze it, I'd say the chances are one in a million, or more,"

"I think you're right. This is getting complicated."

"Maybe it's time you went to the police and see what they think of all of this. I'll stay in here and watch what happens. I'll wait until you come back," Aaron stated, staring up at the bright lights of the house as if they would give him the answers he needed.

"I think you're right. I'll show them this picture of Amie and I'll tell them all that's been going on. Try not to touch anything more on purpose. You might smear a fingerprint that you haven't already."

"I told you, I'm wearing gloves. Don't get paranoid on me."

"I'm serious, Aaron. Your gloves could wipe fingerprints off, so I'm saying be careful."

"Yeah, I'll be careful. Try not to take all day. Damn car is cold. You think the police will take us seriously?" Aaron asked.

"I think that chloroform on the cloth will get their attention. If nothing else, at least we'll have the law aware of... shit... this isn't going to be easy to explain. Remember one thing, I'm your lawyer. No matter what, you don't talk to the police without me there."

"God, Ryan! I don't give a shit about that legal stuff right now. All I want is to find Laura. Go! Get back before I freeze to death," he added, hoping it softened his previous harsh words.

"Don't you go near that house," Ryan warned.

"I won't. I'll sit here like a good little boy and jot down the comings and goings from a distance. You'd better hurry. I'm not a patient man." Aaron kept his gaze fixed on the house. He heard Ryan climb out of the car and later drive away.

Aaron wondered how Laura could have read that abduction ad and not have shown it to him. When did she find out? Maybe someone slipped the ad in her purse, like someone had into his briefcase, and she hadn't even seen it yet? Could he make himself believe that? No, he told himself. Why the hell did all this have to happen?

An eerie silence settled around him. It could have been the howling wind and cascade of falling snow, but an uneasy feeling crept closer, telling him it was more than the weather.

Chapter Seven

Laura slowly regained consciousness. Shivers shook her body. Her feet and hands were numb. Her face felt swollen and tight. She searched the darkness, hoping for a clue as to where she was.

She strained her senses, listening to the silence. When the snapping and clanging of what sounded like a slide lock being opened, Laura dropped her head back onto the cold floor. A door squealed open and a blast of cold air whirled into the room.

"You can't keep them in here. They'll freeze to death," a deep voice said.

Laura heard what sounded like the dropping of a body. She struggled to remain perfectly still. The glow of a flashlight moved across her face. Laura held her breath.

"She looks close to frozen already. Damn it, Black Angel, this isn't right," the man with a deep voice said. "I went along with some of your ideas, I admit that, but this is going too far."

"Man, you ain't got any idea what too far is. Try spending a few years with some good old boys in the slammer, then ya know what's too far. 'Sides, these folks know too much. Either they or you go down. What do ya prefer?" Black Angel asked.

Laura slowly opened her eyes to a narrow slit. She studied the rugged, thin, almost wolfish face of the man called Black Angel. She was surprised that he had pale skin and white hair. He was of brute stature and if she had to guess, at least six feet six inches tall. His black leather jacket and boots covered with silver studs made her think of a biker. She quickly figured it out; he was black-hearted and white like an angel. He was the kind of man who made his own rules and went his own way, the hell with everyone else.

"By the time they're found, they won't be tellin' nothin' to nobody," Black Angel stated.

Moving her gaze to the other man, her body stiffened in shock. He was the good-looking man she had seen at the Berkhart house. Was he Amie's father? But what would he be doing here? She didn't want to think about it. Could a man be callous enough to arrange to have his own daughter abducted?

It took Laura ten seconds to decide she would live through this. She had to, for her daughter. Allowing her gaze to travel around the room, she paused to glance at the body the men had just dropped on the floor. She barely restrained herself from screaming. The lifeless body was Aaron.

"Trouble is, there's always something that can go wrong. One murder leads to another. There comes a time when it catches up with you," Berkhart said, his deep voice hushed.

"Save it for your crowds. Their car breaks down and they come in here to find shelter for the night. It never occurs to them they might fall asleep and freeze to death before morning. We'll place a few calls to the right police investigators. They'll find nothing suspicious about their deaths," Black Angel said.

She heard him sneering with pride over his cleverness.

"I don't like it, but I suppose we don't have a choice," Berkhart said, nodding his approval of the plan.

"This kid is going to cause us nothing but trouble. I say we finish up here, then take care of things on that end," Black Angel said, moving the lantern around the desolate building.

"A simple fire will keep the old lady from spillin' about the phone call, and the kid won't show up to be recognized no more."

"I want Michelle to come back to us. Imagine a picture of the frozen adoptive parents from Montana, found in Chicago, along with a large picture of Michelle. Next to them will be a picture of her natural parents, Donna and me, finding its way to all the major newspapers. Can you imagine the public response?"

"That would be real stupid," Black Angel interrupted. "You'd blow the adoption agency organization and the money it brings in for your campaign and payoffs."

Laura listened as wave after wave of shock slapped at her. She should have told Aaron the truth. He could die because of her fears!

"I guess you're right. I need that money. But I don't think the kid needs to die," Berkhart said in a thoughtful tone. "Just think about it. Couple wants to adopt so bad the husband steals a baby for his wife. I like it. They're dead, so who would know? We've bled the loss of our child thing to death, anyway. Now we can give the public the great reunion of parents and child. They'll love it!"

"Maybe you're right. Them freezing in Chicago and a fire in his mother's home in Montana might look suspicious. "I still can't imagine your Donna being too happy about this decision. She hates kids. She agreed to Michelle because of —"

"You don't need to remind me of the why!" Berkhart snarled.

"I only meant to remind you that the abduction suited Donna just fine. You bring the kid back and you might be asking for trouble."

"I'll hire a live-in nanny, if I have to. When Michelle's old enough for boarding school, our problems will be behind us. Besides, you'd be surprised how many votes we'll get from just a few pictures of us with the kid."

"Let's get outta here, I'm getting' colder than a cows tit," Black Angel said, giving Aaron a kick.

"Stop that," Berkhart ordered. "They're in here freezing to death, not beaten to death. Use your head."

"Don't push me, Berkhart. I can make sure the right people hear about your activities any time I want. One word and it's all over for you."

"Be careful who you threaten. If I can hire you to do my dirty work, you can be sure there's someone I can hire to take care of you. The police would be happy to come pick you up," Berkhart snapped, walking toward the door.

"Try anything like that and I'll —"

"You'll what?" he interrupted. "I've got the power, you keep forgetting that. Who's going to believe you over me? Now, let's get out of here. Donna will be waiting."

Laura remained still. She watched the men walk to the large door, close it behind them, then click the hinge into place.

She had to wake up Aaron. If they didn't find a way out, they'd freeze to death, just as Black Angel and Berkhart had planned.

Moving slowly toward her husband, Laura realized she could move her hands better than she thought. She rubbed them together, working to generate some life back into them. She scooted her bottom across the floor until she reached Aaron's side.

"Aaron? Wake up," she said, her voice quivered from the cold. "Aaron, you hear me?" she shouted. He released a slight moan. A mixture of hope and fear filled her. How could this be happening? She and Aaron were from Great Falls, Montana. Things like this happened on *Missing* or *C.S.I.* But this wasn't a TV show... it was real. There were no guarantees that at the last moment the bad guy would be caught by a minor slip-up, and it ended happy.

Laura lifted Aaron's head onto her lap. His warm breath against her hand reassured her. "Aaron," she called out to him again. "Fight the heaviness. Wake up!"

Frustrated, she slipped his head gently back to the floor. Struggling to stand on numb feet, she slowly moved toward the door. She bumped into a wall, and in the darkness, she felt along the coarse wood with her palms. A cold latch burned into her flesh. She ignored the pain and lifted the hardware. It gave way, opening.

She couldn't believe it. Of course, if they were locked in, it'd be suspicious. They had never expected her or Aaron to come to before the freezing temperatures took effect. The storm had died down enough to cast a bright glow between sky and ground.

A deeper cold penetrated her thin coat. She quickly spied an old house in the distance. If it had a fireplace and some wood, they'd have a chance to warm up so they could get away from here and hopefully take on Berkhart and Black Angel.

Laura glanced back at Aaron's unmoving form before walking out into the night and closing the door behind her. Aaron didn't need the cold winds blowing on him, too. No doubt he was nearly as frozen as she was. Thoughts of her sweet Amie kept her putting one foot in front of the other. She pushed forward, each step sending incredible pain up her legs.

She was completely exhausted by the time she made it to the steps of the old building. It seemed impossible to pull her body up the front porch and into the structure.

Berkhart's words haunted her. "*As soon as Michelle's old enough, we'll put her in a boarding school.*" Laura gathered her strength together and dragged her feet across the porch, then leaned against the door to catch her breath. She knocked. Silence. She pounded once more before she turned the doorknob. Unable to focus her strength on standing, she found herself falling into the house. She landed hard on her right elbow.

"Damn!" she muttered. Nothing seemed to go her way. That wasn't true, she reminded herself. That door back there could have been locked giving her no chance of escaping.

Looking around, Laura realized things were definitely improving. She struggled to her feet, closed the front door, and worked her way further into the old house. The lack of furnishings didn't deter her. She smiled at the sight of a wonderful potbelly stove. The liberal stack of wood and a box of matches sitting on top of it made her cry with joy. A pile of blankets and several pillows spread out in front of the cold stove spoke of the room used as a meeting place. Perhaps for young lovers, she thought, allowing her imagination to give her comfort.

It became a challenge to grip the metal handle and slip it into the groove in the round, black plate on top the stove. Laura realized time now became her enemy. She crisscrossed a stack of wood down inside the stove. She struggled to pinch a match tight enough to light it.

"Come on, Laura," she coaxed herself. Finally a stick match came to life. She held it down on the dry wood, blowing slightly, and nearly crying with joy when it took hold.

Within minutes Laura felt heat generating from the stove. She also felt the stinging life that the heat brought to her near frozen limbs. Thoughts of Aaron out in the freezing building made her anxious to get herself thawed enough so she could return to get him.

For the first time she wondered how Aaron had managed to get himself in the same predicament as her. No doubt he'd come looking for her, but how did he find her?

The crackling fire grew hotter. Laura forced herself to wiggle her hands over the heat; tears of pain streaming down her cheeks. Her feet responded with the same burning and tingling as her hands. She wanted to run from the heat and the consuming pain it caused, but she couldn't. If she didn't get Aaron in here by the fire soon, he would freeze to death, as those men had wanted.

The front door banged open, then closed, causing Laura to jump. Was there a chance that Berkhart and Black Angel saw the smoke and came back? She whirled around, her heart thumping madly.

"Aaron!" she cried, rushing to him the best she could with her still stiff limbs.

"Hogging the fire as usual, I see," he joked.

She moved her arm around him and struggled to grip his side with her numb hands. "I was afraid you were freezing to death out there. I've been trying to thaw myself out enough to go get you," she explained, embarrassed and ashamed to be warming herself, while he remained out in the cold.

"Can't say I wouldn't have enjoyed your rescue, but it's a good thing I made it here myself. You don't look like you're in any shape to rescue yourself, let alone an oversized brute like myself."

She smiled, grateful he understood. "Move closer to the fire. I guarantee you'll be cussing it as much as praising it," she stated, moving with him to the blankets.

"It amazes me how you keep thinking of all these creative ways to seduce me. This is a man's dream come true. Stranded in a snowstorm with a beautiful woman. Blankets piled on the floor in front of a roaring fire."

"I think you've sniffed too much chloroform. My idea of seduction has nothing to do with a numb and half-frozen face and burning, stinging hands and feet. Nor does it include two men planning our frozen demise," she explained.

"I wasn't sniffing chloroform. The bastard knocked me into next Tuesday. By the way, what two men?"

"Sit down before you fall down."

"If I sit down, I don't think I can get back up," he admitted, glancing between the stove and Laura.

"I'm thawing out more all the time. Go ahead, sit," she said, painfully wiggling her fingers. She opened the stove and added a few more sticks of wood, then sat down next to Aaron. "When I came to, two men walked in and dropped a body on the ground. I didn't know it was you at first. I'm sure you can imagine my shock when I found myself looking at you. I thought you were dead."

"I don't remember anything after someone hit me on the back of the head."

She watched him press the back of his neck with an unmoving hand, then wince. "That's not the worst of it. One of those two guys was Mr. Berkhart. Now before you say anything, let me finish." She noticed she had his full attention.

"Mr. Berkhart is... well, I'll go into that later. But this other guy is bad and they were talking about leaving us in that shed to freeze to death. And they said that our Amie was... I don't know how to tell you this. Amie's natural parents aren't dead. Her natural parents are Ken and Donna Berkhart. He's some important politician and he wanted Amie back so he could get more sympathy votes. He said Mrs. Berkhart didn't want the crying kid around again, and that they'd have to find a nurse to take care of her. Then, when she was older, they'd send her to boarding schools. And —"

Whoa, what the hell are you talking about?"

Laura cried, allowing the pent up tears to burst like an overflowing dam. She noticed Aaron remained still. She glanced up and could see the sadness in his eyes. "I have more to tell you."

"I have plenty to tell you, too. I think both of us need to come clean with each other, if we're ever going to put our marriage back together."

She drew in a steady breath. So, he still wanted to make *them* work. It was sad, because once she told him the whole truth, there was no doubt in her mind, he'd want nothing more to do with her again. "I think the man who was in our hotel room was this Black Angel. I also think Mr. Berkhart wasn't expecting," she drew a deep breath before she continued, "I don't think he ever wanted to have Amie back."

"So what you're saying is, if I'd never started investigating the adoption or hadn't gone to the Berkhart's house in the first place, we wouldn't be in all this shit?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. You knew about the Berkharts? You went to their home? What the hell aren't you telling me?" she yelled, so confused it hurt her brain.

"There's lots I need to tell you and I'm sure you have some things to tell me too. But right now I think all we need to know is someone is trying to kill us and we need to figure out how to get the hell out of here. Before we can do that, we need to get out of these clothes, and share our body heat, and thaw the hell out," he said, looking at her.

"You're right, first things first." She looked at his unmoving hands. "We can't go anywhere until our hands and feet work. Maybe our mouths should have been frozen for a while," she said, then couldn't help but snicker. She noticed the tips of his mouth rose.

"Would it be unromantic if I asked you to help me with these buttons?" he asked. "I can't tell you how relieved I am to find you. I imagined all sorts of terrible things. I'm so sorry, Laura," he said, his voice soft and apologetic.

She looked at him, the warmth of his smile echoed in his voice. "You have nothing to be sorry about," Laura whispered. She turned to him and unbuttoned his jacket. The effort caused sharp, pin-like jolts up her fingertips, but she continued to help him. She tossed his jacket on the floor, then unbuttoned her own, flinging it on top of his.

"That looks intimate," he teased, looking at their joined coats.

"Men!" She pretended to be shocked. "How bad are your feet?" she asked, working the laces of his shoes loose. She glanced up to see him grimace when she pulled them off. "I know the feeling," she said, sitting to remove her own shoes.

Without explanation, she continued removing her clothing. First his shirt and then her blouse, his jeans and then hers, his socks and hers. She didn't bother asking if he wanted to keep his boxers on, she pulled them down his legs, then chuckled when he groaned.

"You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?" he asked, his voice husky.

"Don't be silly," she answered, slipping her panties off and tossing them on the pile. "Just as you said, the best way to warm up is to share our body heat. I'm not going to attack you," she assured him, sighing under her breath. "We both need some rest and strength. If you behave yourself, maybe I'll consider it later," she promised, watching his mouth curve into a bemused smile.

Brazenly, Laura walked over and spread out their jeans and jackets in front and around the stove to dry. She added more wood to the fire before joining Aaron on the blankets. She fought against the burning sensations the thawing caused. She didn't doubt he struggled with his own pain.

She slid down on the blankets and pulled one over the top of them. She moved her back against his chest, allowing him to move his legs along the back of hers, as he liked doing. He moved his arm around her, and she smiled, grateful to share this moment with him.

They'd sleep before discussing their situation. If she were lucky, he'd forgive her. If she were really lucky – he'd make love to her. She could hope.

Aaron leaned on his elbow and watched Laura sleep. She amazed him. The fire still crackled, and he realized she'd kept it burning most of the night. Why hadn't he ever thought of her as being strong?

Married five years and he'd never really gotten to know his wife. Somehow work, baseball, football, and archery had absorbed most of his time. When was the last time he took her out for the evening? He knew she loved sharing a candlelight dinner, soft music, and dancing.

He hadn't been much of a husband. She cooked, cleaned, did all the laundry, and had even worked on the outside. What did he do? She'd once accused him of being self-centered. Until now he'd dismissed the charge. Tonight, he owned up to it. No wonder she'd become distant. He gave her nothing in return.

Aaron wondered if he'd get a second chance to do things differently. He decided there was no better time to start than now. He kissed the warm skin on the back of her neck. She wiggled slightly and he immediately grew hot for her. But he knew she needed sleep and his needs could wait.

Again she pressed her bare bottom into him. She moaned softly and he found his breathing increasing at the mere thought of making love to her.

He thought of her standing before him, lace stockings and garter belt. He relived his touching her incredible crotchless panties and burned with need. He'd found them all in the wastebasket and had retrieved them, packing them with his clothes. She may have thought things were over, but they weren't if he could help it. She'd teased him all night, and she owed him a night with those lacy temptations.

He got up and placed more wood in the stove, then returned to the mattress. He slid down in front of her, then flicked his tongue across her taut nipple. She arched her back toward him. Gently he outlined the circle of her breast with his hand, then captured the soft skin with his mouth.

Aaron paused in his pursuit, realizing he hadn't waited for her to awake. Once again he put his own needs before hers. Pulling her exhausted form against him, Aaron cradled her

in his protective arms. He wasn't perfect, but he'd never again take her for granted. He'd work at being a better husband and father, if at all possible.

He turned his thoughts to what Laura had told him. Ken Berkhart wanted Amie back to further his political career. The man received sympathy votes due to his daughter's abduction. He'd get sympathy votes when she was returned. There seemed something wrong with this picture. Even worse were Laura's suspicions that Donna Berkhart didn't want Amie. Well, he and Laura sure wanted Amie and he was going to go to hell and back again, if that's what it took, to keep her.

Laura woke feeling rested and finally warmed-up. She heard the clang of the stove cover, and looked up to find Aaron feeding it more wood. To her disappointment, he was already dressed.

"Morning," she said, looking up at him.

"Well, good morning. I wondered if you might sleep all day. It wouldn't have made a difference, though. That blizzard is worse than it was last night."

"In that case, maybe you should rejoin me," she offered, lifting the blanket in a bold offering. She watched as he slowly and seductively moved his gaze down the length of her. Her skin burned as though he'd touched every inch of her.

"I want to, but I think we should talk first. We need to face a few things, together. If you still want me—"

"Maybe you're right. I have a few confessions to make, too. I guess it's time to clear the air," she said, sitting up and reaching for her clothes. It always had to be on his terms. Why was that? If she was in *the mood*, it didn't matter. What mattered was if he was! She swallowed hard, tucking her hurt feelings inside. She noticed he kept his back to her while she dressed. She felt the door closing, and knew it would slam shut and lock after their talk. She considered seducing him, just to feel his love one last time. She glanced back at Aaron. He still had his back to her, closing her out. The time for love was over.

Laura finished pulling on her shoes when she felt certain she heard a car door slam. "Did you hear that?" she asked, while jumping up to her feet. Quickly she reached for her coat.

"Yeah," he said, rushing to a frosted-up window. "Maybe they've come back to make sure we're both frozen stiff," he whispered.

"The smoke from the stove will give us away," Laura said, straining to see through the blowing snow. "I saw them both last night when they brought you in and I can recognize them," she stated, realizing that alone put her in more danger. But they didn't know she saw them, Laura reasoned. She released a small sigh of relief.

"Let's get out of here before they have a chance to corner us," Aaron suggested, pulling on his coat.

"We don't stand a chance out in that blizzard, Aaron. We can face them here, or freeze out there until spring. They don't want Amie. She's just a pawn to get Berkhart votes. I want to put him away," she said, rushing to another window for a better look.

"I won't just stand here and let them kill us. Out there we at least have a chance," Aaron pointed out.

"It's Black Angel," Laura gasped.

"You've got to be shitting me!"

"Aaron, he's no one to fool around with. We have to run," she shouted. Grabbing a blanket from the floor, she rushed for the back door. She felt Aaron close behind. She led the way, running blindly into the cold, white whirling world. She clung to his hand.

"Let's head for that building over there," he suggested, pointing off to their right.

"No, he'll be checking all the buildings. You can be sure of that. Maybe we can –"

"Let's double back," he yelled into her ear. "If we can work around him, we can find his car and get out of here."

"That's a great idea," she admitted, leading them off to the left. It didn't take the cold long to penetrate her to the bone. If Black Angel chased them, he had to be completely mad.

"Drop," Aaron said, pulling her down on top of him. "Don't move," he added, holding her close.

Laura watched through the whirlwind of snow. Just ahead she saw what alarmed Aaron. Black Angel staggered against the wind, heading for the house. Once he'd walked enough to have his back to them, she jumped up, allowing Aaron to get to his feet.

"I realize it's difficult," Aaron whispered near her ear, "but we'd better run for it. We have one chance and it's now," he said, then placed a warm kiss on her lips. He grabbed her hand and led the way, breaking the wind, pulling her with his strength. She dropped the blanket and it whirled away like a large snowflake.

She saw Black Angel's car up ahead and felt excited to think the plan might work. Without waiting for directions, she pushed her way through the snow, fighting the wind with each step she took, to the passenger side, while Aaron slid in behind the wheel.

The sudden stillness inside the car caused her to tense. She gave Aaron a quick look, then glanced down at the steering column. "No keys," she said out loud, her voice sounding strained.

"If you don't tell my mother," he said, sliding down, reaching up and pulling some wires out, "I'll reveal a talent you never knew I had." The car came to life, and he quickly put it in gear, sliding dangerously close to the opposing ditch edge.

"I'll never breathe a word," Laura whispered. She gripped the edge of her seat, but remained silent. He needed to concentrate on the road, and she didn't want to distract him. Besides, she was too scared to talk. She filled her thoughts with images of Amie. She longed to hold her daughter in her arms and assure her she'd always be there for her. Laura missed Amie like she'd miss an arm if it were amputated. She missed the smell of her Baby's Love lotion scented skin and her sweet sounding *ma ma* and *da da*. She missed their morning walk in the park.

What on earth would she possibly do without Amie in her life?

Chapter Eight

"Honey, wake up," Aaron said, shaking her shoulder.

Laura heard his voice through her muddled dream. She looked up to find Aaron staring back at her. She looked around and noticed a flashing sign advertising the Desert Motel. "Is it safe to stop?" she asked. "Maybe I should drive for a while and you can sleep," she suggested.

"I've signed us in. For an extra fifty, he's letting me park the car in his garage. I told him it wouldn't start if I left it outside. I tried calling Mother, but the storm has all the lines down. If I could trust the police, I'd go straight to them, but after what you overheard in that shed, we can't take any chances. Come on. I'm beat and I know you are, too."

She pulled her coat tight and followed Aaron into the small, cabin-like building. She noticed it was clean, nothing fancy, but it looked wonderful.

"Go ahead and take your shower. I'll take care of the car. Don't look so worried. I'll be right back," he said, pulling her to him for a long and deep kiss. "We have some unfinished business, remember?" he asked.

She watched a soft and loving curve touch his lips. She couldn't help smiling back.

"I'll be in the shower," she said with an air of invitation. She clung to him for a moment. Every day, her love for him deepened and intensified. What a fool she'd been to turn away from him. She'd thought, no, she believed, their love was over. She sensed a change in Aaron, and suddenly, she felt a spark. Now it was more like a burning ember. She wanted and needed her husband. She almost wished she didn't; now there was so much more to lose.

He didn't answer. His gaze became a smoldering flame that disturbed her in every way. Her body ached for his touch.

"I'll be back. Lock the door behind me. I have a key. I'll let myself in," he said, pulling his coat collar up around his neck.

Laura watched him leave. She quickly locked the door. Peeking through the window she watched him disappear in the whirling snow. The room felt empty and cold without him in it. She needed a shower and time to clear her head. The time had come to talk to Aaron. She couldn't walk away, hide behind their lovemaking, nor could she pretend to sleep so they wouldn't have to face this thing. Too much had happened.

She had nothing to change into. Their suitcases were still at the hotel in Chicago. Laura wondered how Mother Palmer and Amie were doing. They hadn't been able to call her for two days now. It seemed like forever since she had held Amie in her arms.

Cool air caressed Laura's skin as she dropped her clothes in a heap on the floor. She stepped into the tub-shower and quickly stood under the welcoming, warm water. It had never felt so good. She lathered her skin with the hotel soap. The clean fragrance smelled every bit as wonderful as a whiff of expensive French perfume. She used the complimentary shampoo on her short hair. Her mood felt lighter than it had in the past day.

The shower curtain snapped back. Laura squealed, covering herself with her hands.

"Damn! I'm sorry, Laura. I really didn't mean to scare you," Aaron said stepping into the confined space. "Let me make it up to you," he offered, pulling her against him, wrapping his arms around her like a protective blanket.

She pushed away from his embrace, backing herself into the corner of the shower, allowing the water to fall between them. After a day and night of fear and almost dying, she felt the overwhelming need to blurt out the truth.

"We won't be allowed to keep Amie." Tears filled her eyes. "They're only using her like some sick pawn. They don't love her like I do."

"They don't love her like *we* do," Aaron corrected. "It's my fault." He allowed his arms to hang loose by his side instead of trying to hold her again. "I never suspected anything was wrong with Amie's adoption. You've got to believe that. But I didn't want you to wait years to get a child either. I knew this might be your last chance to have a baby. I knew our marriage was over, but I didn't hate you. I felt like I let you down. So, I wanted you to at least have the baby. I paid them five thousand dollars in cash to put our name at the top of their list."

Laura stared at him. She started laughing, first as though he'd told her a joke. It grew into loud, hysterical spasms, until it coagulated into a huge knot in her chest and turned into blinding tears. He took a step toward her and she held up her palms to keep him away from her.

"I'm sorry, Laura. I never wanted all this to happen. Someone tore out a missing child picture from a milk carton and put it in my briefcase. I just found out the truth on my way to Chicago. I wanted to tell you, but I couldn't. I went to Ryan and all of a sudden there were people following us, threatening us, and trying to kill us. This isn't what I imagined, believe me."

She suddenly couldn't breathe as she listened to his confession and what it meant. "Oh, I believe you, Aaron," she said slowly. "I pulled out some money I had stashed away before we were married. Five thousand dollars, to be exact."

"What?"

She held up her hand, asking for silence. "Evidently, Dr. Jennings used both of us by mentioning cash might speed things up. Getting Amie two days after paying that money should have made me suspicious. But I wanted her so badly and I knew you were only going along with the adoption because of me. I was going to tell you about the money, but as time went on it got harder. Finally I decided it had been my money and it hadn't hurt anyone. I knew our marriage was over, but at least I had Amie," she paused, swallowing.

He reached again for her, but Laura pressed away from him. She kept her eyes on his chest, afraid of the look on his face.

"Then I found Amie's picture posted in a missing child ad in a magazine, and the nightmare began. I talked to Sharon and she called in an investigator friend, Brett... something. He started looking into things the day before I came to Chicago. He has a FBI buddy who said this thing was big. I wanted to tell you, but I knew you'd be angry with me for giving the adoption agency that money. I just wanted Amie so badly."

He was stunned and hurt. "You could have turned to me. You could have discussed this with me at any given time. You could have given me a chance. Why didn't you?"

"I don't know. You could have talked to me, too!" she pointed out. "We haven't been able to talk to each other for a long time. You think everything you do is right and whatever I want or do is wrong. Your mother always agrees with you and that leaves me alone."

"That's not true."

"But it is, Aaron. Think about it. Our inability to get pregnant wasn't the only problem we had in our marriage. We weren't communicating or facing things together. That was the main problem. You ran away from any conflict between us and I buried my frustration in my want and need for a baby. Either way, we never turned to each other. We've grown apart. Oh, we can still have the chemistry, but do we have the love?" She watched his hesitation. She'd been right; he wanted her body, but not her heart.

She watched him step out of the tub and grab a towel. He left the bathroom, closing the door behind him. So, she'd been right all along. Their marriage was over. Tears stung the corners of her eyes, but she refused to succumb. She'd cried enough to last a lifetime. She needed to toughen up and figure out how to get her daughter back so her life could go on.

Aaron had made his choice merely minutes ago, but Laura knew that answer over a year ago. Whatever made her think he'd changed his mind just because their bodies still craved each other so madly?

Aaron sat on the edge of the bed. Laura had faced him down. He didn't know the woman in that shower. She was bold, assertive, and blunt. She scoffed his attempts to show her he still cared about her and she revealed her secretive actions over the past year. After hearing that how could he trust her?

On the other hand, could she trust him? Hell, he wasn't any better. He'd done the same thing as she had. A fine pair they made. What had Laura said? They had the chemistry, but not the love. He wanted to say he thought he'd finally found the love, but what good would the idle words be? He would have to show her. Did he still feel the effort was worth it?

A pounding on the door brought more chills than the icy night. He glanced back to see Laura standing in the bathroom doorway.

"Stay behind the door. Don't move until I tell you it's safe," he said between clenched teeth. He tightened the towel around his waist.

The pounding continued. Aaron ran to the window edge and peered outside, realizing the motel owner stood outside in the whirling snowstorm. Aaron unlocked the bolt and pulled the door open with a jolt.

"Come on in," he shouted, shivering from the blast of cold air and swirling snowflakes.

"Sorry to disturb you," he said, moving into the room. "I thought you ought to know a fella was just here looking for you and the missus."

"What did he say?" Aaron asked, tensing up.

"Asked if a couple was stayin' here. He described you both, then said he was looking for you because your daughter was in the hospital and you needed to know. Said your flight had been cancelled and you was driving back to Montana."

"Lord. What did you tell him?" he asked, shivering more from fear than the cold.

"I told him no one has been here for three days. In this blizzard a person would have to be a fool to try traveling," the manager answered.

"You think he believed you?" Aaron asked.

"It appeared he did."

"Why'd you lie for us?" he couldn't help asking.

"You seem like a nice fella. This other man didn't. In my business you meet all sorts and you get to be a pretty good judge of character. This fella seemed like a real mean one. He's staying in one of the cabins on the other side."

"Damn," Aaron groaned. "We can't take a chance staying here. You have any food I can buy? We haven't eaten in a couple days."

"Sure. Get dressed and I'll have my wife fix you some sandwiches."

"Thanks —"

"Fred. You're welcome, son. Might I ask why this fella is chasing you and your wife?"

"It's a long story, but you can be sure he's not going to catch us. When we get to the bottom of this, you'll be hearing about it on the national news," Aaron said with conviction.

"I'll get those sandwiches going," Fred said, leaving in a whirl of cold wind.

"How could Black Angel be here already? We took his car," Laura said, disturbed by the news.

"Can't imagine. We have to get out of here. Get dressed," he said, running into the bathroom and then returning with an armload of clothes. Silently, he sorted their dirty, worn belongings. Hurriedly they dressed.

"We're going to make it back. We'd better not stick around long enough to call Mother or Ryan. Let's put some miles behind us first, then we'll find a phone," he said, drying his hair with a towel.

"Will this nightmare ever end?" she asked, pulling on her socks.

"Yes. When Black Angel is locked in a cell, singing a song of names and places to save his own sorry ass."

Laura didn't respond. She recognized Aaron's tone; the one that said, leave it alone. End of discussion. She hurried. She knew Aaron was exhausted; he'd driven for hours. If she guessed right, they were a good six hundred miles closer to their daughter. They only had to drive in a blinding blizzard another nine hundred or so miles.

"Let me drive for a while," she offered. She grabbed his arm and squinted to keep the snow from blinding her. They stomped their boots in the office entryway.

Laura glanced through the small window and saw Black Angel at the front desk. She caught her breath as well as Aaron's arm. They ducked down, then turned around quickly and headed back outside. He eased the door shut behind them.

Aaron spotted the gleam of a gun. They'd nearly walked into a disaster.

Aaron grabbed her arm and they ran to the side of the main building. They stopped, waited, and listened.

"Come," he whispered, guiding her into the garage. "If we open this door, he's sure to hear it."

"Don't use the opener. We can ease the door up manually. With the blizzard —"

"Wait here, Laura. Don't leave for any reason. Find a good hiding spot and only come out when you hear me call you Laura Loraine."

"God, I hate it when you call me that," she quipped. Making light of the situation helped her cope. "What are you going to do?" she asked, certain she wasn't going to like his answer.

"If we're really going to put miles between us and that monster in there, we need to disable any vehicle he might drive. I'm going to slice a few tires and retrieve a few distributor caps," he said, grabbing a knife off the workbench. "I'll be right back," he said, closing the door quickly behind him.

Laura felt alone and vulnerable. She quickly spotted the car they'd stolen from Black Angel. Her gaze settled on several five-gallon cans of gas. They'd driven for miles and she knew the gas tank was probably close to empty. With every effort to move quietly, Laura removed the gas cap and hoisted the full can, directing the spout into the opening. The process went slow and the weight of the gas can strained her muscles, but Laura didn't stop until gas trickled back out of the opening. She smiled, twisting the gas cap on tight.

She peeked out the side window but saw nothing except blowing snow. She shivered in the freezing garage, knowing Aaron would be much colder outside. She moved across the cluttered area and stared at the owner's well-used Ford pickup. It reminded her of the old truck her shop class worked on years ago. She hated clichés about women and vehicles, and although she didn't know how to rebuild an engine or fix the pistons, she did know what a distributor cap was.

Pulling the hood latch from inside the cab, Laura pulled hard, lifting with all her strength with her left hand, while pulling on the thin rod with her right. It snapped into place, holding the hood up. She smiled, satisfied with her efforts. Slipping her feet up on the front bumper, Laura reached down in and worked the black distributor cap free.

Taking it with her, she went to the car they stole from Black Angel and dropped it on the back floorboard. She'd mail it back to the owner and some money for the gas, after they got back. She didn't want to take advantage of the nice man.

Laura sat behind the wheel and eased the door shut behind her. She slouched down in the seat and waited. Finally the side door of the garage opened and then closed. She watched Aaron brush the snow from his head and jacket. He looked cold but satisfied. She waved at him from the car. She could tell he wasn't too pleased with her hiding place.

"I'll drive for a while, then when the roads look better you can take over," he said, nudging her to move over into the passenger seat. He stepped back out and grabbed the garage door manual opener and raised the large door. With a loud jolt it snapped into place. He ran back to the car and jumped in, pulling the door closed as quiet as he could.

She considered arguing, but she knew he was right. They couldn't afford to end up in the ditch. "Are we going to—?"

The side door burst open and an angry Black Angel appeared. Aaron started the car and stepped on the gas, squealing the tires as they bolted from the garage.

"Duck down," Aaron shouted, as the window on her side of the car shattered.

She heard several more shots before they reached the first corner. She held her breath as the car swerved from one lane, into the next, before righting again, moving forward.

"That was close," Aaron said. "You okay?" he asked, glaring at the road.

"Yes. We were lucky. I wish he hadn't shattered this window, though," she said, shivering from the cold air blasting through the rough opening.

"Better he hit the window than one of us," Aaron reasoned. "You need to find something to cover it. Use your jacket and I'll turn the heater on full blast.

"That guy must be crazy. If he kills us, he'll have to kill that motel manager. Oh no, you don't think he hurt that nice old man, do you?" she asked, upset at the thought of more violence.

"I sure hope not. There isn't much we can do right now to help him. We can only hope he's okay. Damn. It smells like gas in here. I bet we're almost out," Aaron said, glancing down at the gauge. "It can't be right I haven't put any gas in this thing and the gauge says it's full." Aaron flicked the gauge with his nails.

"It's full. I filled it while I waited for you. I also got this from Fred's old truck," she said, dangling the distributor cap from her fingertips. "Thought I'd mail it to him later." She hoped he'd be alive to receive it.

"You did alright back there," he said, reaching over to squeeze her hands. "We need to get a few miles between us and that animal, then we'd better start looking for a phone. As soon as the lines are working, I'm sure he'll call his people in Great Falls. I'm not convinced Mother and Amie are safe. These people may try to bargain a trade, then kill us all. I'm not sure how to handle this. Here, let me stop so we can fix that window." He pulled to a stop.

She opened the door and Aaron held the jacket high enough for her to jam the material in the window. She pressed the sides against the lower part of the door while Aaron hurried around and got back inside the car.

"Why don't we call Sharon?" Laura suggested. "She and Brett can take Mother and Amie to a safe place. Brett's an investigator. He'll know what and how to do this sort of thing," she suggested.

"That's a good idea. Shit, we should have called them and asked them to do that before now. We should have had Brett call the police. I don't know this Brett, but if Sharon likes him, he must be okay. We'll find a restaurant in the next town and we can try calling Brett from there. We better get some food for the road, too. We can't waste any time. I'm sure we set Black Angel back, but I have a feeling we haven't seen the last of him yet."

Chapter Nine

Aaron glanced over at his sleeping wife. She'd been through a lot lately, more than he'd begun to imagine.

He never would have guessed her to be so strong. He sensed she would have to find a lot more strength in the days to come. But first, they had to get back to Great Falls.

He'd spent the past hundred and thirty miles mulling over all the information she'd pulled together. Most interesting was the conversation she overheard between Berkhart and Black Angel. It was important but didn't help them as much as she hoped it would. What Laura hadn't realized was that it was her word against both of theirs. They lacked proof.

There were several things that could substantiate their story, but it still wasn't enough to go to the police with, or Aaron would have headed for the nearest station.

In the back of his mind, he hoped Berkhart was dirty as hell. If they could prove it, they just might have a chance to keep their daughter. Aaron wouldn't mention it to Laura; no use getting her hopes up.

What bothered him most was who was behind it all. He doubted Berkhart was the one in control. Not the way Laura said Black Angel spoke to him. There had to be someone higher. If it took his lifetime, Aaron knew he had to find him.

The storm had let up some. He felt a twinge of hope they'd make it after all. He pulled the car next to a gas pump, and turned off the ignition. He drew in a breath, grasping strength to get out and fill the tank.

He watched Laura adjust her position and quickly settled his gaze on the creamy expanse of her neck. He longed to kiss her. Instead, he bolted out the door. The cold penetrated his thin jacket and the wind whipped at his bare face and hands. He hated winter, but never more than at this moment.

His stomach grumbled in protest, and Aaron realized his weakened state was due to the lack of food the past few days. He quickly hung up the pump, and screwed the gas cap on tight. He slid back behind the wheel and drove the short distance to park in front of the truck stop's restaurant. It may not be fancy, but he knew all these places had incredibly good food.

"Laura?" Aaron murmured, shaking her shoulder. He moved his fingertips over her cheek and rubbed it slightly. She opened her eyes.

"Is something wrong?" she whispered. "Where are we?" She looked around as she sat up and adjusted her clothing. "Food! I can't begin to tell you how hungry I am."

"We need to make a quick phone call, get some takeout food and we'll be back on the road. I thought you could drive for a bit."

She nodded to the plan, then frowned down at her clothes. "No matter what I do, they still look like I slept in them," she complained, pulling her fingertips through her short hair.

"Not much we can do about that, but I doubt if anyone will care around here," he said, suddenly concerned about his own appearance. "Want to brave it?"

"There's no way I'm leaving without a full stomach. I don't know about you, but I can't live on love alone," she said, before choking on the words. "In our case, starvation is a real problem."

He didn't find her banter amusing, but let it roll. "Let's get some food. Come out my door so your jacket stays in place," he directed, then pushed open his door and stepped outside. The moment she emerged from the car he pulled her against him, wrapping as much of his jacket around her as he could. They entered the restaurant in a whirlwind.

Instant warmth enveloped them. Aaron immediately looked around, tense and protective. He spotted a middle-aged woman wiping off a counter. Only one customer, an ancient-looking Native American man, sat eating.

Quickly, Aaron spotted a pay phone hanging on the wall. He suddenly felt better. "Come on, let's get a booth, order, then we'll make a few calls while they fix our food," he suggested, guiding her to a booth by a window.

"Hi, folks. You must be crazy or desperate to be traveling out in this storm," a sweet voice stated. "Coffee?" she asked, placing two heavy, brown, cups on the table.

"You bet," Aaron responded, watching the woman. She wore too much makeup and her bottle-blond hair spoke of age, rather than youth. Her smile made the other factors insignificant. "You have a beautiful smile," he complimented, before realizing he spoke.

"Well, coming from a young puppy like yourself, thank you," she said, glancing over at Laura. "Looks like you could use some mothering," she said in a tone more of concern than insult. "On that rack by the bathroom door there are complimentary travel packets. Help yourself, both of you," she added, pouring hot coffee into the cups. "I'll be back in just a bit for your order."

Aaron laughed slightly, shaking his head. "Woman has class. We'd better follow up on her suggestion. Wouldn't want to hurt her feelings," he joked. Sliding from the booth, he waited for Laura to slide toward him. They headed for the bathrooms.

Grabbing one pink and one blue packet, he guided her down a narrow hallway. Pausing in front of the women's door, he handed her a pink bag. "Don't come out until I knock and let you know it's me. Lock the door," he said in a firm tone.

He waited outside the door until he heard the lock slide in place. He moved to the men's room. Laura had seemed a bit quiet. After all that had happened, he couldn't blame her. She must be mentally and physically exhausted, he thought, knowing he certainly was.

How did Black Angel catch up to them so quickly at the motel? They'd never been chased before. They had no experience to compare it to. It suddenly occurred to him that he had started thinking in terms of *they*, *we*, and *us*. When? They were a team, but he'd never included her, like he did now. Was Amie their connection? Had she done this for them? When they had to give her back—what then? Laura said they didn't have the love, could he prove her wrong?

Aaron tore open the traveler's bag. It contained a small washcloth, comb, toothpaste and toothbrush, deodorant, disposable razor, and even a sample of men's cologne. He smiled. This was nice. He hurried, anxious to make sure Laura was okay, and the smell of food beckoned to him.

He dropped the partly used items back into the blue bag and slid them into his jacket pocket. He hurried to get his wife.

He tapped the door with his knuckles first once, then twice. "Laura," he called out, panic rising in his voice. "Laura?" he called out louder.

"Here," Laura responded, poking her face around the corner, down the hall. She held a phone receiver against her ear.

His relief and anger responded in unison. "I told you to wait—"

She held up her hand as she turned back to the phone. "Hello, Sharon? "

"Dear God, is that you, Laura?"

"Yes. Yes, it's really me."

"Oh, my God! I was so worried. Brett and I have been going crazy wondering where you to went to."

"Hush, and listen, Sharon."

"But where have you been?"

"Listen. Calm down and just listen to me. I don't have time to explain everything ..."

"Well you could have called sooner. Do you know what we've been going through?"

"Sharon, would you please take a breath and listen to me?" Laura said impatiently.

"Okay, I'm listening."

"Has Brett found out anymore info for me?"

"All the airports are closed over here. This has been the storm of the century!"

"Yes, Aaron's mother called to tell us about that."

"Brett wanted me to tell you that Aaron's mother has been calling us about ten times a day to see if we've heard from you."

"Has she received any more calls from that stranger?" Laura asked, looking at Aaron, then shaking her head so he knew the answer.

"No, but she said she's afraid to answer the phone. If the caller ID isn't a number she recognizes, she isn't answering it."

"Good. Has Brett found out anything more about the adoption agency?"

"He's being real secretive with his information these days. Says I don't need to know. I think he's trying to protect me. I did hear him on the phone saying this thing is bigger than they even imagined."

"Great, I'm not so sure I wanted to hear that! Do me a favor, would you, Sharon? Call Mother Palmer and tell her weather has held us up from flying or calling. Sharon, I need you to do something for me without a million questions. Aaron and I want you and Brett to take Mother Palmer and Amie to a hiding place."

"Good God, a hiding place. Why on earth for? Where? You're going to have to explain that one."

"Sharon! Listen for a minute, would you?"

Aaron took the receiver from Laura. "Sharon, this is Aaron."

"Aaron! Hi. Good God, I can't believe this is happening."

"Listen. Sharon, shut up for a minute, and just listen, please. Thank you. Now, a situation has happened here. I don't have time to go into it. Because of it, Laura and I think Mother and Amie might be in danger. We don't know for sure and we aren't even sure what kind of danger. Call it intuition or just taking precautions, I don't give a shit. Will you do this for us?" he asked, exhausted by the conversation.

"Of course, Aaron. I'll let Brett know right away."

"Thank you," he said, then handed the receiver back to Laura.

"You think he might know a place where you can spend a few days?" she asked.

"Brett's firm has several hotel suites he uses for his cases. We'll take them over to the Presidential suite at the Rainbow Inn."

"That's a terrific idea. Sharon, Aaron and I thank you. Bye," she added, then hung up the receiver before Sharon had a chance to say anything more.

She followed Aaron to their table.

"Well, that certainly helped." The waitress smiled at them. "I went ahead and served you both up our special of the day. Hot beef stew, fresh baking powder biscuits and Dutch apple pie for dessert."

"Great!" Aaron responded, picking up his fork while waiting for her to finish placing the food on the table. "What's your name?" he asked, impressed with her.

"Anna Wild Wind. My father-in-law and I own this place," she pointed to the old man at the counter. "It pays the bills and helps me give my three boys a decent life."

"What about your husband?" Aaron couldn't help asking.

"Ben Wild Wind got himself shot down protecting his ancestors," the old Indian answered. He turned toward the couple. "Grave looters needed more artifacts to sell to important white collectors. It is now big power to have the belongings of our Indian People. They want our dead – but nothing to do with our living."

"Grandfather Wild Wind is right," Anna spoke in a quiet voice that seemed so unlike the woman of a few minutes ago. "It gets worse every year. If we try to stop it – they burn our homes or beat up a loved one, and sometimes they even kill us. If we go to the authorities, nothing happens. The reservation is poor and pathetic, but others are rich from selling the belongings of our old ones."

"I had no idea things like this really happened," Laura spoke, between chews. "Can't the government put a stop to it?"

Aaron watched the old man hang his head as though in defeat. "I have a brother who just might find this a worthy challenge. I've got some unfinished business right now, but when it's taken care of, I'm going to talk to Ryan. You need some help and I think he's the man who can do it."

"We appreciate your saying so, but we won't hold our breath," Anna said, heading back to the kitchen. "We've heard a few song and dances in our time," she added.

Aaron looked into the old man's eyes and paused. A feeling of peace filled Aaron's mind. A wave of heat passed through him and all feelings of fatigue disappeared in its path.

Breaking the trance, Aaron glanced back at Laura. She ate, unaware of his experience.

"What did Sharon say? I know she's taking Mother and Amie to a safe place, but did she say where?" he asked, taking a big bite of meat.

"Brett's firm has several hotel suites he uses for his cases. We don't need to worry about them," Laura said, swallowing emotions, instead of food.

"Maybe we should lay low here for the night. We're both exhausted."

"Sharon seemed too easy," Laura stated, glancing up at Aaron.

"What?"

"You know Sharon. She has to know every detail, every word of conversation, and even every kiss and tell. She gave up too easily."

Aaron sipped on his coffee, thoughtful for a moment. "You have a point. What exactly did she say? It could be a clue."

Laura thought, then said, "She knew about the phone call your mother received that first night. Sharon said they could take Mother Palmer and Amie to the Presidential suite at the Rainbow Inn. Brett's firm owns it. Aaron, that's it!" Laura said, excited.

"Care to fill me in? That's what?" Aaron asked, watching her thinking it through.

"They are remodeling the Rainbow Inn. Brett's firm doesn't own it either. Some investment firm bought it and is restoring it to its original state. I read a big article on it in the newspaper last week. It's a billion dollar project."

"Was she telling us they were headed there or maybe she meant that was part of the information Brett found out on the adoption agency?"

"Does this mean they think someone might be listening in on their phone calls?" she asked.

Aaron felt her gaze burn across the table. "I'm going to call Mother," he stated, jumping up. "Then I'm calling Ryan. I should have called them before. What was I thinking?" he asked, rushing to the pay phone, not waiting for her to answer.

Fumbling with the change from his pocket, Aaron placed a call to his mother. He listened to the steady ring. Fearful images filled his mind. He hung up and quickly dialed Ryan's number. It rang. He waited.

"Hello?" a soft voice answered.

"Hi. Is your mom or dad there?" Aaron asked, unsure which of the boys answered.

"Mom, phone!"

"Tell her it's Uncle Aaron and to hurry," he told the child.

"It's Uncle Aaron and he said you should hurry," the young boy repeated.

"Aaron? Good Lord! Where are you? Did you find Laura? We've been going crazy waiting to hear," Doris said, her voice expressing her concern.

"I'm at a pay phone. You're better off not knowing where we are. I found Laura. Well we kinda found each other. Anyway, we're heading back home. I'm worried about Mother and Amie. Tell Ryan to continue his investigation, but to be damn careful and be as discreet as possible."

"He has been, believe me. We got a call from Laura's friend, Sharon, and she sounded hysterical. Ryan couldn't make out much, but it sounded like she'd gotten her cell phone to work and was trying to be quiet so no one could hear her. I suppose you should know. Ryan believes they have Mother Palmer and Amie."

Aaron swallowed hard. It was one thing thinking it—another to hear it in words. "He have any ideas who and where?" Aaron asked.

"No. Ryan has been working with a man Sharon told him to call—"

"Brett?" Aaron interrupted.

"Yes. Together they've got a pretty good picture of what's going on. Ryan doesn't want to tell me much, just in case ... just because it's better."

"Doris, I'm sorry. I'd never do anything to put my family in danger. Tell Ryan he should take you and the kids to a safe place. I'm sorry we dragged you guys into this. The men chasing us aren't leaving any loose ends, like Laura and me. We know too much."

"Lord, it can't be," she stated in a tone of disbelief and fear mixed.

"Believe it. I'll try to give Ryan a call tonight. On second thought, tell him I said you need to get to a safe place," Aaron stated firmly. "These guys will do anything to get to Laura and me."

"I'm afraid, Aaron. Ryan has been digging deep. If they are as connected and dangerous as you say —"

"They are. Tell Ryan this is for real and for keeps. You take care of each other and I'll get in touch sooner or later," Aaron said, hoping it would be sooner.

He went back to the table, and Laura. He had his back to her the entire time he'd been talking on the phone. Now he realized how foolish that had been. Anything could have happened to her, and he wasn't even keeping an eye on her. Damn, this cloak and dagger shit wasn't easy.

"I got a hold of Doris," he said, sliding across from Laura. "It's not good, Lor. I guess Sharon called Ryan and Doris thinks they have Mother and Amie," he whispered, cradling his head in his palms.

"No. Oh, no. Do you think they'll hurt them?" Laura asked.

He noticed tears filling her eyes and he wished he could have spared her the fear and pain. "I don't know, Lor. Ryan and Brett are now working together. It sounds like our adoption of Amie set us up as kidnappers. They talked each of us into paying five thousand dollars cash for a baby. Ryan needs to find out who's in charge of this organization, then he can bring charges against them," Aaron explained.

"Why are they so intent on killing us? We have no proof," she said, sipping her coffee.

Aaron took a bite of pie. "I think they're afraid we'll testify once the authorities have enough evidence to indict them. Ryan and Brett are making sure they find that evidence. If we testify, we might get immunity on all charges. If we're lucky they'll believe we had nothing to do with this, except stupidity and a great need for adopting a child."

"What about Amie?" she asked in a heavy voice.

"I don't know, Lor," he said, reaching over to pull her small hand into his. "I wish I could tell you everything will be just fine, but I can't. There are a lot of ifs there. Right now we need to get home and do whatever is necessary to keep everyone safe and alive."

"I think we should go to the police," Laura suggested.

"I don't," Aaron countered. "We don't know who we can trust. This Berkhart is powerful enough to have just about anyone on the payroll, or the ability to pay anyone off if the need arises. No. I say we get back to Great Falls on our own. We should trust no one besides Ryan, this Brett, and each other," Aaron said. "We've haven't done much of that lately, have we?" he added.

Laura shook her head, but didn't answer.

"Here's a sack lunch for later today," Anna said, placing a bag on the table. "A blind fool wouldn't miss you're on the run. Don't ask, but Grandfather says your heart is good. He says to tell you to leave immediately. A black angel is getting close," she relayed. "I'm not sure what he means, but I have a feeling you will."

Aaron jerked his head toward the old man, but he was gone.

"Grandfather said little lady needs a coat. This one was left months ago. No one came back for it, so I guess it's yours now."

Aaron took the silver ski jacket and handed it to Laura.

"Tell Grandfather I really appreciate it. That was very nice of him," Laura said, slipping into the warm coat.

Aaron reached into his pocket and withdrew his last fifty. "Here," he said, extending the money.

"No, but thank you," she said, pushing his hand away. "I have no doubt that you will be needing that money more than me. You can mail me what you owe me when things get squared away."

Aaron watched her pick up their empty plates, then head toward the kitchen.

"Thanks, I'll pay you back, I promise," he called to her.

"I'd hurry if I were you. Grandfather is never wrong."

They bolted from their seats and raced out of the restaurant. Aaron slipped his arm around Laura and quickly opened the driver's door. He waited in the blowing cold while she slid across the seat and settled into the passenger side. He quickly slid into the driver's seat.

"Let's go find our daughter," he stated. Determination and optimism laced his words and he struggled to feel them.

Chapter Ten

Laura fought the weariness that threatened to engulf her. She'd been driving for hours and the monotony of the road droned on. Aaron slept, deep and hard. She knew he must have been completely exhausted to finally let her take the wheel.

The storm had finally blown itself out. Snowplows had done a good job on the freeway. Other than an icy patch here and there, it went well.

The road conditions didn't haunt Laura's thoughts, but worrying about her daughter did. If those men wanted to eliminate any possibility of loose ends, then they'd certainly have to get rid of Sharon, Mother Palmer and Amie. The thought brought chills down her spine.

Laura turned onto Tenth Avenue, relieved to finally be in Great Falls. She'd go straight home ... no, that'd be foolish. They could be watching the house. She would have headed to Brett's house, but she didn't know where he lived.

"Aaron," Laura called out, reaching over to shake his shoulder. "We're home," she stated flatly.

"Huh?"

"We're home. Should I head for a pay phone or a police station? I hate to call Brett this early. It's three in the morning," she said driving through the flashing yellow lights.

"He'll understand. Stop at the gas station up there. Park this heap around back and I'll wipe it clean of fingerprints. You use the pay phone and call Brett to come and get us. Try not to attract attention from the guy behind the counter. If we're lucky, he won't notice us."

Laura didn't argue with his logic. She pulled up behind the building and turned the ignition off. She got out of the car and stretched. She watched while Aaron opened the passenger door, got out, walked back around to her.

Be careful," he said, then placed a soft kiss on her lips.

Before she could answer, he slid behind the driver's wheel and closed the door.

"Hurry," he said, from inside the vehicle.

Laura worked her way to the corner pay phone. She dug in her purse, and quickly found Brett's phone number.

"Hello," a dull voice answered.

"Brett? This is Laura Palmer."

"God, for real? I'd all but given up hope. Lord, you guys have no idea what you're in. Where you at?" he asked.

"Kum and Go on Tenth. We didn't want to go home in case —"

"Good thing you didn't. It's being watched. So is your mother-in-law's and even Sharon's house. Hell, we can talk later. I'll be there in fifteen... no, ten minutes. Stay out of sight. Don't even go inside the gas station. Just wait outside. I'll pick you up around the back."

Laura looked at the receiver and felt stunned. She hurried back to Aaron. She saw him walking toward her from up the alley. "Where'd you go?" she asked, puzzled.

"I took the garbage to an apartment dumpster a couple blocks down. I don't want them finding a way to trace that car to us."

"But how could they? Neither of us have our fingerprints on file. I don't. Do you?" she asked, shocked at the thought.

"They might. It was a long time ago. Don't look at me that way," Aaron said, shivering.

Laura allowed him to wrap his arms around her, shielding her from the wind. "What did you do?" she asked next to his ear.

"A bunch of Ryan's college buddies were having a few beers. One of the guys, John, decided he wanted to scare his girlfriend, Marge, the queen of scary movies. You have to remember that they were drunk, young and stupid. Anyway, they broke into her house by climbing a trellis and getting in through an upstairs window."

"You weren't with them?" she asked.

"No. To make a long story short, they'd broken into the wrong house. The people they scared half to death recognized several of the boys. Ryan was one of them."

"How does that get your fingerprints on file?" she interrupted.

"Well, Ryan and I have always looked a lot alike. When the police came to the door I put Ryan's jacket and Brewer's cap on. The people said it was me."

"Why'd you do that? Why would he let you?" she asked, shocked by it.

"Ryan wouldn't have been able to be a lawyer if he'd been arrested. We both knew that. No one was hurt. I did hours of community service and that was the end of it."

"But now your fingerprints are on file. You wiped the car clean, right?" she asked, looking up at him.

"Here comes a car. What does this Brett drive?" he asked, pulling her closer.

"I didn't think to ask. That's him," she said, waving.

"Get in quick and lay low," Brett said in a low tone.

Laura jumped in the back seat, sliding across to the other side for Aaron to have room. They leaned down below the window level. "Is this really necessary?" she asked, shaking.

"I may have been followed. This time of night is not normally my joyriding time. I'm not certain whether they've caught on I'm involved yet."

"Who are they?" Aaron asked.

"Sorry to have to meet you this way, Aaron, I'm Brett, of course. I talked to Ryan tonight. Doris got a call from a deep voiced man. Said Ryan is walking on thin ice. He should get off the lake or it might crack, drowning him. His body wouldn't be found until spring."

"Good, Lord!" Laura gasped.

"Now I know we can't back down. Any more news on my mother and daughter?" Aaron asked.

"Wish there was," Brett answered. "I'm worried about Sharon, too. She's never been able to keep that mouth of hers shut and I haven't been able to get hold of her. I'm afraid she's in trouble."

"I'm afraid of that too," Laura agreed. Sharon in a kidnapping situation could be nothing but explosive. Laura hoped it didn't get her friend killed. "You have any ideas where they might be? I knew something was wrong when she said you were taking them to the Rainbow Hotel."

"What? When did you talk to her?" Brett asked, taking a corner sharper than necessary.

"Yesterday. I asked her if you could hide her, Mother Palmer and Amie. She said sure, your company owned a suite in the Rainbow Hotel. But I knew that couldn't be since it's being completely renovated. I think she cleverly let us know they were hostages."

"Sounds like it," Brett said thoughtfully. "What if her captors told her to tell you that? It's the perfect setup."

"I agree," Aaron said, stretching out on the seat, realizing Laura kept a distance between them. "Is there a way we can get a floor plan of the building?"

"In the morning," Brett answered, "I'm going to the Great Falls Builder's Exchange and see if they still have the remodeling plans on file. If we're lucky they do."

Exhaustion gripped Laura. She wanted to sleep, but knew she really wouldn't until she had her daughter safely in her arms. She struggled to keep involved in the conversation. "If all that construction is going on, how could they use any of the rooms to hide out in?"

"I think the remodeling is being concentrated on the lower levels," Brett explained. "Who's going to bother checking on the upper rooms which should be vacant?"

"I see your point," she stated. "Where are we going?" Laura asked.

"Remember when I told you I had an FBI friend, Dan Karhu? He wants to talk with you both. He's gotten some good information for us, and he's also figured out a few facts that shed some light on things," Brett answered.

"It's three in the morning," Aaron reminded Brett. "It seems rude to appear at a stranger's door without any advance notice."

"Don't worry about it. He wanted to see you two the minute you got into town," Brett stated, his car bouncing hard over the railroad tracks.

"Well, we appreciate your help. Lord, we've been in shock over the events of the past few days. I couldn't have imagined anything like this in a lifetime," Aaron admitted.

Laura couldn't have said it better. She could hardly wait to hear what Brett and this FBI guy had to say. It couldn't be any crazier than what happened in Chicago.

"I apologize for the secrecy and for having you stay in my basement," Dan Karhu said, stretching his legs out in front of him.

Aaron immediately liked Dan. He had a warm, relaxed personality that made them feel comfortable immediately.

"You folks have stirred up one of the biggest, fastest growing, and most dangerous child kidnapping rings in history," Dan said, lifting a coffee cup. "Anyone want a cup?"

Aaron nodded and noticed Laura refused. It seemed she had grown quiet. He knew she was exhausted and worried about Amie. He hoped they had formed a bond through all of this and that she wouldn't withdraw from him, like she had the past six months. He truly believed he had finally broken through that shell of hers. Now he felt it building up again. Aaron suddenly realized Dan stood before him with a mug of hot coffee and a smile of understanding for what had been going on.

"This thing is huge. That also makes it difficult to break. We need hard evidence in order to go forward. It won't pay to make accusations and let them cover their tracks, making it harder to try again."

"I agree," Brett interrupted. "I think we have a few angles to check out, but with the Palmers here, we just might have enough."

"No. We don't have near enough. I don't want these bast...excuse me, jerks to have the slightest idea we're on to them." Dan was bold and direct. "I don't want them to be careful. I want to get them holding the goods. It may boil down to catching them with your Amie."

"Absolutely not!" Laura shouted, immediately alert. "You do what you have to do to save Sharon, Mother Palmer and our daughter. But I'll not put any of them in danger, just to catch these monsters. It isn't worth it."

"They'll keep right on stealing babies and adopting them out, unless we stop them," Dan said, jumping up from his chair.

Laura realized how agitated this whole situation made the sheriff. "There's more, isn't there?" she asked, watching him rub his palms over his face.

"There's a lot more. This thing is linked all across the U.S. We've discovered Chicago and L.A. are the only large cities involved. The rest are in smaller cities like Great Falls. It's intricate and a brilliant setup," he said, pointing to a large U.S. map pinned to a pegboard. "All these small white pins indicate an adoption agency I suspect as being a part of this organization. I determined this through computerized records of adoption activities. This proves there are at least three hundred adoption agencies across the States involved in the ring."

What are the red pins?" Aaron asked, moving closer.

"A further investigation in the adoptive parents' records netted some alarming news. The red pins represent parents of adoptive children having died of accidents in areas near an adoption agency. As you can—"

"Accidents?" Laura interrupted. "You're saying that all those people actually had accidents?" she asked, studying the board.

"We think it was made to look that way," Brett answered, moving forward. "You see, no one ever sees the big picture, nor do these statistics ever come together, unless someone were to catch onto what's going on. Now you can see why we believe this thing is big and dangerous. We want you to give us every detail that happened in Chicago. We need to know about every conversation you had with these people. It may be more important than you know," Brett said, sitting back. "We'll also record it." He set a small tape player on the coffee table.

"In case we are conveniently eliminated?" Aaron asked, glancing from one man to the other.

Dan cleared his throat. "We don't have time to tip-toe around, Aaron. We need to be up front with you and Laura. You need to be just as honest with us. We can put these people behind bars. I know it. Call it instinct if you want, but I believe we're going to be successful."

"You have a personal interest here?" Aaron asked, noticing the man flinch from his question.

"I'll be frank," Dan said, sitting on the arm of the chair. "When I was ten, my four-year-old sister was stolen from the park we were playing in. I saw a man grab her and jump into a car. I never saw her again. And my parents never recovered from that loss. It always hung over us. Still does. I know how it feels to lose a loved one. I've always worried what has happened to her. Wondered if she's alive or dead. Is she happy or sad? Treated well or misused? What does she look like?"

"I'm sorry," Aaron offered. "I can relate to those feelings already. Anything happens to Amie—"

"Stop it!" Laura shouted. "This is getting us nowhere. I want to know where you think Amie is."

"In order to know that, both of you have to tell us what happened from the time you left for Chicago to right now, this very moment," Dan stated with conviction.

Laura wasted no time in relaying their story.

"Well, that's the story." Much later Laura looked at first Dan, then Brett. "We don't want to lose Amie, but we're not stupid either. We know we don't have a right to keep her if she is the Berkhart's daughter.

"You've been put through a lot," Brett said, snapping off the recorder. "Sharon told Laura I'd hide Aaron's mother and Amie in our company suite, the President's Suite of the Rainbow. We need to check that out, Dan."

"Interesting. We go charging in there, we let them know we're onto them. No," Dan stated. "You both need to go back to your place. Wait for them to contact you. They will."

"They'll try to kill us again. Black Angel will find us and we won't—"

"You can be sure that poor excuse of a human being won't step his little toe in Great Falls. Every law officer in these parts has studied his disguises, his face, and his known personalities. I don't think he'd chance it. We almost caught him two years ago. Closest he's ever come to being captured."

"How can you be that sure he won't continue coming after us?" Aaron asked. "He chased us from Chicago and nearly caught us several times. The guy is a slime ball."

Laura strained to concentrate on the conversation. The men's voices droned on and... on. She struggled against the heaviness that enveloped her, but she couldn't fight it.

"Laura?" Aaron called softly, shaking her arm. He hated waking her, knowing she needed the rest, as much as he did. But he couldn't sleep. It wasn't Dan's couch that kept him awake, but the nightmares of what could be happening to Mother, Amie, and Sharon.

He considered the options of finding them alive. He could go along with Brett and Dan. Work it so he could talk with the kidnappers and offer an exchange... silence for their lives.

Damn. Aaron fought the uneasy feelings that gripped him. He couldn't let anything happen to Laura. He couldn't take any chances they might harm his mother, Amie, or even Sharon. He felt as if he was in a room with the walls closing in on him. Just like Indiana Jones had been, except, could Aaron escape as easily?

Options? Aaron kept asking himself. The safest would be to make a bargain. They'd promise to stop the investigation and hopefully be allowed to keep Amie. No one would ever have to know Amie had been found. After what Laura had told him, the Berkharts didn't really want her back anyway. Aaron knew he was kidding himself. The FBI knew about Amie, and so did the Police in Chicago, so now they had to face the facts. Amie wasn't their daughter and wasn't going to be their daughter. She would have to go back to people who didn't even want her.

Could he bargain with these people? Would it be right? Could he live with himself knowing that babies were being stolen from their families daily, and he'd done nothing to save them?

Aaron ran his fingers through his hair. Brett and Dan were willing to take chances, could he? He needed to call Ryan. Looking around, he spotted a phone. He tapped out the numbers and waited while the phone rang several times.

"Hello," a sleepy voice answered.

"Ryan, that you?" Aaron asked, unsure.

"Yeah, who's this?" he asked.

Aaron slammed the phone down. It wasn't Ryan! Fearful images filled Aaron. Dan said Black Angel wouldn't come to Great Falls. Did he go back to Chicago? Aaron refused to imagine anything bad happening to Ryan, Doris, or the boys.

Aaron couldn't take much more. His imagination raced wildly. He couldn't sleep. He heard noises where there were none. Everyone he loved seemed to be in danger, because of him.

There had to be a stop to all this. Aaron slipped into his jeans and shirt. He grabbed his shoes, socks, and jacket. He was going to the Rainbow Hotel. They wouldn't expect him.

Using extreme caution, he finished dressing, worked his way back up the basement stairs, then out the front door. He didn't have a car, and he hated stealing one from Dan, but what choice did he have?

"Going somewhere special?" Dan's deep voice asked.

Aaron jumped, swinging around, ready to attack. "How'd you sneak up behind me like that? I didn't creak a step nor click the door."

"I expected it. Knew it was only a matter of time before you decided you'd had enough and took matters into your own hands. I can't blame you. I'd do the same. That's why I waited for you. I knew you'd try," Dan stated, moving toward his Subaru. "You coming?"

"Yeah," Aaron answered, surprised, yet strangely relieved.

"I can't promise you we'll go in, but it won't hurt to check out the place. At night you can see things that aren't noticeable in the daytime," Dan explained.

Being careful not to wake anyone in the house, Aaron pulled the car door shut. "Never thought about it. How long you been with the FBI?" he asked.

"Too long. I've worked hard and liked it, but it seems I don't do all that much. If I break this case, then I'll be someone my superiors will remember. I've done a lot of studying about this kind of thing. Now I know why. I always knew one day I'd be needed and I had to be prepared."

Aaron liked Dan more than he did initially. The man had merit and depth. When this was all over, he knew they'd become great friends. "What bait did you have in mind?" Aaron asked, unsure he even wanted to know.

"It's like this, Aaron, you and Laura make an offer. Your and Laura's complete silence for the hostages. They know where to find you if you change your mind, and you know they'll finish the job if you do a double-cross."

Looking sideways at Dan, Aaron found this approach confusing since he knew Dan wouldn't settle for complete silence. "How does this give you evidence to put them away?"

"You get your family and friend back, then we stir things up. We put you and yours in a safe house, then go after them," Dan explained.

"It's not that easy. I think they got to my brother, Ryan, and his family. I called, and a strange man answered claiming to be Ryan."

"This gets worse by the hour. I think everyone involved in this investigation will have some sort of accident. Amie is evidence and you and Laura are a threat. They'll use your daughter, mother and friend until they get you both. Then, it's all over."

"I shouldn't have gotten us into this. I should have suspected something when Dr. Jennings suggested I pay that money in cash. But more than anything, I wanted Laura to have a baby. She's been unhappy for so many years. Now, I wish we'd never have thought of adoption," he said grimly.

"I don't know what to tell you, Aaron."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean that," he added quickly. "Amie is like our own. Laura loves her. I do, too. If we lose Amie, Laura and I don't have a chance in hell to save our marriage." Aaron paused, struggling to control the lump in his throat. They pulled into a parking spot and Aaron immediately looked up at the top floors of the Rainbow Hotel. With their sitting across the street, next to the Civic Center, they had a good view.

"They could be on any side of this building," Dan stated, using binoculars to search the upstairs.

"Any particular reason you chose this side?" Aaron asked.

"For one, they can watch what's happening with the construction crew from this side. Second, there are no tall buildings. No one can look across at them," Dan explained. "Wait! Look at the third window from the left," Dan ordered, handing the binoculars over to Aaron.

Aaron felt his heart beat faster. He moved the magnification to where Dan directed. After a few seconds a figure took shape. It was a man, smoking a cigarette and leaning against the window frame. "I see a man. Good God, I see a man up there!" Aaron said, his excitement building.

"I don't recognize him. Do you?" Dan asked.

Aaron adjusted the power and studied the figure. "It's Dr. Jennings!"

"What?" Dan asked. "You sure?"

"Sure as I know my own mother. It's him all right. The moon is casting enough light, so I can see him. And someone is joining him. I don't recognize the newcomer. Looks like they're arguing," Aaron said, handing over the binoculars.

"Got them! The other man is Dr. Charles Henderson, head of Obstetrics at the Montana Medical Center. I would never have guessed it in a million years. That hospital is the best in the State. Wait a minute. Think about it, Aaron. Obstetrics—babies. What if babies recorded as dead at birth didn't die and the parents thought they did? I wonder how many young girls gave their babies away to this man, and he's made a fortune from them?"

Aaron heard the bitterness creep into Dan's voice. "I hear you. You'll have to check him out."

"Boy, they're having one heck of an argument," Dan stated, watching the men closely. "Wish my wife was here. She knows Sign Language and lip-reads. On second thought, I'm glad I sent Beth and Trina to Flathead Lake for a winter vacation."

"You own a cabin there?" Aaron asked.

"Wish we did. No, it's a friend's place. I hinted the girls needed time away from me, and my crazy job. He understood and offered the place without questions. I believe this case is going to come to a head pretty damn soon. I didn't want them to be in any danger," Dan explained.

"Isn't that Brett over there?" Aaron asked, watching a man work his way to the side door of the hotel.

"Damn. Brett is a good man and knows what he's doing," Dan said, breathing deep. "But, I can't let him go in there alone. You stay here and watch those guys up there. If they look like they've heard us, honk the horn three times, and then two short blares. I'm not sure we'll hear it, but hopefully we will," Dan said, handing over the binoculars.

"I don't like this," Aaron admitted.

"Neither do I. If we don't come out in an hour, or you hear gunshots, use my cell phone and call 911," Dan said, handing over his cell before he reached up and switched the roof light off so it wouldn't shine when he opened the door. "Don't hesitate, you understand?" he said, reaching for the door handle.

"I understand," Aaron said in a quiet tone. He watched Dan cross the street with cat-like motions. It was obvious the men above had no inkling Dan had entered the hotel.

Watching the men made Aaron more nervous by the minute. But they needed to know what happened to Mother, Amie, or even with Sharon; he could do that. He stared at the men above. They continued their heated discussion. Aaron swallowed. He couldn't just sit here, waiting for other men to rescue his family. He had to try and help.

Aaron eased open the car door and closed it without more than a slight snap. He moved across the darkened space to the hotel. Breathing heavily, Aaron slipped inside the building.

Chapter Eleven

Laura bolted to a sitting position. Her heart pounded and every nerve pulled tight. What had awakened her? She shifted her gaze around the room but saw nothing that should have unnerved her so. Silence surrounded her.

The smell of Amaretto coffee still lingered in the air, but so did the scent of Old Spice mixed with Yardley. She thought hard about where she had recently smelled the combination. Black Angel.

Cold fear gripped her. She moved her hand over her mouth to keep from screaming out. He'd found them. Where was Aaron? She moved her palm across the couch bed for Aaron, and found it empty. Where had he gone? Had he heard Black Angel earlier and went to investigate? Could he have killed Dan and Aaron already? Laura stopped her thoughts. They made her shiver.

She needed to hide, but where? The unfamiliar basement-family room gave no natural light. She could hide under the bed. How ridiculous did that sound? She asked herself.

Laura heard a bump and froze. It came from inside the room. Tears formed in her eyes. She needed a weapon, but where? She couldn't see. The coffee! In a slow, shaking forward movement, Laura eased her palms to the coffee table top. Slow inch by slow inch she worked her hands across the flat surface. Yes! She found the base of the pot and it was still hot.

She heard another thud, then silence.

Laura struggled to quiet her breathing. Concentrating, she gripped the coffee pot handle, squeezing it like a gun. She straightened up... and waited.

Her back ached from the stiff posture, yet she didn't move. Her neck muscles tensed up from being cocked to one side, as she strained to listen for anything that might warn her of an uninvited occupant.

"You know I'm here, don't you?" a deep voice asked.

Laura jumped, gripping the coffeepot. She touched her palm to the hot glass bottom and quickly drew back. A shiver shook her body, but she remained silent. She couldn't see him, but she knew Black Angel stalked her this very moment.

She watched as his small penlight flashed a small circle of light as he descended the stairs. She heard a thud and then the clanking of his penlight as it bounced down the stairs.

"Damn it to hell!" he shouted in frustration.

"What do you want?" she asked, barely getting the words out.

"You, of course. You didn't think I'd stop searching for you, did you? No one has ever gotten away from me. You've been a challenge, that much I'll say. I usually do it quick and get it over with."

"Stop it!" Laura shouted. "Leave. The police know you're chasing us. You didn't get caught two years ago, but they said if you came after us, they'd get you this time," she said, hearing the quiver in her voice.

"I'm scared, *honey*. Where are you? Damn!" he shouted.

She heard him bump into something and felt the couch jerk. She drew in a breath. She felt him moving closer.

"I can smell you," he said, laughing in a deep, throaty jeer. "I'm going to enjoy this, lovey."

Laura waited, aware she had one chance to hit him with the glass pot hard enough to break it and spill hot liquid over him. She concentrated on quieting her breathing.

"Make it easy on Black Angel and he might make it easy on you," he said, laughing.

Now! Laura told herself. She swung the glass pot fast, hard, and with purpose. She felt it connect and heard the glass break before jumping back.

"*Yeoww! Damn! Owww!* Wait till I get my hands on you."

Laura shimmied off the couch-bed and made her way around it, running toward the dim light where the stairs were. He caught her arm and jerked her hard. She landed abruptly on her back. She squirmed to break free and found he had a vice-grip on her wrist.

"Thought you'd get away, didn't ya? I'm gonna make you pay big for burnin' me. I have ways of burnin' a bitch like you, too," he sneered, slapping her hard.

Gasping, Laura rubbed her cheek with her palm. She had to do something, or this animal was going to beat, rape, and then kill her. He still had a grip on her left wrist. She groped blindly with her right hand, searching for anything she might use to defend herself. She cried out when he punched her in the eye.

"Don't move. I'm gonna find a light. And just to make sure you're still right there when I turn it on..."

His warning wasn't idle. He grabbed her wrist and jerked it upward, fast and hard. She heard the bone snap before a sharp pain shot up her arm. Through the agony racing through her body, she heard him fumbling around for a light.

Now! Her inner voice screamed again. Laura stumbled to her feet. Without trying to figure out where he was in the room, she ran fast toward the faint light of the stairway. She couldn't believe she'd actually reached them. Knowing she couldn't celebrate yet, she ran up them, holding her injured hand against her chest. It burned, throbbed, and the pain from moving around made her feel light-headed.

She opened the front door, then pushed open the screen, allowing it to slam shut, before running back inside the house. She hoped he'd expect her to run for the cars or across the road to a neighbor, but not stay inside the house.

Hiding behind the kitchen island, she heard him running up the basement stairs. She held her breath. Finally, she heard the slamming of the screen door. She waited a few minutes, then hurried around the island, ran across the room and closed the front door, locking it.

She saw the light on in the basement, but refused to go back down there. Moonlight filtered through the skylight windows. It cast a shadow on the wall to the right of the stairway. She noticed an electrical box. Without thinking, she pulled the large switch down. The lights in the basement went off.

It took every ounce of energy she owned to return to the kitchen. Laura grabbed the receiver off the wall, exhaustion sending her sliding down to sit on the floor. She felt for the buttons on the phone with her thumb and dialed the all important three numbers

It took three rings to hear a voice. "911."

"Oh my God, you're truly there. Send everyone to Franklin Avenue. I'm sorry, I don't know the street number," Laura whispered.

"Ma'am? What is your emergency?" the voice asked.

"Tell the County and City Police that Black Angel is here, and he's trying to kill me," she said, watching the windows in fear.

"Black Angel, ma'am? Is he your husband?" the voice asked.

"No, he's wanted by the police. Just tell them and they'll know! He hit me and broke my wrist," she stated, fearful they were wasting too much time talking. Black Angel might find a way back into the house and finish the job he started. "I'm sure he has a gun."

"Hold the line while I relay this," the woman said.

Laura listened, struggling to be patient.

"This is home base to every patrol car. Black Angel has been reported attacking a woman at 1553 Franklin. Please respond and consider the suspect armed and dangerous. Bob, call an ambulance and send it out there. Now, what's your name, honey?" the voice asked.

"Laura. Laura Palmer. What's yours?" she asked, wondering how she could talk on the phone while Black Angel was still out there looking for her.

"My name is Diane. Most everyone calls me Dee. Laura, I want you to stay on the line with me until I'm sure a policeman is with you. You understand?"

"Yes. But, he might hear me talking."

"Is he in the house with you?" Diane asked.

Laura listened for a moment. "He was, but I don't think he is now. Not yet anyway."

"Is there anyone else there?" Diane asked.

The sound of breaking glass caused Laura to drop the phone. She muffled her scream while inching her way down the hallway. Laura struggled to think of a good hiding place. As before, the options sounded ridiculous. Maybe that was the key. Pick a simple place, one he'd not expect her to be in. She crawled back to the kitchen island and curled up inside the U shape of it. She pulled two stools into the space to better cover her hiding place.

Silence cried out louder than a squealing tire.

"Hide and seek time again," Black Angel taunted, moving into the room.

Laura rested her throbbing wrist in her lap covering her mouth tightly with her right palm. She trembled as he moved closer and closer to her hiding place.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," he sang.

She should have searched for a knife, but she hadn't. Laura struggled to swallow, but her mouth was too dry.

"You shoulda been concerned about your shadow, lovey. The moon can be your friend or your enemy," he said, pulling a stool from the bar.

The high-pitched scraping of the wooden chair leg resembled fingernails on a chalkboard. As he pulled on the second chair, Laura kicked it with both feet, sending it hard into his chest.

"Damn! You haven't learned your lesson yet, have you?" he asked, then stomped on her foot.

Laura bolted back into the space, holding her wrist and sliding her legs up in a fetal position. She trembled, knowing she had one hope. "Hurry, 911," she whispered under her breath.

She thought of the phone hanging in the corner and knew they were listening. She hoped if she kept Black Angel talking, maybe, just maybe they'd get here in time. "Before you kill me, I'd like to know why," she said, huddling in a heap.

"Why? Are you that stupid? I did it for the money, of course. What other reason is there? Get out of there!" he demanded.

"Are they going to kill Amie, Mother Palmer, and Sharon?" she asked, trembling.

"Of course they are. Now get outta there or I'll drag ya."

Laura crawled a short way, then stalled. "Who are they? Since I won't be around to tell anyone, I'd like to know who is responsible. Who is behind all this?" She asked, sliding just a little more out, holding back as much as she could.

"It's big money, sellin' babies. You ought to know, look what you and your husband paid for yours," he reminded her.

"We both paid that cash to get put on top of the adoption list. Neither of us had a clue we were buying a stolen baby. The list was so long and it would have been at least four years before we were next. I wanted a baby now. We thought no one wanted Amie, and we certainly did," she said, tears filling her eyes.

"Yer breaking my heart," he snarled.

"She is everything we ever wanted in a daughter. Aaron and I are back together and we've been so happy. I want to know who is responsible for tearing it all apart," she said between clenched teeth. Her voice wobbled between tears and anger.

"Ever hear of my boss, Doctor Patrick Fenwick, out of Chicago? He's a buddy of your good Doctor Henderson. You see three doctors, old friends, are sick of all these useless, uneducated kids keeping their babies. What can they give them but welfare and poverty? These kids have no chance in life. So the good doctors do them a favor by finding them a home with people who have money and want the little bastards."

"But Amie was kidnapped. Her picture was in my magazine and on a milk carton. She was stolen from her parents," Laura pointed out.

"Get out here. I'm tired of waiting," he demanded.

"I'm coming, it's not easy since you broke my wrist and possibly my ankle," she answered, stalling. "Why did you kidnap Amie?"

"I've had enough talk. Doc Fenwick gave you a chance to stop investigating Amie. You and your husband chose to ignore the warning. Now, you know too much. I'm going to kill you and your husband. That's all you need to know!" he said, reaching down, grabbing her by the hair and dragging her across the room.

She screamed from the pain and fear.

"This is the police. You may as well show yourself!" a deep voice amplified by a megaphone shouted from the front of the house.

Black Angel slid his arm around Laura's neck. "If they try coming in, I'm taking you to hell with me," he sneered in her ear.

Laura gasped for air as he walked toward the window to see his odds. She stared at the police and sheriff cars were filling the street. "Let me go and they won't shoot you," she suggested. He tightened his grip and she choked from the pressure on her esophagus.

"Like I said, lovey, I go, I take you with me," he answered, dragging her toward the front door.

As he walked, he kept slamming her broken wrist into his side. Tears filled her eyes and she struggled against the pain and fear she felt.

"Don't shoot or lovey here goes to hell with me!" he shouted.

"Let Mrs. Palmer go and put the gun down, Black Angel. You can make this easy or hard," the man said through the megaphone.

"You going to gamble with lovey's life? I don't think so," he said, pressing his gun against Laura's temple.

Laura thought of Aaron and then Amie. Would she see either of them again? "Just let me go," she whispered, shivering from the cold wind that penetrated through her thin clothes.

"Can't do that, lovey. They won't shoot as long as I have you. Besides, we still have some unfinished business. I want you, and I will have you."

She shuddered at the thought. "I'd sooner die," she spat.

"That can be arranged," he said, then threw back his head and let out a wicked, loud laugh.

"Black Angel, you won't get out of here. Give it up. Don't hurt the woman and it'll go better on you," the policeman pointed out.

"What, twenty-two counts of murder and one count of attempted murder, charges dropped because of good behavior?" he asked, chuckling in a dry, cynical tone. "I don't think it matters a duck's squat."

Laura noticed several officers inching closer. She struggled to stand, her legs trembled and her body no longer seemed to obey. Her eye had all but completely swollen shut from his hard blow. Her cheek stung from his slaps, and her foot and broken wrist throbbed, sending jolts of pain that nearly buckled her legs. None of them mattered. The cold circle of the gun's barrel against her skin did. Her tormentor pressed it hard into the side of her scalp and it hurt. She couldn't imagine what a bullet through the brain would feel like, but the thought sent shivers of fear through her body.

"Black Angel, my name is Arthur," the man said over the intercom. "Killing Mrs. Palmer won't get you anywhere," he stated, then added, "You can make it easier on yourself."

"Shit, I wasn't born yesterday. You can't do shit."

"We can talk to the FBI about Witness protection."

"You can't give me no witness protection, stinkin' cop! Besides, people get killed in them. I'm no fool," Black Angel said, pushing the gun harder into Laura's temple.

"You shoot her, we shoot you. What will that accomplish?" Arthur asked.

"I win, you bastards!" Black Angel laughed, then his expression turned somber. He pulled the trigger.

The click of the gun made Laura jerk. She felt bile rise in her throat, but she fought it down. No explosion entered her head.

Black Angel laughed loud and out of control. "Damn, that was a rush, wasn't it?" he asked, pulling back the hammer again. "Might get it right this time," he said, pulling the trigger.

It clicked. Laura vomited, fear sending her into a spasm of shakes.

"Goddamn," he shouted, tossing her to the ground, shaking vomit from his arm and hand. He looked up, realizing his mistake.

"You won't get to her in time, Black Angel. Put the gun down," the officer ordered.

"It's outta bullets—just like my luck," he said, laughing. He raised the gun to his own temple and pulled the trigger.

The loud blast made Laura jump. His body fell hard across her back, his head snapping down against hers, pushing her forehead hard into the cement sidewalk and pinning her down. She knew his head cradled into her neck. She could feel his blood drip down and across her shoulder.

Through the ringing of her ears from the gun blast, Laura heard the echoing sound of mens' voices. She felt them move Black Angel's body off her. She realized they'd lifted her onto a stretcher. She fought the bile that rose in her throat again. It was over. She kept her eyes closed. Until Aaron came, she'd talk to no one. A dark wave rose and took her with it.

Aaron felt a chill run the length of his spine. It had nothing to do with him. He had a feeling that Laura needed him. Why had he left her alone in Dan's house?

"What the hell you doing in here?" Dan whispered, moving around the corner and facing Aaron.

"Sorry. I just thought you might need my help and I wanted to be there for you and my family. Are they here?" he asked, looking around.

"No. I saw Brett and he's going to get close enough to listen in on their conversation, if he can. He has as a high velocity microphone, so he won't have to get in too close. We checked out the other rooms and found no sign of anyone being kept here. We're back to plan one. You and Laura will have go back to your place and wait for them to contact you."

"Let's go back to your place. I don't feel good about Laura staying at your house alone," Aaron said, hurrying down the stairs.

"Wait!" Dan whispered, holding his hand up in a quiet gesture. "Sounds like someone is coming up," he barely voiced the words.

Aaron heard the steady scrape of footsteps and nodded. They hurried up the single flight of stairs and back into the corridor. "Where should we hide?"

Dan looked both ways before motioning for Aaron to follow him.

He felt his heart pounding in his chest. He followed Dan, running as quietly as possible. Aaron slipped into a room behind him feeling breathless and tense.

Undraped windows stretched across the far wall, lighting the room in gray shadows. He glanced at Dan aware he hadn't moved since entering the room. Aaron looked past Dan and through a window connecting this room with the next.

"It's an observation window," Dan whispered. "This whole floor had been FBI headquarters years ago before I started with them. I would guess this room is soundproofed. At least, we better hope so. Lock the door," he directed.

Aaron nodded, then paused, watching the two men he'd observed through the binoculars earlier.

"It's getting out of hand," Dr. Charles Henderson said. "When I agreed to be a part of this I never expected murder would result. We take unwanted babies and find them good homes. You can't start eliminating people because you've gotten sloppy."

"Shut up and listen to me. We've accomplished a lot here. I never wanted anyone hurt either. But it's happened. We have to get past it and go forward," Dr. Jennings stated.

"We can argue until we're hoarse. I'm not going to change my mind. I want out. This thing with Berkhart has gnawed at me far too long. The Palmers don't deserve to die just because they wanted to adopt a baby. You did wrong by me and them with this Michelle child," Henderson said, walking back and forth the length of the room in jerky, nervous steps.

"I agree this *ordeal* has turned sour. I had no idea the Palmers would react so strongly. They are endangering our whole operation. Can't you see that?" Dr. Jennings asked.

"I won't be a party to murder. I'll go to the police and tell them everything before I agree to such a thing," Dr. Henderson threatened.

"You wait one minute," Dr. Jennings shouted. "You'd be willing to go to jail because of this one problem?"

"Murder is more than a mere problem! Yes I would," Dr. Henderson interrupted.

"Think about what you're saying," Dr. Jennings pleaded. "You'll spend the rest of your life in jail. You think about what your life would be like? Man, you need to think this thing through."

"I won't be party to murder. I'd rather rot in jail with a clear conscience, than cause those—"

"Entertaining, isn't it?" a deep voice stated behind them.

Chapter Twelve

Aaron jumped, turning around with a jolt. "Brett! Damn, that wasn't funny," he snapped, shaking his head.

"You ever pull an act like that again, you won't like the consequences," Dan whispered. "Thought I told you to lock..." He stared at Aaron for a moment, then turned back to the conversation.

Aaron watched Brett slide the lock back into place, then step back from the door. His attention had obviously been drawn to the scene on the other side of the window.

"Hey, you boys need to keep it down. I heard you all the way back at the stairs," the newcomer stated.

"Who's that?" Brett asked, his tone hushed.

"A thug named Freddo," Dan answered, equally quiet. "He's from L.A. I'd say the organization is getting restless if he's here."

"What you doing here?" Dr. Jennings asked, crossing his arms in obvious aggravation.

"Just got word things are happening here, that's all. My people are getting upset with the news that's coming across the wires. On my way over here I heard Black Angel was killed at some house on Franklin. Word is some FBI agent lives there. I'd say you're making a mess of things. Haskell wants a meeting of the Three," Freddo said.

"We all never meet together. That's too dangerous. One reason this whole operation works is because we never meet. No one can place us together. It's not happening," Dr. Henderson argued. "You go back and tell *your people* not only will I not meet, but I'm done. This whole ordeal has gotten out of hand and I want nothing more to do with it!"

"God," Aaron said, looking at Dan, then Brett. "Laura!" He bolted toward the door and snapped open the lock. Brett gripped his arm as he slowly slid the lock back in place.

"What was that?" Dr. Jennings asked, glancing around.

"I didn't hear anything, you prick," Freddo snarled. "You're invited to the meeting too, Dr. Jennings."

"Wait one minute. I had nothing to do with all these investigations. I'm being investigated myself," Dr. Jennings shouted, his face turning pale. "Don't try pinning this on me."

"Guys, I have to go check on Laura," Aaron whispered.

"Stay put," Dan answered. "We can't take the chance of them hearing us. Lay low for just a bit here."

Aaron rubbed his palm over his lips. He didn't like this one bit. He felt torn between getting information that might save Amie, Mother and Sharon, and running out the door to be with Laura. He stood silent, wrestling with his thoughts and emotions.

"It was your greed that got you in that Berkhart mess!" Freddo shouted. "The Palmers stirred up a pile of shit and now there's some two-bit P.I. digging up dirt that has been packed down for years. Our L.A. folks won't be happy if they get investigated. Your ass is going in the frying pan if it happens," Freddo added.

"I had nothing to do with any private investigator showing up," Dr. Jennings stated, standing his ground.

"Then there's a State Attorney in Chicago by the name of Ryan Palmer. Ring any bells there? Doc Fenwick came unglued when the police showed up with a subpoena for his records. He's pissed because your shit is leading them to him," Freddo said, smiling at the fidgety Dr. Jennings.

"I run an adoption agency along with my practice helping unwed mothers. These people have nothing to do with me."

"We also heard that Doc Henderson was being investigated by the FBI," Freddo said.

"What are you talking about? I'm not being investigated. I'd know about it if I were!" Dr. Henderson protested, crossing the room.

"My sources tell me they're running a lot of checks on you," Freddo told him.

"I think it's time to close down the entire operation," Dr. Henderson said, pulling his fingers through his hair.

"There will be a meeting and Jennings, you're invited," Freddo repeated.

"Damn!" Dan whispered. "He didn't give the L.A. doctor's name. We need to know all the players."

"If Black Angel was killed at your house, I need to know Laura's all right," Aaron said, impatient to leave. "Look, you stay here and I'll go check on Laura."

"Okay," Brett agreed. "You two go ahead, I'll stick around and get the date, time and place of this meeting. It's safer if you leave now, anyway. I'll get in touch when I find out."

Dan nodded. He silently released the lock, easing the door open. He motioned for Aaron to follow.

They couldn't get out of the Rainbow fast enough for Aaron. Once he stepped outside, he paused to breathe fresh air into his lungs.

"Stay here, I'll swing by this side and get you. Both of us running to the car might attract attention. Brett doesn't need anyone suspicious right now," Dan said in a low tone.

Aaron nodded. He watched Dan move in and out of shadows, making his way back to his vehicle. The man was good, he thought. He walked to the end of the block, facing First Avenue South so they wouldn't even have to drive past the windows of the Rainbow.

Dan crossed over; facing the wrong direction, to pick up Aaron then sped back into the appropriate lane.

"We need to go to the Deaconess Hospital," Dan finally said.

"What? Is it Laura? Oh my God! What happened?" Aaron asked, afraid to hear the answer.

"I didn't get all the particulars, other than Black Angel shooting himself at my place. Laura has a broken wrist, some bruises and a slight concussion."

"Damn it! I shouldn't have left her. What was I thinking?" Aaron asked, fighting with his conscience.

Dan turned the corner so fast the tires squealed. "I'll get you there as fast as I can," he said. "I'm sorry, man. It's my fault. I never expected Black Angel to have enough balls to come back here. I shouldn't have taken anything for granted where he was concerned. The guy was evil. I just didn't know how evil. I hope she's okay, I really do."

"I can't believe all this is happening to me. I want to get these bastards! I want to be at this meeting they're having. I want to hear what they have to say and I want it on tape."

Matter of fact you can send me in there with a bug. I'll get them to sing like canaries for you." Aaron's voice hardened.

"I understand what you're saying, but you'd better take some time to think about it first. I think you should discuss it with Laura before you do anything."

"It's Laura I'm thinking about, and all the other Lauras out there. I'm thinking of all the Amies out there, too. This has to stop!" he said angrily, spacing the words evenly.

"I agree. I just want you to realize one thing," Dan said, squealing to a stop. "It could get you killed."

Aaron turned to look at Dan. "If I don't do it, it could get my daughter, my mother and my wife's best friend killed. What choice do I have?" he asked, bolting from the Subaru.

Aaron ran to the reception desk. "I'm looking for Laura Palmer. I'm her husband," he stated, breathing heavy.

"Room 402, Sir," the young receptionist answered.

"Thanks." He next stopped at the lobby's gift and flower shop. He grabbed a vase of peach roses, scribbled on a card, paid the elderly woman, then raced toward the stairway in record time. He took the stairs two at a time, racing down the hall until he reached room 402.

He took several deep breaths outside her door. He noticed a water fountain and took time to take a long, calming drink. He was angry, scared, and felt like a failure. But he didn't want her to know any of that. He was sure she had enough to worry about.

Seeing a nurse at the head station, he walked over to her. "I'm Aaron Palmer. I want to know the extent of my wife's condition," he said, steeling himself to sound at least a little civilized when it was the last thing he felt.

She smiled up at him. "Your Laura is a gutsy woman. She is doing quite well. Her wrist has a compound fracture and her ankle is sprained. We've been putting cold compresses on her eye and cheek and the swelling has come down a lot. We're still observing her for the mild concussion, but all indications are good. She is one lucky lady."

"Thank you," Aaron said, almost dazed. What did that bastard do? Aaron didn't kid himself. If he had stayed with her, Black Angel wouldn't have laid a hand on her. Would Laura forgive him for essentially abandoning her?

With quiet steps, Aaron inched into Laura's room. He walked over to her bed and gazed down at his wife bearing bruises and injuries she shouldn't have had to suffer. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he lifted her right hand into his and felt the tears burn his eyes. He cried for her, his own anger, and the pain of losing Amie. He cried for his mother and even Sharon. He never wanted any of this to happen. He wanted Laura to be happy. He wanted his mother to have a granddaughter. He wanted his family back.

Where were his mother, Amie, and Sharon? He'd failed them all. If only he'd stayed with Laura. If only he had suspected something from the start...none of this would have happened.

He cried for them all. Men didn't cry, but this night he cried until there were no more tears left. Spent, Aaron lowered his cheek to the bed, holding her fingers against his lips.

"Have they found Amie, Mother Palmer and Sharon?" Laura asked once she awoke and found Aaron seated on the bed beside her. She felt Aaron's black mood and withdrew herself. His old self had suddenly returned.

"No. We still don't have a clue where they're being kept," he answered, unable to look her in the eye.

"Why don't you just ask me?" she said quietly.

"Ask you what?"

"No, he didn't rape me."

He watched as she stared down at her broken hand. "Oh, God, Laura! I'm so sorry, honey. You can't imagine how sorry I truly am. This is my fault. I should have been there for you. I shouldn't have left you alone," he admitted.

"You're right, you shouldn't have. It was the worst feeling in the world to wake up and find you gone. My mother deserted me when I needed her as a child. You deserted me when I needed you most. Why?" Tears made silvery tracks down her cheeks. "Why do I always end up alone?" she whispered, turning away from him.

Aaron raced from the room. He ran down two flights of stairs before he even realized he'd fled. He pulled the door open and bumped into Brett.

"Outta the way," he snapped, walking past him.

"Whoa. Where you headed this ticked?" Brett asked.

"Out of here and back to my place so those bastards can get in touch with me. Hell, I might even walk into Dr. Jennings' office and demand a meeting to get my mother, child and friend back."

"You're that bent on getting yourself killed? How will you help them then? You want to help? Calm down. Think straight. Do this right. Laura won't stay mad at you forever. She's hurt," he added.

"Did she tell you that?" Aaron asked.

"No. I stopped in to see her, and you both were sleeping. Damn, she looks awful. But she's alive. Be grateful for that," Brett said, striding alongside Aaron as he exited the hospital.

"She said I deserted her, like her mom did when she was little. How do I make up for that?" Aaron asked.

"Give her time. She has a lot to handle right now. It must have been damn scary to have that bastard come after her," Brett said. "She needs your support, even if she seems to be pushing you away."

"I'm going to deal with Dr. Jennings. I'll get Amie back for Laura. She'll forgive me then. We'll be happy again. If we lose Amie, we lose everything," Aaron admitted. He sat down on a bench under a tree, just beyond the hospital parking lot.

"I think you're wrong, man. Sharon said Amie didn't change how you felt toward each other."

"Damn straight. We were headed for divorce before we got Amie. It looks like that hasn't changed," Aaron interrupted.

"Sharon said you both cling to your anger. You blame each other for making things miserable. You don't rely or talk to each other. Not a good basis for a relationship," Brett explained.

"Easy for you to say. Laura won't even talk to me. She's back to tears and turning away from me."

"I don't know. It looks to me like you're back to running away, too."

"I think Sharon has been telling you too much about Laura and me. To change the subject, I've been calling Ryan's house. Now no one answers. I'm worried," Aaron admitted.

"Listen to me," Brett said in an even tone. "Laura left the phone off the hook when Black Angel attacked her. 911 has it all on tape. He implicated Dr. Patrick Fenwick as his boss who put the hit on you and Laura in Chicago. He also mentioned Dr. Charles Henderson as one of three doctors involved."

"What about the third doctor from L.A.? Did he name him too?" Aaron asked, determined all three would pay.

"No. He didn't say anything more, but it was enough for the County and State Attorneys to get interested in this case," Brett explained. "An arrest warrant has been sworn out for Dr. Fenwick. I'm having them check on Ryan and his family, too."

"I'll be damned! What about Dr. Henderson?" Aaron asked.

"I don't know. If these guys are meeting together, maybe none of them will be found at their offices or homes. It still may be far from over," Brett said, shaking his head.

Hey, guys, how is Laura doing?" Dan asked as he briskly approached.

"She'll live. Damn, this should never have happened."

Stealing babies shouldn't happen either," Brett responded.

"When are those bastards meeting?" Aaron asked, straddling the bench.

"Wish I knew," Brett admitted.

"What? You stayed to find out what else was going on, didn't you?" he accused.

"Of course I did. Obviously they didn't set a date in that room. Freddo is going to let them all know where and when. That leaves us out in left field. But I think they're keeping Sharon and your family at Dr. Jennings' house."

Aaron jolted. "What? Why are we sitting here? Let's go find out," he said, standing. He noticed Dan was walking down the sidewalk, his cell phone against his ear.

"Wait," Dan shouted, facing them. "Let me make a few calls. We need to do this legally. Search warrants aren't handed out on pure speculation and I need to prove probable cause. The 911 tape gives me that and more. But, we need to be careful or we could get them all killed."

"Dan's right, Aaron, he has training in this. I don't say this lightly. These men are fighting for their lives. They won't hesitate to protect what's theirs," Brett explained.

Aaron sat and covered his face with his palms. When was this going to end? "I feel like a yoyo. One minute jerked up, the next rolled down." He wondered how low he would have to go before climbing back up. A thought brought him out of his self-pity. "What about Dr. Jennings' holding nursery?" Aaron asked.

"What holding nursery?" Dan asked, snapping his cell phone shut.

"When Laura and I went to get Amie. Lord, that seems like years ago." Aaron shook his head clear. "We met at a small house two blocks down from the clinic."

"We've been watching his house and clinic. Nothing has happened at either location. Shit, why didn't I know anything about a holding nursery? Let's go check it out," Brett suggested, crossing the parking lot with long strides.

Aaron glanced up at the fourth floor. If he saved Amie, would Laura forgive him? He hoped so.

"I'm not hungry," Laura said, turning away from the food.

"You have to eat, dear," Nurse Bryce said in a soothing tone. "He'll be back."

"Do you have any children?" Laura asked, finally taking a bite of pudding.

"I have a four-year-old daughter and a two-year-old son. Let me tell you they keep me busy. How about you, dear?" she asked.

Tears flooded Laura's eyes. "I have a one-year-old daughter, Amie. They have her. Oh, God, they have my daughter and I don't know where she is. She'll think her mother deserted her. I just know it," Laura said through her tears and sobs. "What am I going to do? I can't find my baby!"

She accepted the arms of Nurse Bryce. Laura's chest burned from the emotions she felt. Tears flowed and sobs shook her body. "I want my baby," she cried out.

"I had no idea," Nurse Bryce said, holding her tight.

"You can't tell anyone. They might kill her. Why is this happening? Where is Aaron? Why can't he be here for me?" she asked, torn apart.

"You're serious, aren't you?" Nurse Bryce asked, stunned by her words.

"Yes," Laura admitted.

"I've heard rumors. I'm not one for gossip, but I saw something I don't think I should have. Is Dr. Charles Henderson your baby's physician?" she asked, looking around to make sure no one was listening.

"Yes," Laura answered, wiping her eyes dry. "And if you're wondering if I suspect he has something to do with this, you can be sure the answer is a strong yes. I just have to find proof. Do you have proof?" Laura asked hopefully.

"I'm not sure. I saw Dr. Henderson leave the hospital, several different times, with an infant in his arms. Once when I was coming to work for an emergency, and once when I was leaving. Both times I stayed in the shadows, because he was looking around suspicious-like. Everyone in the hospital knows you don't cross Dr. Henderson. Some nurses have, and they don't work here anymore. And to be honest, honey, I need my job. Then last week I saw Dr. Henderson was performing an emergency C-section on a Mrs. Hill. I went out to my car and waited and watched. I know that sounds awful, but I couldn't live with not—"

"Did he come out with a baby?" Laura interrupted.

"A man drove up to the supply delivery door and Dr. Henderson came out with a bundle. He jumped into the car and off they went."

"Lord, you're a witness, Nurse Bryce!"

"Call me Suzie. But what if there are logical reasons for what I saw? And no offense, but if he finds out I spoke out against him and he did something illegal I could end up like you," she admitted. "Besides, my husband told me to mind my own business. It's been bothering me since."

"Then we won't tell anyone until it's absolutely necessary. Maybe you can't prove there was a baby in that bundle, but it is suspicious and your testimony could cast that suspicion. You could be a key factor, you know that, don't you?" she asked, gripping her hand.

"Yes. I only hope it's enough. My Larry said to tell no one, and he won't be happy that I did. But, I think about Mrs. Hill all the time and—the grief of having a baby die. It just isn't right."

"Is that what the records show? That her baby died?" Laura asked. "Was she an unwed mother?"

"I checked with Pediatrics and they had no Baby Hill listed. I called my friend who helped with the delivery and she sounded really nervous. She said the baby was born dead."

"And was she divorced or unwed?" Laura asked again.

"That's the strange part. It was a nice, young couple's first baby. My heart broke when I stopped by her room. She said Dr. Henderson was kindly arranging the baby's cremation."

"He sold her baby!" Laura stated. Fury almost choked her.

"I think you're right. I was so afraid to tell anyone what I suspect. You won't say anything, will you?" she asked.

Laura patted Suzie's hand. "There will be a right and safe time for you to tell what you saw. Until then, I won't breathe a word of it," she promised.

"I've got rounds to finish. You keep your chin up, Laura. I know your husband will be back. Have faith in him," Suzie said, then left the room.

Laura stared at the bouquet of peach roses Aaron brought her. She picked up the card and stared at the words. *It doesn't have to be over.* She knew he meant their marriage. With so much that had happened, how could they ever patch things up? He would be the reminder that they no longer had Amie. Maybe he felt she was the reminder that they no longer had Amie. How do they mend that? Was Amie already dead? Had she been returned to the Berkharths? Maybe that would be best. But Laura couldn't imagine not being able to say goodbye any more than she could imagine having to say goodbye. The thought tore at her heart.

Memories of Amie's smiles and hugs sent Laura longing for her daughter's arms. Would the hurt ever end? Six months was so short a time to be blessed with an angel.

The word angel brought Laura's thoughts back to Black Angel. She flinched as flashbacks of his attack haunted her. She cringed as she relived him snapping her wrist. She shivered feeling the cold muzzle pressed to her skull. She pressed her palms flat against her ears to block out Black Angel's taunting laugh, while he pulled the trigger ... twice.

Laura cried. She felt so alone. "Aaron, where are you," she whispered. She pulled her legs up into a fetal position, and cried herself to sleep.

"Dan should be arriving any minute," Brett said, under his breath. "He got the warrant. Judge Asselstine is no fool. She fully believed your story. Dan's FBI, but I guess there's gonna be some more of them coming from Illinois since Amie was abducted in Chicago and brought across state lines. This shit is getting big. He told me he got the go-ahead and that's all I care about."

"Finally something has gone right. But what if I've guessed wrong? If they're at Dr. Jennings' house, I'll have blown our chance to rescue them," Aaron said, worrying more with each passing minute.

"I've seen enough movement in that building to indicate you're right. Look," Brett said, watching a man darting from a tree to the side of the house. He carried a can in one hand and a dark sports bag in the other.

"Let's go after him," Aaron said, reaching for the door.

"Wait," Brett warned. "You need to learn some patience. We can't attack him just because we think he's up to no good. Wait and see what he intends to do. When he incriminates himself, we'll stop him."

"What's he doing?" Aaron asked, watching the small man move down one side of the house, then finally returning across the front. "He's planning on setting it on fire! Good God, Brett!" Aaron growled. He felt numb with increasing rage and shock.

"I think you're right. Let's move in closer so we can stop him before any damage is done," Brett said, while he reached up and switched off the overhead light.

Aaron's heart beat hard against his chest. He followed Brett. He was positive his family was inside a house that was going to be torched.

"Is that a match?" Brett asked, standing in front of a scraggly bearded man.

"What's it to you?" the shabby looking man asked.

"It means a lot to me," Brett said, taking another step toward the man. "I don't think you should torch a house that three women and a baby are living in," Brett answered, pausing to take another step closer. "It means even more when I tell you I'm in love with one of those women and the other two are like family. What do you have to say about that?"

"You're full of shit," the man sneered.

"Who sent you to torch the place?" Aaron asked. "Don't stall too long, I'm not a patient man. I've had such a bad day I'd be thrilled to break every bone in your body. Start talking!"

"I haven't done anything you can get me on. And you're not cops, so you can't do anything," the man said, setting the can down.

"No, we're not," Brett admitted. "But, several are on the way. Who told you to torch this house? And why would you be willing to kill innocent women and babies in the process?"

"I didn't know anyone was living here. You gotta believe me," he said, his voice wavering. "A fella said he'd pay me five hundred dollars if I'd burn it down. Said the place won't sell for what he's got in it, so he figured he'd collect the insurance."

"So you didn't ask questions, you just went for the easy money?" Aaron asked. "The way I see it, it's arson with four counts of attempted murder, maybe more if we find more people inside."

"No way. I didn't know anyone was in there. You can't pin that on me," the man stated, shifting his feet.

"Tell you what," Brett said, "Tell me who hired you and I'll put in a good word for you."

"How do I know you will? You could –"

"Because we don't want you," Aaron interrupted. "We want the man who hired you. Now, who is he?"

"Shit, I'd tell ya if I could. But I don't know. We only talked on the phone and I don't usually get a name. He paid in cash."

"Come back to my car," Brett ordered, then turning to Aaron. "We'll tie him up and gag him. When we're done here, we'll send him home with the police."

Aaron tied the gag and double-checked the arsonist's wrists and feet. "It's secure," he told Brett. The sound of closing car doors was music to Aaron's ears. "Here they come," he stated under his breath.

"It's about time," Brett said. "I'm as anxious to see Sharon as you are your loved ones. I never realized before how much she means to me."

Aaron watched Dan. He wore a big smile and waved an important document.

"This is it, guys. Let's go find a few loved ones." Dan walked across the street, Aaron and Brett in tow.

Dan knocked. No one answered. Dan knocked a second time. No one responded. Dan pounded even harder a third time.

"Just a minute," said a small voice just before the door opened.

"What can I do for you," the woman asked, peering through the barely opened door.

"We have a warrant to search this house," Dan said. "I'm FBI Special Agent Karhu and these are my associates. Please, let us in."

Chapter Thirteen

"What if I won't let you in?" the woman asked, closing the gap even more.

"Ma'am, this doesn't give you a choice," Dan informed her in a stern tone, handing her the warrant. "The Court has granted us permission to search this house. You refuse to let us enter and you are in contempt of Court. Open up this door or I'll be forced to break it in. Either way, we are searching this house. Do you live here?"

"My name is Glory. I housesit for Dr. Jennings. I live here and take care of his guests. I ask no questions," she replied, rubbing her hands together. "I have no place to go if you send me away." Her weathered voice pleaded for understanding.

"I'm here to search the premises. I'm sure you know what we're looking for, so you'd be smart to take us to them," Dan said in a kind, gentle tone.

Aaron realized he'd been holding his breath. Could they really have found them? He was afraid to even hope.

"I never see the natural or adoptive parents. Dr. Jennings says it's for my protection and theirs. If they stay overnight I use the door slots to pass food to them. They have their own bathroom and bedroom. I don't have a key to the door. Only Dr. Jennings has that," Glory informed them.

Aaron, Dan and Brett followed the woman down a corridor, past an empty TV room, and finally she stopped at a door at the end.

"Like I said, I ain't got no key for it."

Aaron stood staring at the door. His nerves were on edge. He was filled with excitement and fear.

"Hey, Stanley, get down here and bust in this door," Dan shouted.

It all seemed a dream to Aaron. It didn't seem possible that all this was real.

"I understand the police department put a guard on Laura's room," Dan said in a low voice.

Aaron saw Stanley heading toward them with a large door wedge.

"You still think she's in danger? Black Angel is dead," Aaron said, moving out of Stanley's way.

Two hard slams and the door gave way.

Aaron rushed past Brett and stood in the middle of the room. He gazed around the area, shocked to see face after face stare back at him, unmistakable fear in their eyes. He looked at every one of them, but didn't see the three he wanted to find there. "They're not here!" he said in disbelief. "Where are they?" he asked, looking around the room once more to make sure. He was stunned to see that every woman in the room was pregnant. "Have you seen a woman about my age, an older woman and a baby?"

"I think who you're looking for is in the bedroom," a young woman said, pointing at a nearby door.

Aaron noticed she flinched the moment he looked at her. "We're not here to hurt you. On the contrary, we're here to rescue you," he said, rushing to the door across the room. He turned the knob and realized it wouldn't budge.

"Listen up," Dan called out, extending his badge in his hand and walking past each woman to see. "I'm Special Agent Dan Karhu with the FBI. I'm sure you smell the gasoline. It wouldn't surprise me your fear stems from the fact you realized how close you came to dying in a fire tonight. We would like each of you to give us a statement. If you aren't sure you want to talk, think about how Dr. Jennings hired a guy to burn this house down—with you in it."

Dan looked behind him. "Stanley," he shouted.

"I'm here... let me at it!" Stanley said, hitting the door with a forceful slam. It gave way immediately.

"Go ahead," Aaron said, worried and apprehensive.

"Brett!" a shrill call echoed then Sharon ran out. "I knew you'd find us!" she cried, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Aaron rushed past them, searching the room until his gaze rested on his mother's smiling face. He glanced at her lap and saw his sleeping daughter nestled there. His feet froze in place. His chest tightened and tears misted his eyes. "Lord," he whispered, "You're a sight for sore eyes. You can't imagine what's been going on," he said as he rushed into his mother's arms.

"We never doubted for a moment that you wouldn't come," Mrs. Palmer said, pulling her son to her chest. "Sharon told me everything. Why couldn't you have turned to me?" she asked, holding him tight.

"I wanted to spare Laura. So, I asked Ryan to help me." Aaron paused, no need worrying her, he thought. "Laura and I could be charged with buying a stolen baby." He lifted Amie into his arms. Her warm body snuggled against him. He drew in her scent, realizing how much he loved it. He watched her full lips pucker and he felt tears surface. He held his daughter in his arms and his heart ached—he loved her so much. How could he ever let her go?

After having signed all the hospital release papers and a request that Dan remove the guard, Aaron moved quietly into Laura's room.

"Honey, wake up," Aaron whispered, shaking her shoulder. "You think you're well enough to leave this place?" he asked.

Laura sat up, glanced quickly around the room, then back to Aaron. "What's wrong?" she asked, watching his expression change from concern to a boyish grin.

"Do you trust me, Laura?" he asked.

She thought for a moment, then answered, "About as much as you trust me, I guess."

"Good. I'll help you get dressed. Don't ask questions and don't raise suspicions," he said, pulling an oversized shirt, jeans, socks and tennis shoes from a grocery bag. "I've got your jacket here, too."

"I can tell something has happened. Why won't you tell me?" she demanded, sliding to the edge of the bed.

"I am sick of being followed and worrying that someone might jump out from a bush to attack me." Aaron said, untying the strings at the neck of her hospital gown and took in the back view of her shapely figure. He removed it completely before he stood in front of her. Struggling not to touch her, he slipped his flannel shirt over the cast on her left wrist, as he

worked the garment into place. He started at the bottom button and worked his way up. He paused, then gently lifted her breast in his palm and quickly let it go. "I've signed you out, but I don't want anyone to know exactly when we left the hospital. Just trust me, Laura."

He noticed her searching glance and what he hoped was trust. He pulled on her socks and grabbed her jeans. "I just realized I forgot bra and panties, sorry," he said, slipping her Levis up her legs. A glimpse of tan skin and a triangle of dark crisp hair caused his pulse to quicken.

Moving back so she could slip off the edge of the bed caused him to question his actions. It was too late to back out now. He pulled up her jeans, liking the feel of her bare bottom brushing against his palms.

Without a word, he gently pulled her to him. He moved one hand to support the back of her neck. He lightly kissed her bruised cheek, then tenderly captured her lips with his. She responded, slow at first, fiery at last. He struggled to control the pressure building against his tight jeans.

"We have some unfinished business, wife," he told her in a husky voice. "Now if you'll stop tempting me, I'll finish getting you dressed before someone comes in and finds you attacking me," he teased.

"Don't blame me. I would have remembered the panties and bra," she bantered.

"I wasn't complaining," he answered, noticing her smile. "Sit on the bed and I'll tie your shoes," he suggested, slipping the tennis shoes on her small feet.

"Where are we going?" she asked, watching him carefully. "You're keeping something from me. I can tell,"

Aaron took her right hand in his, then silently led her from the room. He glanced down the hall, then at the nurse's station where he didn't see anyone standing around. He hurried to the stairwell and guided her behind him.

"Where are we going?" she asked, limping on her sprained ankle, struggling to keep up with him. A couple days of bed rest had left her feeling weak.

"Away from everything," he answered. "You ready to run off with me like a couple of love sick teenagers?"

She stopped on the landing, staring at him.

"What did you say?" she questioned.

"I asked you if you'd run away with me." When she didn't speak he pulled her into him. "I asked you to trust me. We can't stand here and debate this. We don't have time to waste. Will you come with me unconditionally, Laura?"

He held his breath. He read the questions in her eyes, and hoped she wouldn't ask them. He wanted to know if she trusted him. He wanted her unconditional surrender. He felt her hesitate. He feared she'd turn away. Instead she took the few steps it took to move into his arms. He held her against his chest, feeling protective and filled with more love than he ever thought possible.

"Let's go," she whispered. The cold November wind whirled around them. He pulled her closer. They moved in the shadows, away from the hospital. They walked two blocks, arm in arm, before Laura recognized their car parked nearby.

"Why didn't you park closer to the hospital? We're still in danger, aren't we?" she asked, looking around.

"I'm not taking any more chances," he said, opening the door for her. "Lock it, I'll be right back." He read her confusion and resistance. "Trust me," he said, before running toward the car behind them.

He opened the front passenger door. "Smart to put up the windshield sun visor, looks dumb, but effective," he teased, leaning into the vehicle.

"Daddy!" Amie called out, climbing toward him.

Aaron smiled, receiving her tight squeeze around his neck. "Thanks, Brett and Sharon. Mother, are you sure you're fine with this arrangement? He asked, looking at her sitting in the back seat.

"Of course. I've taken care of myself for years, Aaron. You, Laura, and Amie need this time together," Mrs. Palmer said, giving him a soft smile.

"We'll get in touch," Aaron said, wrapping the sides of his jacket around his daughter.

"We'll be at Dan's house," Brett said. "Don't keep us wondering where you're at."

"I'll call when we get to our hotel room," Aaron said, backing out of their car, Amie snuggled against him. He hurried to the driver's side of his car and knocked on the window. Hearing the lock click, he opened the door, whispering in Amie's ear, "Your mommy needs a big hug and kiss. She has missed her girl." He slid into the driver's seat and held Amie toward Laura.

"Mama! Mama!" Amie cried.

Laura pulled her daughter into her arms and cried. Cried for Amie, for Aaron, Mother Palmer, Sharon and herself. Tears of fear, loneliness, and happiness wet her cheeks.

"Baby, I've missed you," she whispered.

"Ma Ma," she said, jumping on Laura's lap. "Dolly?" she asked.

"Of course," Laura answered, glancing at Aaron. "It's in our suitcases and when we unpack we'll give it to you," she fibbed, fighting the lump that rose in her throat. "Sit back and let Mommy look at you," Laura said, staring at Amie. "I think you've grown two inches since we left on our trip."

"Big girl," Amie answered.

Laura laughed, pulling into her chest. "Oh, I have missed you," she admitted, patting her daughter on the back.

"Ma Ma," Amie answered, patting Laura's shoulder in response.

Laura smiled, fighting the tears that gripped her. God, she could not give her daughter back to those people. Amie was their daughter. She lifted her tear-filled gaze toward Aaron. He wiped at his cheeks with his palms.

"I know, honey, I know," he said, rubbing Amie's back. "I can't bear to lose her either." Aaron started the car and sped away.

"Was that Brett's car behind us? Does this mean you found Mother Palmer and Sharon, too?"

"We found them all in time. They're going to be just fine. We also found a room filled with pregnant women who are willing to testify against Dr. Jennings. It's exactly what we needed."

"Thank God." Laura nestled a tired Amie in her arms. "What are we going to do?"

"We're heading for Canada. It's the only solution. We'll change our names and we'll never return," Aaron explained, stepping on the gas.

"You can't be serious! We'd be fugitives. We'd be as guilty as those doctors and Black Angel. Aaron, you're not thinking clearly. There has to be another way." Laura felt a cold knot form in her stomach.

The silence between them grew tight with tension. She watched the lights of Tenth Avenue disappear behind them. She hoped he didn't mean it and that they were not heading for Canada.

"Aaron, talk to me," Laura said in a choked, emotional tone.

"What do you want me to say? I won't let them take our daughter away from us. Now you've heard it straight. She is ours. The adoption was legal."

"Was it?" she asked, uncertain what had truly been. "Think about it."

"Dan checked out Dr. Jennings' Adoption Agency. It's fully licensed. He had a friend in the Department of Family Services check for any charges or suspicions filed against Dr. Jennings."

"And what did you find?"

"There were many complaints, but none that stuck due to lack of evidence. But this time we have all sorts of evidence," Aaron said, pulling into the gas station at the Ulm turnoff.

"Then we've got to stick around and make sure these doctors are arrested and convicted. Without us to testify against them, it doesn't tie together. What if our not being here means they're set free? How will we feel if that happened? No one knows about Nurse Bryce. Her testimony alone could put Dr. Henderson away," Laura said, watching Aaron's torn, confused expression.

"Who is Nurse Bryce?"

"She saw Henderson leave the hospital several times with a bundle," Laura explained.

"That's not enough. Can she prove he was carrying a baby?" Aaron asked.

"He did an emergency C-section on a woman. He told her that the baby was stillborn, then left carrying what looked like a baby. You tell me," she snapped.

"Thing is, there's no real proof. It's Nurse Bryce's word against Dr. Henderson. The recording from your 911 call has Black Angel's confession on it. He implicated three doctors in running a black market baby ring. It gives motive and ties all three of them together with a common goal. We don't know the name of the doctor in L.A., but it shouldn't be too hard to figure it out once they start checking colleges, buddies, phone calls and that type of thing."

"But, as you say, where is the proof? This third doctor has managed to keep his name out of everything. I have a feeling he's the brains behind this whole setup," Laura said, rolling one of Amie's curls around her finger.

"Dan will figure it out, and he'll manage to get proof. They can do the case without us. They have all those pregnant girls talking about Jennings. He, in turn, tells an interesting story about Doctor Henderson. Great bunch of people."

"Maybe Henderson will deal information on the doctor in L.A. for less time on his own conviction. Who knows?" Laura stated, tired of the entire mess and wanting it all over. "All I know is running isn't the answer. If just one of them refuses to talk or someone's testimony is considered invalid, or someone in power intimidates to the point of backing off, they could still get away with it. I don't want that to happen."

"Neither do I. I want a guarantee we can keep Amie. Do you want to go back? What if they take Amie?" he asked, looking at his daughter, touching her soft cheek with his fingertip.

"I won't have Amie living in fear. I won't have her learn to run from her problems, like we are planning on doing. I want to keep her with all my heart, Aaron," Laura cried, tears choking off her words. "But I love her too much to give her the wrong kind of life. Let's go back and prove the Berkharths are part of this black market baby ring. If we can do that, maybe there's a chance we can keep her," She kissed Amie's head.

"What if we can't prove shit?" Aaron asked, his tone bitter. "We'll have gone through all this for nothing."

"If we help stop these people and doctors from playing God, then it hasn't been for nothing," she reminded him. "If we can prevent other parents from going through what we've just experienced, it's worth it."

She waited for Aaron to answer. He said nothing. He pulled into a gas station and got out of the car. Laura watched as Aaron filled the car with gas, standing in the cold wind longer than he needed. She was right; he had to know it. They had to do all they could to make sure the third doctor in the organization was uncovered and brought to justice. They had to be there when the *guilty* verdict was read. Then, and only then, would they find some peace from this horrid ordeal.

Watching Aaron go inside to pay for the gas made her feel vulnerable in the car. She wondered how long it would be before she would feel secure again.

Aaron's walk told Laura he was uptight and uncertain. He sat behind the wheel, gripping it tightly. She waited patiently.

"We'll go back." He started the car and squealed out onto the freeway exit, then slammed the brakes to a jolting stop. "I can't do it, Laura. A father protects his daughter. I can't take the chance they'll take her away. I can't."

She couldn't find the words to convince him otherwise. It seemed hours before Aaron stepped on the gas. She noticed the exit sign he took said north.

Chapter Fourteen

"You're not thinking this through. You can't believe I want to lose Amie. It's not a question of choice, Aaron. We go to Canada and we'll be looking over our shoulders for the rest of our lives. You'll never see your mother again. We won't ever see Ryan and his family. We won't be able to tell them where we are because it would put him in a legal conflict. That wouldn't be right either," Laura pointed out.

"Damn it, Laura! You don't think I haven't thought about all of this? It's been driving me crazy. What kind of man lets his daughter be taken away? After what you overheard, I don't want her anywhere near the Berkharts."

The car swerved on the ice, first right, then left. Soon they were twirling in a circle, first on the road, then across the double lane, then into the ditch.

"Damn it to hell! Will nothing go right for us?" Aaron shouted.

Amie awoke and started crying.

"There, there, sweet pea," Laura said soothingly, rocking Amie back to sleep. "Well, that was really helpful, Daddy."

"Please, Laura. Less sarcasm and a little support would be good right now."

"Sarcasm! How about some brains? You managed to drive your wife and your one-year-old daughter out into nowhere, in the middle of a damn blizzard, and put us in a ditch. I'm supposed to say, *that's okay, dear?*"

"Not really, but... hell, I don't know all the answers, Laura. I want shit to stop happening. I want things to go back to when all I had worry about was if I had clean shorts to wear in the morning."

Laura started laughing. "I must admit, that sure would beat the fix we're in now," she said, straining to see through their fogged windows. "Isn't that a blinking light across the road and down a bit?"

"Where? Oh, you might be right. I could walk over there and get us some help. Thing is, I can't leave you and Amie here alone. I don't want you two sitting out here in this blizzard. So once again, I'm shit out of luck!"

"My, aren't you a real positive attitude bundle of joy tonight. You really think anyone has followed us? I can't imagine why we'd be in so much danger, other than a man carrying an axe coming out of the blizzard to kill us all. Come on, Aaron."

"You have all the answers, don't you? Well, remember, Miss Positive Attitude, I left you at Dan's house. Where did that get me?"

"That was different, Aaron. Black Angel isn't following us anymore. He's dead. And, I know you mean well and I love you for it. Amie and I will be safe. Just hurry and come back."

"I'm not so sure about this. They say you should stay in your car and wait for help."

"You think anyone would see us in this ditch? I really don't think so. They might in the morning, but do we have enough gas to keep warm until then? Besides, I'm not all that comfortable running the heater. I've heard so many horror stories about carbon monoxide poisoning." She felt exhausted, and was so angry with Aaron for putting them in this

situation. She understood his motives, but it still didn't make her feel any better. She watched him check out the gas gauge.

"Okay, I agree. I'm not leaving you two here, and that's final. So, that means we're all taking a little walk in the snow."

"You're not serious! I really don't—"

"We're not arguing about this, Laura. I'll tuck little Amie under my jacket. She'll be fine. And you can tuck your cast under your jacket and take my hand. We'll be fine. We're all going now."

Laura knew there wasn't any arguing. She handed a sleeping Amie over to Aaron, and then worked at zipping up her jacket. After several tries, she managed. "You do realize I'm not crazy about the cold!"

"Oh, but you look so healthy with rosy cheeks!"

"Cute. You'll say anything to get off the hook. All right, I'm ready." Laura was not looking forward to this. She hoped the cold air would clear his brain and make him realize running away wasn't an option.

"Come out my door, Laura. Your side might drop down several feet."

Fear filled her. She'd never thought about it and now that she did, it scared the crap out of her. "I am so not happy about this," she said, already cold from the open door.

"You do realize, it's been ages since we've taken a walk together. Who knows, we just might enjoy this."

She couldn't help laughing. She liked his change of attitude. Too bad he didn't always take things this way. "Aaron," she said, grabbing his hand. "Don't you think we should stay in the car? It's a nightmare out here," she shouted, hiding her face into her hood as much as she could.

"No. In two hours we'd have no heat. In two hours we could have a wrecker pull our car out of the ditch and be on our way to Canada."

"Have you always run from your problems? Even as a kid?"

"What the hell does that suppose to mean?"

"Don't get mad, I was just wondering." She felt his anger. She struggled to keep up with his long strides. The snow had to be twelve or more inches deep, and started sliding inside her tennis shoes.

"Laura, I'm not running away from our problems. I'm taking my family where I can keep them safe and we can be together. There's a difference."

"I know that, Aaron. But, I can't help but think it's a big mistake. They will charge us with kidnapping. We could go to prison. We'll be—"

She stepped down the same time as Aaron. They found themselves quickly on their backsides, sliding down the steep slope. She lost her grip on Aaron's hand and felt the momentum pick up as they coasted across the snow. Fear somehow moved to the back of her mind as the joy overcame the simple pleasure of sliding. "Whoo hooo!" she yelled, hoping Aaron would realize she was still okay.

"Yipppeee!" he responded.

She laughed, knowing they were going to be just fine. She slowly came to a stop. "What a hoot!" she laughed, looking around to see if she could spot Aaron.

"That's one way of putting it. I think Amie enjoyed the ride. She never uttered a peep." He laughed.

"That's good. I must admit that was fun. I kept praying there weren't any trees up ahead! See, things do go right!"

"Guess so. Sure saved us a lot of walking. Look, can't be more than two blocks away."

Laura looked and saw a blinking Truck Stop sign and released a sigh of relief. "Well, Mr. Palmer, it looks like help is just ahead. Lead on, fearless leader!"

"Yes, Mrs. Palmer, it does look that way!"

Laura grabbed his hand, and they walked in silence. The wind seemed to have died down some and the snow fell, large and gentle as they walked. She couldn't help but enjoy herself.

"You okay?"

"Sure. How about you?"

"I'm sorry that you have to be out here in this. It was stupid of me."

"Actually, I'm not!"

"You're not?"

She laughed. "Aaron, when was the last time we laughed like this together? Yes, I know the circumstances are a bit strange. But we're having a pretty good time in spite of ourselves."

"You would look at it that way. I'll agree it's a good feeling to be with my girls like this. That's why I want to go to Canada."

"Aaron, think about the carefree way it felt to slide down that hill."

"Okay, so what?"

"In Canada, we'd never feel that free. We'd never feel that complete. We'd always be worried someone would find us out. We'd always have the fear someone would take Amie away from us. She would feel that. We can't do that to her."

"I can't give Amie back. I can't."

"You think I can? Aaron, you've got to stop and think. Running away will make things worse. Let's go back and talk to Dan. He'll know what to do." They walked up to the front doors of the truck stop, shook off the snow and walked in.

"You folks must be crazy! Where's your car?"

"You're right about that," Aaron answered, stomping his feet. "It's across the freeway in a ditch. My wife, daughter and I just enjoyed a little walk in the snow."

Laura watched the waitress grab a couple of menus and motion toward a booth by a window. "You know of any all-night wreckers?" she asked, sliding into the booth.

"Well, dearie, my husband just finished towing a truck across town. He'll be back before you're done eating. I'm sure he can help you out."

"That would be great," Aaron said, handing Amie to Laura. "I'm going to the men's room. Check out the menu and order for us, would you, Laura?"

Laura held Amie close. "Sure," she responded, absently, watching him walk away. Had he heard a word she said? Would he still insist they go to Canada? She hoped not. She wasn't the kind of woman that could live in fear her whole life. She certainly wasn't the kind of woman that could handle prison.

"Well, dearie, what will it be?"

Laura looked up at the waitress. "Oh, sorry. Um, how about cheeseburgers and fries? Ranch dressing on the side and two Pepsis."

"Sounds good. You folks aren't planning on driving more tonight, are you?"

Laura wondered the same thing herself. "That's up to my husband. Are there any hotels nearby, just in case he comes to his senses?" she asked.

The waitress laughed. "Honey, you're a cute one. You know I wouldn't be surprised if most of them in town are full up. We had quite a lot of people in here all night, and I don't think any of them decided to go any further. Tell you what, after I put your order in, I'll make a few calls for ya."

"Thanks," Laura muttered, watching Amie. She smiled and felt a tug at her heart. Aaron wanted to go to Canada for all the right reasons... and all the wrong reasons. If they lost Amie, Laura wondered if she'd regret talking Aaron into going back home.

"I feel so much better. You order?"

"Yes," she answered, looking up at Aaron as he slid across the bench. "I was thinking. We know the Berkharts really don't want Amie. Even if Black Angel was alive, I doubt he'd have admitted what was said between him and Mr. Berkhart. Berkhart hired Black Angel to kill us. It makes me think that he hired him to kidnap Amie, which started this whole nightmare. That would prove they didn't want her in the first place."

"Do you really think we could dig something up about the Berkharts? Something that might be bad enough the courts would never give Amie back to them?" Aaron asked.

"Aaron, what about when I overheard Berkhardt and Black Angel talking about Amie? Plus, they agreed to leave us there to freeze to death."

"I didn't hear it. So it'd be your word against his. We have no proof."

"Here ya go, folks. I don't mean to ruin your night, but it appears both hotels in town are full. I could call around and see who has something open nearby."

"That won't be necessary —"

"There's my husband right now. You go on and talk with him. He'll pull your rig out and have it back here in no time."

Aaron stood up. "I'll be right back."

Laura watched him through the window. It wasn't long before he came back. "You give him your keys?" she asked, as he slid into the seat across from her.

He nodded. "He's a nice guy. He's been pulling people out of ditches all night. Said the storm is slowing down. The plows went by while we were talking."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, I've been thinking about what you said. Maybe Berkhart is involved deeper than we first thought. Maybe we could prove he's involved up to his ass. Do you think Berkhart could be the third person in this setup? I mean, think about it, he's not from L.A. but he would have the brains to head it. Maybe that's how he keeps incognito. He makes everyone think the third partner is from LA."

She tapped the tabletop with her fingers in thought. "No one can find the guy from L.A. because he really isn't from L.A. Aaron, you might have something there."

"But, what if I'm wrong?"

"What if we never check it out and we wonder about it for the rest of our lives?"

"I hear you, Laura, I just worry what will happen if I'm wrong."

"What if *we're* wrong?" Her voice rose as she repeated the question. "Aaron, we have to do what's right."

They ate in relative silence. They were both mentally and physically exhausted. They finished their food and paid for the meal and the tow. Their car was outside. She wondered if they would be going north or heading south, back home.

"Amie still sleeping?" Aaron asked, as he held the door open for her.

"I'm glad she is, poor thing. Must be confused by all that's been going on. I'm sure —"

"Just a second," he said, slamming her door shut.

She watched him rush around and slide behind the wheel. "Damn, still cold to the bone!"

"I was going to say, I'm sure she feels all this tension. It can't be good for her."

"I'm sure you're right," he said, starting up the car and adjusting the heater to full-blast.

Laura waited in silence while her husband sat in turmoil with his thoughts. She nearly cried out in relief when he drove across to the turn off that headed back to Great Falls. She could only hope this was a good decision. His glance told Laura that she and Amie were everything that mattered.

"The three doctors take babies from unwed mothers. That nurse I told you about, Suzie Bryce, knows for a fact that Dr. Henderson took that baby from a Mrs. Hill and Suzie said she wasn't an unwed mother putting her baby up for adoption. This was her first baby. Doesn't it sound like Dr. Henderson is moonlighting on the side?" Laura turned toward Aaron.

"Yeah. Where's this leading?" he asked.

"Think about it. Why would Henderson be moonlighting? Money! Why did he need more money?" she asked, waiting for an answer. "Come on, brainstorm with me," Laura coaxed.

"He's supporting a mistress? He's buying more land? I know," Aaron said, getting excited, "He's being blackmailed! It has to be. Dan said he has all sorts of properties, including some in Hawaii. If someone threatened him, he might have needed hard cash up front. Like our ten thousand," he added.

"Right. Dr. Henderson certainly wouldn't want a scandal or speculation about his practice. The wrong comments in the right places could spell disaster for him, and his associates."

"Laura, that's how we'll find out if there is a third doctor or if the third person is Berkhart," Aaron said, stepping on the gas. "We need to talk this over with Brett and Dan. Besides, I want to know if they've heard from Ryan yet." Aaron's tone softened. "Lor, thanks for making me turn around. I don't know what got into me. I couldn't see past losing you girls," he said, rubbing the back of her neck with his palm.

"Who said we're leaving?" Laura asked, surprised by her own quick comment.

"It's not over yet," he said under his breath. He wanted to ask her if she'd stay, even if they lost Amie. The words refused to leave him. He was afraid of her answer.

Aaron pulled into the backside of the Heritage Inn, then turned off the engine. "I want you to stay here," he told her.

"I thought we were going to Dan's house," she commented.

"It's late, we're tired and at this hour I'm sure they're tired too. Dan felt better having Mother stay at his house, then I guess Mother felt better if Brett, and Sharon stayed there, too. I don't think he needs the three of us. Besides, you and I have some unfinished business to take care of," he teased, leaning over to kiss her, lingering, savoring every moment of it.

"I see your point," she whispered. "What about Amie?" she asked.

"One room with a crib and queen-size bed. She's exhausted and won't even know we exist until morning. Lock your door, I'll be right back," he directed, hurrying into the building.

Fear engulfed Laura. Images of Black Angel filled her thoughts. She jumped when a car door slammed. A couple walked hand-in-hand past her car. Laura trembled, afraid they might attack. Minutes seemed like hours.

"What's taking Daddy so long?" she asked Amie. Laura considered going in after him, but the fear of unlocking the car door won out.

She felt relief when she saw Aaron walking toward her, dangling their room key in his hand. It took every effort to smile back at him. She longed to be secure behind a locked door.

Aaron opened the car door and lifted Amie into his arms. "Good thing I have some things for us."

Taking the key from him, she led the way to their room. She turned the knob and Aaron grabbed her arm.

"Here," he said, sliding Amie back into her arms. "I'd better check it out ... just to be sure," he added.

Laura wondered when they would be able to stop looking over their shoulders...she feared it might never stop.

"Other than a few dust balls, it's clear," Aaron called from inside.

Laura smiled, grateful nothing lurked in the shadows. She removed Amie's clothes, except for her pink undershirt and diaper. Laura placed her daughter in the crib, then looked up at Aaron.

"She showed no worries, no fears, no concerns over what has happened. Sharon and Mother Palmer did a great job in protecting our daughter."

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" Aaron asked, looking down at her cherub face. "I think she looks like you, Laura. I've often heard that kids many times take on characteristics of their adoptive parents. You think that's possible?" he asked.

Laura slipped her arm around his waist. "I'm beginning to think anything is possible. Why don't you get our suitcases? I'm eager for that shower," she said with longing.

"If I hurry, could I join you?" he asked, moving his palm down the curves of her buttocks.

"You'd better watch over Amie. While you shower I'll stay with her. I'm not ready to let my guard down just yet," Laura admitted, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"I agree. I started worrying I'd never see or hold Amie again. I'll be right back."

Laura stared at the door long after Aaron closed it. She loved him and didn't want to feel a distance between them ever again. She glanced over at her sleeping angel. How could they give Amie back?

Laura sat next to Amie, picked up the phone, glanced at the slip of paper Dan had given her and dialed.

"Karhu residence," a deep voice answered.

"Hi, this is Laura Palmer," she said, feeling awkward to be calling another man.

"Laura! Hi! It's me, Sharon. You like my masculine voice? Dan told me to answer that way, so no one would know us gals are here alone. We're not worried, just being careful. He said you were going to call. Matter of fact he was getting upset you hadn't called already —"

"Sharon! Sharon," Laura interrupted, "Take a breath! I'm exhausted listening to you," she added, laughing. "It's good to hear your voice, but in limits, girl!"

"Very funny. Hey, you got that cute kid of mine with you? She sure is sweet. Mrs. Palmer said you're the best mommy that little girl could have, and she's going to tell the judge that, too."

"What judge? What you talking about?" Laura asked, feeling a shiver of fear set in.

"You know, when this all goes to court. It will, you know. Dan says you and Aaron can try and sue for custody of Amie. Of course that will be after this adoption scandal thing is settled," Sharon said, her excitement rose with her tone.

"We don't have a choice with Amie. She isn't our daughter. The courts aren't going to give adoptive parents custody over birth parents. Why give me false hope, Sharon? We don't know how we're ever going to give her back, but we know we have to," Laura admitted, a single tear rolling down her cheek. She wiped it away with the back of her hand. She looked up to find Aaron staring at her.

"It won't be long when those doctors will be behind bars. Brett and Dan raced out of here like their butts were on fire. They said something about a meeting at the Rainbow. Where are you staying?" Sharon asked.

Laura found it hard to keep track of Sharon's conversation. "The Heritage Inn," she finally answered. "How long ago did Dan and Brett leave? They say anything about —"

"Where did Brett and Dan go?" Aaron interrupted.

Laura slid her palm over the receiver. "The Rainbow. Sharon said they left —"

"I'll be back. Will you and Amie be okay staying here? I need to see about this meeting. I wouldn't go, Laura, but it's important," he said, slipping his jacket back on.

"We'll be fine. If I get worried, I'll call 911 right away," she said, smiling at him, hoping he didn't feel her uncertainty and fear. She lifted her face to receive his kiss, before he left. She didn't want to be here alone. She wasn't ready for it. But she said nothing. "I'm going to go take a shower. Why don't I call you back when I'm done," Laura suggested, returning to her conversation with Sharon.

"Sounds great. Mrs. Palmer and I are playing cards. She said you and I should come and play cards with her on Wednesday nights. Wouldn't that be fun?" Sharon asked, pausing. "Lor, it's going to work out. Brett and Dan are working on it. You'd be surprised what those two can accomplish together."

Laura smiled. "Sharon, the eternal optimist. Hope you don't mind my asking, but did you and Dr. Henderson have a relationship? Did you ever date him?" She was afraid to hear the answer.

"Good Lord, no. I had dinner with him once, but so did about twenty other people from my department. We had drinks together at our Christmas party every year, but intimate, no way. What would make you think that?"

"The way you stood up for him that day Brett came over. You acted secretive and protective. I don't know, you gave me the impression the two of you were an item," Laura explained.

"I did it to make Brett jealous. He thinks he owns me and that he doesn't have to try to keep me anymore, so I wanted him to wake up and realize other men could find me attractive. One of them, possibly an important doctor, could sweep me off my feet and he'd lose me."

"You hussy!" Laura stated, laughing. "Did it work? I mean, did it wake him up?"

"It was great. Next morning I got a rose. He took me out to dinner. I should have awakened him a long time ago," Sharon said, joining in the laughter. "I'll be honest, though, I like Dr. Henderson. So do our young patients. Why are you so interested in his love life?"

"It seems important, that's all. Do you know the lucky girl he was dating? I heard he was serious about someone."

"I don't know. I still can't believe Doctor Henderson is involved in all this. He's really a nice guy. He really cares about all those babies," Sharon said in a protective tone.

"I have no doubt he once cared about them very much. But I think after a while he and his partners realized there was big money to be had selling babies to couples desperate to be parents. They justified their actions by finding parents for these children who would otherwise have had limited opportunities in life. But it got out of hand, and to protect themselves, they had to eliminate anyone who figured it out or started investigating, like Aaron and me."

"But, if you knew Dr. Henderson, you'd never believe he could hurt anyone," Sharon said in a convincing tone.

"Do you know if Doctor Henderson knew the Berkharts?" Laura asked, suddenly excited by her train of thought.

"No, I don't know," Sharon replied.

"You think you could find out? I mean, is there anyone you know who was friends with him and went to his parties, that sort of thing?" Laura asked.

"He didn't socialize all that much. He was a private man. He spent a lot of time in Chicago and L.A. I'll bet his girlfriend is from one of those places," she suggested.

"Who would know?" Laura asked again.

"Beats me. You really think it's important? I mean, I could ask around at work."

"Could you phone someone tonight? I'm wondering if..."

"Call waiting is beeping me," Sharon blurted. "Take your shower and call me back." She hung up quickly.

Laura sat thinking for a moment. If they could find a link between Dr. Henderson and the Berkharts, the court might think twice about turning Amie back to her natural parents. At least she could hope that would happen.

Aaron parked his car several blocks from the Rainbow. He wasn't taking any chances on being seen. He wanted these guys put away. He'd make sure they stopped selling babies.

The pain in his heart stabbed at him. It might even be easier to have lost Amie to death, than to have her torn from their arms and forced to live with those who really didn't want her.

How could they find evidence that Ken Berkhart didn't really want his daughter? He'd used his missing daughter as a ploy on the campaign trail; and managed to bring thousands to

tears with his loss. He'd offered ten thousand dollars reward for her return. He'd played the game well.

They needed to prove the Berkharts didn't want Amie. He knew no court would turn over a kidnapped child to her adoptive parents, especially when those adoptive parents paid cash under-the-table for the child. Right now, he and Laura appeared guiltier than the Berkharts. The biological parents were merely privately indifferent to their daughter while Aaron and Laura broke the law even if it was unwittingly, to get a child.

Aaron stood before the side door of the Rainbow. He had been so lost in his thoughts he didn't remember walking the two blocks or crossing the parking lot. He hoped he'd been discreet.

He looked around in hopes of spotting Brett or Dan's vehicle, but saw neither. He wouldn't wait. If the meeting had started, he didn't want to miss a thing.

Making every effort to be quiet, Aaron hurried up the stairs. He eased himself down the hallway, then inched into the room with the two-way mirror. He left it unlocked in case Brett and Dan showed up.

"Do you realize I had to leave Chicago wearing a fake moustache and a wig? I can't believe it has come to this," the tall, bald man said, sitting down at the table.

Aaron took a good look around the room. He had hoped to find an audio system to tape the conversation; yet, he couldn't find what he needed.

"They can't prove a damn thing. I've covered our tracks from day one. Each and every one of those adoption agencies, except yours, is legitimate!" The short, portly man shouted, slamming his fist on the table in front of a worried looking Dr. Jennings.

"We're legitimate. There's nothing they can prove we're guilty of. Like you, I've covered my trail—"

"You were arrested," Dr. Henderson said. "My attorney bailed you out. You hired someone to burn down a house with twenty-two pregnant girls from sixteen to twenty inside. Your way of covering your trail is incomprehensible. This Palmer situation has been your undoing. How you could jeopardize us all, I don't know." Dr. Henderson returned to pacing one end of the room.

"We wonder about you, Dr. Jennings," a deep voice said.

Aaron watched the powerful looking man whose presence seemed to fill the room. He wore a white suit with a white handkerchief neatly folded in the pocket. His white, silk shirt looked expensive. This had to be the doctor from L.A.

"I had no way of knowing that kid was going to surface. If the Berkharts hadn't placed that ad, Laura Palmer wouldn't have seen the picture and tried to investigate the kid's family. It wasn't a normal situation," Jennings whined.

"What are you doing here?" a voice softly called out.

Aaron whirled around, his heart pounding hard. Brett and Dan stood before him. "Laura called Sharon and she mentioned the meeting was going down. It's definitely going down," he whispered.

"Interesting," Dan commented, walking toward the window. "I can't believe they haven't figured out this is a two-way mirror. When they do, we're in a heap of shit."

"We have to make a plan." Dr. Henderson could be heard. "I vote we liquidate what we can, put it in off-shore accounts, then leave the country. I never dreamed it could come to

this. I only wanted to help all those unwanted babies. Now that I can't help them, I must help myself."

"What a crock of shit! You've made a fortune, Henderson. We all have," the short, aggressive doctor answered. "Yes, we started out with a great idea, but we know what it's turned into. I vote to leave, too. My wife is already waiting for me in Australia. After a vacation there, I think we're going to tour Europe."

"Is that possibly who I think it might be?" Brett asked, watching intently. "He's got to be our missing doctor from L.A."

"I think so, too." Aaron answered. "He seems to be the boss of the outfit. "My guess is the fella sitting at the end of the table is Dr. Patrick Fenwick, from Chicago. Of course we recognize Dr. Henderson pacing."

"I think Dr. Jennings is in danger," Dan said, watching the scene before him. "They didn't ask him here to listen to their plans of escape. My guess is he isn't leaving that meeting room alive."

"Christ! They wouldn't, would they?" Aaron asked, struggling to keep his voice low. "If we could get Dr. Jennings back in jail, maybe he'd be willing to bargain with the D.A."

"If we can get him out of there safe, he might be willing to talk, I'm sure of it," Dan said, rubbing his chin. "I think we should take him in now —"

"Well, what we got here? The Three Stooges?"

Aaron jumped, turning to face a man holding a gun. He wore tight jeans and a flannel shirt with the tails hanging out. He didn't look more than twenty. He glanced at Brett and Dan, noticing their not too happy expressions. How could they have allowed themselves to be put in this dangerous situation? Why didn't they have the sense to lock the door?

"There's no need for a gun," Dan said, taking a step toward the young man.

"Dr. Jennings, look what I found," the kid shouted.

Glancing through the mirror, Aaron watched the collected men rush for the door and toward them.

"What the hell's going on?" the doctor wearing the white suit shouted. "Jennings, is this kid one of yours?" he asked.

"Be glad he is," Dr. Jennings answered. "He caught these three, didn't he? That fella is Aaron Palmer, the guy who started all this."

Aaron stared at the men. "You mean the man who's going to put a stop to all this. You are doctors," Aaron said, glaring at the men. "You're supposed to save lives, not take them. You think all those couples that thought their babies died would be appreciative of your efforts? How many babies have you stolen? How many others have you killed because of this?"

"We don't steal babies, Mr. Palmer," Dr. Henderson said. "We have formed our adoption agency to make life better for them. What kind of life do they have with a teenage mother and no father? What kind of future will they have living on Welfare? We've done them all a favor."

"You did Laura and me no favor," Aaron said, his tone low and controlled. "You gave us a baby that was stolen from her parents. We love that little girl and now we're going to have to give her back. It's ripping the heart out of us."

Dr. Henderson stepped closer to Aaron. "We don't steal babies from healthy, normal families, do we, Allen?"

"We don't. This kid got stolen in Chicago and I don't know how she ended up in our adoption agency," Dr. Jennings answered.

"Bullshit, Allen!" the other man snarled. "You know the truth. We all know. Someone paid you the right amount to steal that kid. Maybe the real parents had something to do with it," he added.

"That's crazy, Haskell," Dr. Jennings snarled. "I admit I called Fenwick in Chicago. I only wanted Black Angel to warn the Palmers. I don't know how they got the kid in the first place. I just wanted to warn them to stop making a commotion and to leave well enough alone."

"Warn my ass!" Dr. Haskell said, tipping his head. "You won't get away with this. There are too many people who know what's going on. You can't kill us all."

"Brett's right," Dan stated. "It'll go easier on you if you turn yourselves in and come clean."

"Who are you?" Haskell asked, glaring at Dan.

"Dan Karhu." At the moment he chose to keep the truth about his being a fed a secret. "I'm a friend of the Palmers. Face it, Haskell. Your days as boss of this organization are over. No more baby selling."

"We don't sell babies," Dr. Henderson snapped. "Dr. Haskell, Dr. Fenwick and I have created the perfect solution to the kids keeping kids thing. It's wrong, you know. They can't even take care of themselves. We're doing everyone a favor by taking them to adoption agencies. We pay these young girls so they have money to get a start on life, too. The babies go to couples, like the Palmers, that can't have children. I don't know how they ended up with a child that was stolen," he said, glaring at Dr. Jennings.

"We weren't in the business of making money doing this," Dr. Fenwick stated. "It sort of mushroomed on us. The more babies we found homes for, the more babies surfaced needing parents. The best part was we created a ninety-percent drop in abortions. So we saved all those babies' lives! We've done more good than harm," he added, leaning his back against the hall wall.

Aaron realized the men were growing restless. Something had to happen soon, or they'd become one of the doctor's statistics. "What about all the people that died because they got too close to the truth?" Aaron asked.

"I bowed out of that," Dr. Henderson said. "I'm not part of any killings."

"Oh, shut up, Charles. You and your fine morals!" Dr. Haskell snapped. "You have three properties and enough money to wallow with the rich and famous until you die of old age. Don't tell me your hands are one-hundred percent clean."

"You're out of line, Larry," Dr. Henderson shouted back. "I made it clear from the beginning that I would tell the truth about our organization, before I'd be party to murder."

"So now we're deciding who is guilty and who is innocent in all this?" Dr. Fenwick asked. "We're all innocent. We keep our mouths shut and let the law try and prove otherwise. If you're smart, Charles, you won't stay around and let them drag you through the mud. You'll be sunning on some beach with Donna!"

"Might that be Donna Berkhart?" Brett asked. "It's starting to make sense now. You and Donna are having an affair, right, Dr. Henderson?"

"No! We are planning on getting married. Only Ken feels it would be harmful to his career so—"

"So," Brett interrupted, "Donna convinced Ken that if they faked a kidnapping of their daughter and he pulled the sympathy of the public, he'd have his increase in support. Now if their stolen baby caused them to separate, well, who would blame either of them? The public would be sympathetic to them both because of the stress and all. And, even more rewarding, they'd be more supportive to Ken because of it. I must admit it's a hell of a plan!"

"Well, Charles," Dr. Haskell stated with a chuckle to his voice, "I would never have guessed. You do realize it's you, then, who has caused our organization to collapse," he accused, pulling his fingers through his expensively styled hair.

"I'm ready to board that plane," Dr. Fenwick said, adjusting his coat. "Let's stop all this talking and get out of here. If these amateurs found us, then the authorities can't be that far behind. I won't allow myself to get caught. I wouldn't last a day in one of those hellhole jails. Pay this kid to silence these three and let's head for the airport."

Dr. Henderson stepped forward. "I won't have you killing these men. I won't! We're doctors. We've done a lot of good, I won't have you killing anyone!"

Aaron watched Dr. Haskell grab Dr. Henderson's arm.

"Charles, we can't leave them here to talk. They can reveal this whole sordid affair. We've spelled out our part in all this, and we're guilty as hell. We don't have a choice but to eliminate them."

"I won't have it. I'll tell the authorities everything before I resort to killing," Dr. Henderson threatened.

Dr. Haskell pulled out a gun and Aaron tensed.

"I'm impressed," Dan said.

Aaron realized Dan was buying time by drawing attention to himself. If Brett and Dan had something planned, Aaron had no idea what it was.

"A .38 Special! It's nice," Dan continued. "You could shoot Dr. Henderson, but it is unlikely one shot will do the trick. Then you have Brett, Aaron, Dr. Jennings, and myself. You do realize that toy holds only five bullets, don't you?"

Aaron watched Dan switching his weight from one foot to the other and wondered where his taunting would lead. Aaron suddenly saw Dan's plan. Dr. Henderson and Dr. Jennings would make great witnesses. Without them, their case would be circumstantial, but with them, iron clad.

"I agree, Dr. Haskell," Aaron fueled Dan's comment. "You think Dr. Jennings' kid is going to trust you? You want him to shoot his boss. Now, Dr. Haskell, if you're willing to kill your own friend, what's to keep you from shooting the kid after the deed is done? No, I think you really have a problem here."

"I'm getting out of here," Dr. Fenwick announced.

"What if we bind and gag them and leave them here? They're bound to be found, but long after we're gone," Dr. Henderson suggested. "Put the gun down, Larry. You won't shoot me."

Dr. Haskell pulled the trigger, sending Dr. Henderson stumbling backward and crashing to the floor.

Aaron rushed toward Dr. Jennings, taking a slamming blow to his chin. Without flinching, Aaron swung both hands together, aiming for Dr. Jennings' head. He staggered and before he could set himself, Aaron swung a powerful right that sent Dr. Jennings sprawling. Before the man could get up, Aaron followed with a left jab that landed squarely on the bastard's mouth. He dropped flat on the floor.

Jumping to his feet, Aaron looked around stunned to find the room swarming with men wearing jackets identifying them as FBI. He glanced at Dan, who pulled open his shirt revealing a small mic hooked to his t-shirt.

"Well, it couldn't have gone better," Dan announced. "I was more than mad when I saw you in that room, Aaron, but as it turns out, you really helped things escalate. We've got them. We really have them! There isn't a court in Montana that would set these bastards free."

"It's over," Brett confirmed.

Aaron wanted to feel relief, happy, even proud of his part in it all, but none of those emotions filled him. His whole body felt engulfed in tides of weariness and despair.

They had no proof Berkhart was involved in any of it. With Black Angel dead, it would be Laura's word against Ken Berkhart's, if she told the authorities what he said in that shed. Her word against his that he helped plan for them both to freeze to death.

If only they'd been given some hope to keep Amie. It was over. They would have to give Amie back.

Chapter Fifteen

Laura felt as if each minute ticking off was more like an hour. What was happening? Was Aaron going to come back, or would he be killed? She couldn't stand thinking about all the possibilities.

Leaning over the crib, she lifted Amie into her arms. She walked around the room holding her sleeping daughter against her heart. "I told you I wouldn't desert you. I would do anything to keep you near. You know your DaDa Aaron loves you. You know I love you. I'm afraid you won't even remember us when you grow up."

She paused, tears filling her eyes and spilling down her cheeks. "We won't ever forget you, little lady. You have given us so much, because you brought us back together. At least, I hope that will happen. You made us realize how priceless life is. You helped us understand what is important."

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she watched Amie sleep. "You are so precious, my dear. I thank God He gave you to us, even for so short a time." The soft knock on the door caused her to jump. Amie wiggled and she quickly placed her back into the crib and covered her. There wasn't a second knock. She had imagined it. Her nerves were stretched to the max. She wanted it to be over. Yet, she knew when it was over they would have to give Amie back.

Aaron stood in front of the hotel room door. He paused before knocking again. He was excited it was all over. They got the men responsible, the proof, and the witnesses. He should be happy. He was happy.

Now there was no stalling. Now there was no maybe. Now there was no later. They would have to face giving Amie back to the Berkharts. He couldn't do it, plain and simple. They should have gone to Canada.

"Damn," he muttered under his breath.

He reached up and knocked on the door, louder. With it all over, would he lose Laura, too? He wasn't sure he wanted to know. He was exhausted. So much had happened since she joined him in Chicago. He'd even made a mess of that. But he didn't regret seeing a side of his wife that he didn't know existed. And through it all, she'd been strong, smart and his equal. Lord, he loved that woman! He loved their little girl. What he wouldn't give to have them in his life. A second chance was all he needed. He wouldn't screw that up.

Aaron panicked and knocked on the door again, harder, with more urgency. He heard the lock click open and he released a breath of air. As the door opened, he found Laura pulling him into her arms. He smiled, welcoming her warmth.

"I was so worried about you. What happened?" she asked, moving back so he could close the door.

"You girls okay?" he asked. "I hated leaving you like that."

"We're fine. Amie slept like an angel and I worried like the devil!"

He noticed the slight smile at the corners of her mouth. "That's one of the things I love about you, Laura."

"What's that?"

"How you manage to add those cute little comments that keep things light. It's a rare quality, and I've always enjoyed them."

"Well, thank you, Aaron. I think that's about the nicest compliment you've ever given me," she said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

He looked at her, long and hard. "That's damn sad, if you want to know the truth."

"I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean. I wasn't trying to pick a fight."

"Oh, honey, I know that. That's not what I meant. Look at you! You're one hell of a beautiful woman. You're smart and funny. You do so much and I, hell, I think of no one but my own selfish self. How you put up with me all these years, I'll never know." He paused and watched her listen. She must be wondering the same things. "I know I've never said it before, but, I'm sorry, Laura. I truly am."

He wore a sheepish expression as he sat next to her. He remained still as she moved her palm down the side of his face.

"There were times, my dear husband, that I wondered what I was doing wrong. I couldn't figure out why you didn't want me. I asked myself what I'd done to kill your love for me. I did love you for making sure we got Amie. There were times I thought she was bringing you back to me."

"She did. I found myself thinking about her all day long ... and you, too. I just didn't know how to tell you that I wanted us to remain together. The more excuses I made to be with Amie also allowed me to be with you. I know it sounds lame, but it's true. I was coming home early and loving it."

Then why did you turn to her?"

"It's over. I'm so sorry I hurt you that way. I know I don't deserve your forgiveness. Shit, if you did that to me, I would have a damn hard time forgetting it. I promise you, Laura, we don't ever have to mention my infidelity again. I know it won't be easy, but, if you'll forgive me, I'll never disrespect you by cheating again. I promise." Aaron felt the tear that slipped down his cheek. He remained still as she wiped it away with her thumb.

"I'll hold you to that, Aaron. I won't forgive it a second time."

Her tone was choked and soft. He could only imagine the hurt he'd put her through. Slowly he leaned toward Laura. He softly touched her lips with his. It was like their first kiss, soft and tender. Full of excitement and adventure.

"What happened out there tonight, Aaron? Did you find Dan and Brett? Did you find out who the third doctor was?"

"It's all over! We got them all and they'll spend the rest of their useless lives in prison. I'm sure of it. I should be happy. Hell, I am happy, we put the bastards out of business and now it won't happen to any other young woman or even any couple like us again. But, for us... It was all for nothing," Aaron whispered, swallowing the emotions that tightened his throat.

"Not for nothing, Aaron," Laura said, in a soft tone. "We've found each other somewhere along the way. We've learned we love each other again. Isn't that worth something?" she asked, before realizing she'd spoken the words.

He leaned forward and kissed her with a gentleness that belied his urgency to kiss her with a demanding need. "Are you saying you won't leave me when we lose Amie?" he asked, unable to meet her gaze. "You've forgiven me?"

Laura stiffened her back. "Aaron Palmer! Sometimes you make me so damn mad!"

"Now what?" he asked, stretching his neck to the right, then to the left.

"Did I once... have I ever... where do you get your ideas? Haven't I proved how much I love you? What do you think the lace and garters thing was about in Chicago? What do you think I was saying in the shower this morning? What about our touching game? Does that speak of a wife who is tired of her boring husband? I'm not going to leave you! On the contrary, I thought because I deceitfully paid that money, you might consider leaving me. When you found out my part in all this, you had every right to be angry with me. I wasn't very honest myself. Maybe I didn't cheat on you, but I was deceitful," she admitted.

"We've been a couple of fools, haven't we? I make myself nuts worrying you're going to leave me, and you stress over me possibly leaving you. That's been our problem. We've thinking of ourselves for far too long. It's about time we started thinking of each other," he explained, peering at her intently. "I can prove my intentions," he whispered, allowing his gaze to travel over her face and search her eyes. He hoped she read the love he felt.

"Prove how?" She couldn't help but notice the tingle of excitement inside her. She watched him rummage through their still-packed suitcases off the hotel bed. She glanced over at a sleeping Amie and smiled.

"Here's my proof," he announced, tossing lace panties, stockings and garters her way.

Laura stared down at them. "I threw these away in the garbage. How did they get in our bags?" she asked, looking up at him, startled by the bold, lusty look he gave her.

"You promised to dance for me. I spent a considerable amount of time imagining you in these before I peeled them off. You promised me a night to remember. I know you're not one to go back on your word, so I retrieved them for later ... for now," he corrected, staring at her.

"Well, since you put it that way. Might I remind you I won the touching game that night? Might I also point out to you, if I put these on, I'm in charge, I have control, and I am the boss? Agreed?" she asked, giving him a smoldering look that brought a flush to her own cheeks.

He pulled her roughly, almost violently, to him. "You hussy. Go change, I'll watch our daughter. When you come back I'm all yours," he teased, releasing his grip on her.

Laura swept the lacy garments into her palm, then gazed up at Aaron. "Save your energy, mister. This is one hot night you're going to remember the rest of your life," she promised, giggling all the way to the bathroom.

Aaron watched her exaggerated sway of the hips, and couldn't help chuckling. "That's quite a swing in your back porch, lady!" he commented, pleased to hear her giggle in response.

He got up and walked over to Amie's crib. He stood there, watching her sleep. Her pudgy, rosy cheeks begged for a kiss. He leaned over and moved his lips across the soft, baby skin. He lifted a curl and allowed the golden hair to twirl around his finger. Tears swelled and he allowed them to wet his own cheeks. His Amie couldn't be more beautiful. His heart cried with him. He reached down to pull her into the safety of his arms.

"Don't you dare wake her up! Afraid you can't handle me?" she teased, as she left the bathroom and moved toward him. "Afraid I'll use my cast on you?"

He watched her move seductively before his eyes and heat ran the length of him. His immediate arousal didn't surprise him. "You're beautiful," he murmured. His heart pounded hard as he lusted after his wife. He quickly started undoing the buttons on his shirt. He couldn't get rid of it fast enough.

Laura felt his gaze burn her exposed flesh. She liked his obvious response to her seduction. She brazenly allowed his gaze to create a blazing path over her. She felt strong as she created an obviously intense need between them.

"You look great. Better than I remember," he whispered in a husky and thick tone. He shoved his jeans to the floor and stepped out of them, flinging them away with a flick of his toes. "Come here."

"Oh, I think you forgot something important," she cooed. "I'm in charge. I'll come to you when I want to come to you. I'll stay distant if I want to stay distant. You'd be smart to move to our bed." She leaned forward, allowing her breasts to hang over the open, up-lifting bra, encouraging, teasing as she moved.

She chuckled when he whipped off his boxers and wadded them up into a ball and tossed them at her. He dove onto the neat bedspread, reaching for her breasts, only to find them out of his reach.

"Getting kinda grabby, aren't you?" she asked, moving slowly around the bed, watching him as he lay waiting for her.

"You're driving me crazy, woman. At least let me touch or feel something!" he pleaded.

"You sound so breathless. You aren't ill, are you? I mean if you aren't well, we would be foolish to –"

He bolted, grabbing her waist, pulling her quickly, yet gently on top of him. "There, that's more like it!"

She laughed, placing her cast on the pillow next to his ear. "You aren't playing fair," she whispered, leaning over to give him the breast he waited for. She felt his lips brush across her nipples. They hardened and tingled, sending heat deep within her.

She gasped as he unhooked her bra and tossed it to the floor.

"It's been years since I've had that thrill. You remember the time at the prom –"

"Hush. I'll never forgive you for that. Everyone thought we were *doing it* after that! I was so embarrassed."

"I sort of got the impression you liked it," he added huskily, laughing deep.

She pressed her breast into his mouth, which he quickly took advantage of. "Too much talk just might get you in trouble," she threatened.

"I wish you had let me do this to you then," he admitted.

"Aaron! We weren't married," she said, feeling an urgency build as he moved his palms down her thighs. She involuntarily squirmed on top of him.

"We'd better remove these," he said, snapping a garter on her thigh.

Laura rolled off of him and lay back. "Be my guest," she offered. She felt his hot breath brush her cheek before he captured her lips in a fiery kiss.

He trailed the tip of his tongue down her neck, breasts, stomach, then stopped, gripping the edge of her lace panty with his teeth. He pulled it up and released it, allowing it to snap. He sat, unhooked a stocking and then rolled it down her leg, kissing now and then, as he

removed it. He repeated the same action with her other stocking. He felt her heating against his palms and it excited him more.

Easing his palms up to the edge of the lacy, crotchless panties, he smiled. "I still can't believe you bought these. I can just imagine how red-in-the-face you were at the store. I love you for it," he admitted, sliding back to kiss her firmly and lovingly.

Each kiss she returned with equal urgency and power. He moved his fingers to enter her moist core—feeling her pleasure from his touch. She allowed herself the same intimate action, moving her fingers around him, giving him pleasure.

They gave to each other. They took from each other. It was flesh against flesh, man against woman, woman against man and the joy of being husband and wife.

A spurt of hungry desire spiraled through her and she felt his burst of aroused passion. Their searing need to fulfill each other had been complete.

She nestled against him, their bodies naked and moist from their lovemaking. "I love you, Aaron," she whispered, snuggling her cheek into the crook of his shoulder.

"I love you, too." He wanted to add, *even if we have to give Amie back, I'll still love you and be there for you*, but he remained silent.

Laura felt loved. Completely loved. She knew he wouldn't desert her. She knew she belonged. They were a family. She couldn't bear to think of not having Amie, but she would approach Aaron later about possibly putting their name back on an adoption list. One they would check out and make sure was legitimate. Now wasn't the time, but soon.

"This court has reviewed this case with great interest and with much concern," Judge Turner said, clearing his voice. "I have never been presented with a more difficult task."

Physically and mentally exhausted, Laura wished for it all to be over. The past two months had been filled with statements, questions, and havoc. Implicated adoption agencies had been shut down and owners arrested all over the United States. None of it drained or worried her as much as their custody suit for Amie.

Brett, Dan, Ryan and Aaron had worked night and day, struggling to find evidence that would link Berkhart to any part of the illegal baby selling organization. They all believed Ken Berkhart had hired Black Angel to kidnap Amie, but they had no proof. No matter how hard they tried, they couldn't find any evidence that would link him to Black Angel. Laura overheard them planning to kill both Aaron and her. But Black Angel's death buried any chance of or getting his witness testimony. It became her word against Ken Berkhart's word. And it was worthless in any court.

Laura felt the pressure of Aaron's fingers as he squeezed hers in his. He held Amie on his lap, but she rested her sleeping head on Laura's lap. Together they held their daughter. The Department of Family Social Services had tried to take Amie from them. Thank God Ryan petitioned the Court to allow them to keep Amie under the DFS's supervision until the case was resolved. Laura knew it only prolonged the inevitable.

"I've heard the anguish of Donna and Ken Berkhart," Judge Turner continued. "Their fears, sleepless nights, and heartache since they lost their daughter over a year ago. I've listened to the same heart-wrenching story from Laura and Aaron Palmer. This is the worst of all situations I've had before me in this court. Both sets of parents love little Michelle or Amie, and after meeting her, I can understand why." He paused, watching Amie.

Laura wondered what went through the man's mind. She twisted a soft curl around her finger, a gesture she and Aaron had become fond of doing. She fought the tears, the fear, and the words she didn't want to hear. The time had finally come, and now she wished they'd run to Canada. At least they'd be together. Lord, how she regretted talking Aaron into turning back.

"I don't think a case like this is easy for any court. The Berkharts are Michelle's natural parents. But in watching the child, I see a real bond has formed between her and the Palmers." Judge Turner took a drink of water.

Laura leaned into Aaron. She managed a faint smile of encouragement and realized he struggled to return it.

"I've been asked to consider the interaction of Amie with the Palmers. I have done this and see a nurturing, loving family. An instinct tells me there is sincerity in the Palmers, something that I feel is lacking in the Berkharts. Yet, I must consider and weigh heavily the fact that six months is a long time for a young child to be separated from her parents. Is this ample time to forget feelings and bonding with her biological parents? In consulting with several child psychologist, I've learned yes, this is most definitely the case, especially with a child as young as our little lady here."

Laura glanced back at Mother Palmer, Sharon and Brett. She gave Doris a tentative smile, then noticed the boys held up crossed fingers, which Laura returned, feeling a bit silly, yet comforted.

She nodded an acknowledgement toward Dan's wife, and wondered why he hadn't come. Did he fear the wrong verdict? Did he feel responsible?

Submerging her thoughts, Laura glanced at Ryan who couldn't represent them. A conflict of interest because of the baby ring cases and Amie's kidnapping forced him to step down as lead attorney. He nodded encouragingly at her. She swallowed the tears that surfaced. His support meant more than Laura could express.

She felt Aaron's arm circle around her back and she leaned into him for support.

"I will repeat, this is not an easy decision for this court. If I could, I'd give a Michelle or Amie to both of you, but I can't. It's my job to weigh the evidence presented before me and make an honest decision, hard as it may be. Therefore, this court rules that the child, Michelle, be returned to the custody of her natural parents, Donna and Ken Berkhart," he said, pounding his gavel down twice as a final gesture.

Laura shook her head in disbelief. "No!" she cried. "She's my daughter ... our daughter. We love her. How can we give her back? Could you give your daughter away? What kind of judge are you?"

"Laura," Aaron said in a tone deep and almost too stern. "We have no choice. We knew this might happen. We have to let her go," his voice broke. He pulled Amie and Laura to his chest, and they cried together.

"Mr. Palmer, I realize your wife's distress and I will ignore her comments of contempt to this court. It is this court's order that you hand Michelle over to Ken and Donna Berkhart immediately. You are also ordered by this court to refrain from any contact with the Berkharts. Might I remind you that this order includes Michelle Berkhart. You will not be allowed visitation rights, nor will you be allowed to approach the child. It is this court's feeling that it

will only cause you both extended grief and interfere with your healing, as well as confuse the child."

Laura heard the judge speaking, but his words made no sense. She clung to Aaron, praying he could stop the judge and make him change his mind. She felt Amie slide from her lap and she clutched the child to her breast. "Just one more hug, please? Just one more kiss," she pleaded. Her heart cried. Her head felt swollen and the world seemed an impossible place to find happiness.

Amie slipped from her grip and Laura stared into the cold gaze of Ken Berkhart. She caught a glimpse of her daughter's soft, blue eyes just as he turned to walk away, taking Amie with him.

Amie's sudden burst of fearful cries tore at Laura's heart. "Mamma! Daddy! No! No! Mamma!" Her screams filled the courtroom.

Laura heard running footsteps and the slamming of the courtroom door. It didn't matter who it was or what the person wanted. To her, nothing seemed to matter at this moment. She allowed Aaron to hold her tight. She struggled to ignore the cries of her daughter, but she couldn't. She glanced up at him and saw his pain.

"I promised I wouldn't desert her. I can't bear it," she whispered between sobs.

"I can't either," he answered, wiping his tears on the shoulders of his shirt. "Together we will, Laura. We have to," he added, kissing her wet cheek.

"Wait! Wait! Your Honor," a man yelled.

Laura recognized Dan's voice. She looked up, struggling to keep her body from trembling.

"Who addresses this court?" Judge Turner asked.

"I am Special Agent Dan Karhu, your Honor. I have a signed affidavit I'd like to present to this court," Dan said, moving toward the judge. Your Honor, the Berkharts are not the biological parents of this child, Michelle Berkhart, also known as Amie Palmer. I have further proof, with a signed affidavit, that is notarized and witnessed, your Honor. This affidavit contains information from Dr. Allen Jennings, swearing testimony that the Berkharts adopted Amie for one purpose only. To have her kidnapped for the sympathy it would bring to Ken Berkhart's campaign for Governor of Illinois."

"You damn liar!" Ken Berkhart shouted, dropping Amie into Donna's lap. "What gives you the right to charge in here and start throwing lies like that? Dr. Jennings is an imbecile who has been indicted on endless counts of baby racketeering. Are you going to take the word of a man like that over me? This is ridiculous, your Honor!"

"Silence! I'll have silence in this court!" Judge Turner yelled, hammering his gavel hard. "Sit down, Mr. Berkhart. You'll have your chance to respond, sooner than you think. Approach the bench, Agent Karhu. I wish to see these documents," he said, giving the courtroom a stern look.

Laura held her breath, gripping Aaron's hands as though it were her lifeline. She stared, struggling to control her breathing. She was afraid to hope, and afraid not to hope.

"This is interesting evidence, Agent Karhu. Please sit down in the witness chair," he mumbled, looking over the stack of papers Dan had given him.

"Mr. Berkhart, tell me it's not true that you and Donna Berkhart gave this court a sworn statement that you are Michelle's biological parents."

"Your Honor, we are Michelle's natural parents. We have a birth certificate," he said, handing a document over to Judge Turner. Laura noticed Berkhart's smug smile. She glared back at him then allowed her gaze to settle on her daughter, who struggled to get free of Donna Berkhart's hold.

"This is strange, Mr. Berkhart. I have another birth certificate in my possession that Dr. Jennings, with the help of Agent Karhu, has provided this court. It has a hospital seal and has been verified, by the agent here, as the legal birth record for this child. You and your wife's names are not listed as the parents. What have you to say about this matter? You have already perjured yourself, Mr. Berkhart, I would think hard about repeating that offense. I can only advise you to seek legal counsel in this matter."

"I have no idea where Agent Karhu got this information, Your Honor. I can only guess that the man is a personal friend of Aaron and Laura Palmer. I'm sure he'd do anything to change your verdict. My wife did, in fact, give birth to Michelle—"

"Oh, for God's sake, stop it, Ken. This farce has gone on long enough," Donna Berkhart snapped, setting Amie firmly down on the seat next to her. "That constant crying is getting on my nerves. Your Honor, we did nothing illegal. Yes, we adopted Michelle, but we did it secretly to protect the child from the crazed press. We continued with that secret to protect Michelle. We admit she's adopted in this court and we can no longer protect her from those vultures. With that in mind, I'm sure you can see why we said we are her real parents. Surely you can't hold us in contempt with our good intentions, Your Honor."

"Silence! Have no fear, Mrs. Berkhart. You will get your chance, in court, to explain why you lied, presented falsified papers, and tried to make a mockery of my court."

Laura watched as Amie pulled her legs up, coiling her body away from the woman. Laura witnessed her daughter's fear and immediately stood in unison with Aaron, both heading toward the child they considered theirs.

"Mr. and Mrs. Palmer, feel free to reclaim your daughter. It angers this court to see how this child was used as a pawn merely for the Berkharts' personal gain. Watching Amie, I see no evidence of parental love from the Berkharts toward this child."

Aaron didn't give Laura a chance to move. He fled to sweep Amie into his arms.

"Daddy!" Amie cried, gripping his neck in a choking hold.

Laura watched them return to her. They sat, clinging together, crying uncontrollably.

"Mamma!" she laughed, crawling onto Laura's lap.

Laura thought how quickly a child recovered from an upset when returned to the protective, loving arms of her parents.

"Yes, pumpkin, you're back," she whispered. She glanced at Aaron and knew they were a family again. It didn't seem possible, but she wasn't going to tempt fate by questioning it. She offered a quick, silent prayer of thanks, and smiled through her tears.

"Might I add, Your Honor, that my witness, Dr. Allen Jennings, has agreed to come forward and testify to this fact, if need be," Dan added. "May I also point out, Your Honor, that Dr. Jennings has other pertinent information that I think this court will find interesting. I felt a need to bring this information to your attention at this moment, Your Honor, before a grave injustice was done to the Palmers. I apologize for not getting this information to State Attorney Palmer and his associates sooner, but Dr. Jennings agreed to turn States Evidence only a short time ago," Dan stated, a smile sneaking at the corners of his mouth.

Laura kissed Amie's cheek and offered her daughter a Green Bay Packer football doll to play with. Doris had brought it when they came for the trial. Mothers were always prepared, she thought with a smile.

"In view of the documents presented by Agent Dan Karhu, I reverse my previous decision. I hereby grant sole custody and finalize the legal adoption of Amie to Laura and Aaron Palmer. This decision is final and all records will be sealed, so this family will fear no reoccurrence of this type of legal action again."

A burst of cheering and crying filled the courtroom. Laura sat stunned; afraid she dreamed it all. She looked into Aaron's eyes and knew it was true. They had their daughter back. Amie was their daughter. Nothing would threaten that fact ever again.

"Bailiff, I want Donna and Ken Berkhart detained by this court. They will be held until such time they are able to consult with their attorneys. Formal charges will be brought against them by the end of this week. This court is adjourned." Judge Turner stood, then leaned over the bench toward the microphone, "Might I add, congratulations to Mr. and Mrs. Palmer and of course to Amie, too!"

One Year later:

"Amie, come in and wash up for dinner," Laura called out through the patio screen door.

"I finished my list," Aaron announced.

Laura looked over her shoulder at him. "What list?"

"Our list of things we can't forget to do. Like we need to write Anna Wild Wind and tell her Ryan has found some very interesting things when he checked into the theft and selling of Indian artifacts. He'll be getting together with her and Grandfather in about two weeks. I really like the remodel she did with the money we sent her."

"I agree. I think the three of us need to pay them a visit. I have some things I'd like to talk over with Grandfather. Did you know Ryan and the boys are going fishing with Grandfather over the Forth of July?"

"Well, that's something I've been meaning to talk to you about. I think we should go, too. Amie has been practicing tossing out that fishing line for weeks. We could use a weekend of fishing, don't you think?"

"Sounds like fun. Why don't you tell Ryan I'll go if Doris goes? Do you think he'll raise enough ruckus for the courts to take action against the theft of Indian artifacts?"

"His prosecution of those three doctors gave him some real recognition and clout in the legal world. I'm glad; he handled it brilliantly. He's a force to reckon with now. I think he'll be doing some great things in the future." Aaron admitted, reaching around her to sneak a piece of chicken from the pan. "Incredible!" He smacked his lips. "Ryan said Dan and Brett have uncovered some pretty incriminating data. Guess they were out at the site a month ago and took pictures of these guys digging up old remains. I don't think it'll stop there. Ryan said he's even going after the people who purchased the stolen artifacts. It's going to be big!"

Laura released a slow breath. "Everything Ryan does is big!" she laughed. "I still can't believe Dan retired from the FBI and went into business with Brett."

"Ryan said he has colleagues all over the States who will use their services. They'll have so much work they'll never have to worry about a lack of clients. Oh, that reminds me,

we're invited over to Dan's for a picnic on Sunday. You're to bring those won ton things Doris taught you how to make."

"I'm glad you thought of telling me. Did it occur to you that Sunday is tomorrow? I need time to plan these things, Aaron."

"I'm sorry, I forgot. I've been working on the promotional fliers for the new arrow release. It just slipped my mind. How about I help you make them? Would that get me out of the dog house?"

"Are we getting a dog house, Daddy?" Amie asked, coming into the house. "Why do we need a dog house? We don't have a dog. Are we getting a dog?" she asked, excitement washed over her face.

Laura shook her head in a positive, absolutely *no* gesture. She shot Aaron a warning glare.

"Well, not for some time, Pumpkin. But we might consider it an option for when you get bigger and can feed and take care of one," Aaron smoothed over.

Laura smiled, relieved. "What else is on that list of yours?" she asked, adding a touch of sugar and soy sauce to the mixture.

"I still wonder who put that picture in my briefcase. I'll bet —"

"Don't, Aaron," Laura interrupted. "It was done as a courtesy, a kindness. Don't embarrass the person by seeking him or her out. It's better this way."

"Maybe you're right. Back to my list. Would it be an embarrassment if we sent a bouquet of flowers and a nice note of thanks to that nurse Suzie Bryce?" Aaron asked.

Laura turned to face him. "That's sweet. Who said men couldn't be sensitive?" she teased.

"It's not sensitive, it's practical. Without her testimony, the nurses and doctors who assisted Dr. Henderson in his operation would never have been convicted. She did the right thing by stepping forward. It took guts and I admire the woman. I'm glad you two have become friends."

"Me, too. Besides, her kids love playing with Amie. Speaking of Amie," Laura said, looking around the kitchen. "Amie, get back in here. You can play after you eat," she called out the patio door again. "Ever since you put that sand box in, she won't step a foot in this house except to eat and sleep."

"Say, Mrs. Palmer, did you save that important paper for us to open together?" Aaron asked, slipping his hands around her, grasping a breast in each palm and squeezing slightly.

"Aaron, Amie might see," she squealed, laughing.

"So, what if she does? The girl has to learn loving parents tease and touch. It's healthy," he added.

Laura reached into her pocket and pulled out a sealed envelope. "You sure you want to do it this way?" she asked, certain *never* would be too soon.

"What better time or place? I love a kitchen. My mother always says it smells of good food and is the center of the home. Yes. Let's do it now and here," he teased, kissing her neck and biting just enough to make her gasp.

"I'm here, Mamma. What you doing?" she asked, climbing up the steps of her *big-girl* chair.

"We're opening an envelope," Aaron explained. "It's a family envelope, so you know what that means?" he asked, tickling the back of her neck with the tip of her shiny, blonde ponytail.

"It's for all of us. Oh, boy. Is it a surprise?" she asked, looking up at them. "Well, if your mother ever opens it, it could be," he said, staring at her.

Laura wet her dry lips. Her hands trembled as she tore the end open. She paused, glanced at Aaron, then down at Amie. "I guess it really doesn't matter, does it? I have you both, and I'm perfectly happy with that. Here," she said, handing the envelope over to Aaron. "You give us the news, your girls are waiting."

Aaron pulled the crisp white sheet free, then leaned toward Laura. "Yippee! Yahoo! I can't believe it!" he shouted, twirling Laura around in his arms.

"Daddy, what is it?" Amie asked, a big smile across her face.

"What is it? Why it's the best news our family could have," Aaron shouted, grabbing her into his arms and twirling her, too. "You're going to have a baby sister or a baby brother! That's what it is!"

"Wow! I want a baby brother. I can be his little mommy!" Amie stated, settling back into her chair.

Laura stared at the pregnancy test results and never believed she'd ever read the words *positive*. She cried, filled with happiness and excitement. She thought she'd feel so happy for herself, but instead, she felt incredibly happy for Aaron and Amie. She'd deliberately not taken a home pregnancy test for fear it would be wrong and give her false hope. When she had the test done at the doctor's office, she asked for the results to be put in an envelope so she and Aaron could look at it together.

"Well, what do you think, Little Mother?" Aaron asked. "You going to start complaining about being fat and ugly? I've heard nightmares about pregnant women and their mood swings and strange eating habits. Lord, what have I gotten myself into?" he teased.

"You just wait, Mr. Daddy! Three in the morning feedings are sweet revenge," she retorted. "Now sit down and eat your dinner before it gets cold."

"Yes, ma'am," he responded, pausing to kiss her long and deep enough to make her legs weak.

She pretended annoyance as she turned to fill a dish with Chinese fried rice, Doris's recipe of course. She placed the fry pan back on the stove and stood thinking how exciting it would be to share the news with Doris and Ryan, Mother Palmer, Sharon and Brett.

Laura paused, covering her mouth with shaking fingertips. Tears filled her eyes. She was pregnant. Aaron's baby grew inside her. She would share the baby's growth with Amie and Aaron. He or she was going to be one loved baby.

Laura felt Aaron's warm arms pulling her back into his chest. He slid his palms to rest on her flat stomach.

"I'm happy, too," he whispered in her ear.

The End