

*Love Inspired*  
**SUSPENSE**  
RIVETING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

# WHAT SARAH SAW

MARGARET  
DALEY

WITHOUT A TRACE WITHOUT A TRACE



## **“Jocelyn, I need you to help me with this case.”**

“Why?” That meant spending even more time with Sam.

“We always made a good team,” Sam said.

They had worked well together until that last case, when everything fell apart. The one person she'd needed to read was Sam, and she had failed. But she'd have to help Sam in order to find her missing friend.

In less than a week her peaceful existence had shattered. Her past had walked right into her present, rousing memories of her time in New Orleans. The cold embedded even deeper into her bones. Would she never be rid of the feeling of being lost?

\* \* \*

**WITHOUT A TRACE: Will a young mother's disappearance  
bring a bayou town together...or tear it apart?**

*What Sarah Saw*—Margaret Daley January 2009

*Framed!*—Robin Carroll February 2009

*Cold Case Murder*—Shirlee McCoy March 2009

*A Cloud of Suspicion*—Patricia Davids April 2009

*Deadly Competition*—Roxanne Rustand May 2009

*Her Last Chance*—Terri Reed June 2009

## Books by Margaret Daley

### Love Inspired Suspense

*Hearts on the Line*  
*Heart of the Amazon*  
*So Dark the Night*  
*Vanished*

*Buried Secrets*  
*Don't Look Back*  
*Forsaken Canyon*  
*What Sarah Saw*

---

### Love Inspired

*The Power of Love*  
*Family for Keeps*  
*Sadie's Hero*  
*The Courage to Dream*  
*What the Heart Knows*  
*A Family for Tory*  
*\*Gold in the Fire*  
*\*A Mother for Cindy*

*\*Light in the Storm*  
*The Cinderella Plan*  
*\*When Dreams*  
*Come True*  
*\*Tidings of Joy*  
*\*\*Once Upon a Family*  
*\*\*Heart of the Family*  
*\*\*Family Ever After*  
*A Texas Thanksgiving*

*\*The Ladies of*  
*Sweetwater Lake*  
*\*\*Fostered by Love*

## MARGARET DALEY

feels she has been blessed. She has been married more than thirty years to her husband, Mike, whom she met in college. He is a terrific support and her best friend. They have one son, Shaun. Margaret has been writing for many years and loves to tell a story. When she was a little girl, she would play with her dolls and make up stories about their lives. Now she writes these stories down. She especially enjoys weaving stories about families and how faith in God can sustain a person when things get tough. When she isn't writing, she is fortunate to be a teacher for students with special needs. Margaret has taught for over twenty years and loves working with her students. She has also been a Special Olympics coach and participated in many sports with her students.

# WHAT SARAH SAW

MARGARET  
DALEY



Steeple  
Hill®

Published by Steeple Hill Books™

Special thanks and acknowledgment to Margaret Daley  
for her contribution to the Without a Trace miniseries.

Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at his holy  
hill; for the Lord our God is holy.

—*Psalms* 99:9



To the other authors of the Without a Trace series:  
Robin, Shirlee, Pat, Roxanne and Terri.

Y'all were wonderful to work with. Thanks!

## PROLOGUE

A patrol car was parked on Main Street in front of Farley's Pawn Shop. Approaching her office across the street, Dr. Jocelyn Gold shivered in the cool January air, remembering the same scene only five days before—when Earl Farley had been found dead, an apparent suicide, in his office right below his apartment on the second floor.

Was the sheriff's department completing its investigation into Earl's death? Sheriff Bradford Reed hadn't been very supportive when Earl died, but then the Farleys didn't belong to the elite of Loomis. After the deputy left, she'd call Leah, Earl's wife, to offer to come over if she needed someone to talk to.

Jocelyn pushed her office door open and entered, hoping everything was all right with Leah, who had instantly renewed their friendship from high school when Jocelyn had returned to town nine months ago. Quickly, she crossed to the window and opened the blinds to allow sunlight to pour into the room. After being gone for two days to speak at a conference in New Orleans on counseling children who were victims of crime, she was accosted by the musty smell of the closed office.

The blinking light on her phone drew her attention. When she played her messages, Leah's voice blared from the



speaker. "Jocelyn, I need to see you. I've made a mess of everything. I'll catch you when you get back tomorrow."

Her neighbor's frantic tone heightened Jocelyn's concern. She placed a call to Leah's apartment. What was going on? A new development in Earl's death?

*Please, Leah, pick up.*

On the fifth ring a gruff-sounding man answered with, "Hello."

The rough voice snatched any words from Jocelyn's mind for a few seconds.

"Who's this?" the man demanded.

She tightened her hand around the receiver. "Dr. Jocelyn Gold," she said with as much authority as she could muster.

"Sheriff Reed. Why are you calling, Dr. Gold?"

"Leah's a friend. What happened? Is she all right?"

"We don't know. She's disappeared."

Jocelyn jerked up straight. "Disappeared? When? I saw her on Friday right before I left." Her friend had urged her to go and speak at the conference, that she had Shelby and Clint to support her while Jocelyn was gone a couple days.

"She's been gone hardly a day."

"Foul play?"

"Don't know. Her brother seems to think so."

Jocelyn instantly thought of Leah's three-year-old daughter. "Where's Sarah?"

"Clint Herald has her."

Leah's brother had her daughter. Relief trembled through Jocelyn. "You might want to come listen to my recorder. She left me a message. She sounded frightened."

"You're at your office?"

Jocelyn sagged back against her oak desk, all energy draining from her. "Yes. I'll be here catching up on some paperwork."

“I’ll stop by after I’ve finished up here.”

Even after the sheriff hung up, Jocelyn held the phone to her ear for a few extra seconds. *Where’s Leah? Is she okay? Does this have something to do with Earl taking his own life?*

*In spite of Leah’s urging, I shouldn’t have gone. If I had been here, maybe she wouldn’t be missing. I let her down.*

She’d come back to Loomis to get away from crime. When she’d worked with the New Orleans police as a consultant dealing with traumatized children, the stress made her long for a more laid-back place to live and a job where she wasn’t bombarded constantly with the horrors people could inflict on children.

Memories she had previously refused to think about inundated her with the suddenness of a summer thunderstorm sweeping in from the Gulf of Mexico. She couldn’t hold them at bay. Legs quivering, she slid down the front of the desk to the hardwood floor.

*I let someone else down and he died. Please don’t let it be happening again.* A tear slipped from one eye and rolled down her cheek. She wiped it away, determined not to revisit her past. But the images of the lost child—and of her friend Leah—haunted her.

## ONE

Several hours later, Jocelyn dropped her pen, her hand aching from writing up her clients' notes in their files. Glancing toward the window, she saw the patrol car still in front of the pawnshop. She stood, stretching her arms above her and rolling her head to ease the tension in her neck.

A knock sounded and sent her whirling around toward the door. She stared at it, not moving an inch. This time someone pounded against the wood, prodding her forward. She hurried from her office into the reception area and peered out the peephole. The sight of Sam Pierce stunned her. She hadn't seen him in months—not since she'd worked that child kidnapping in New Orleans with him. It hadn't ended well, and they hadn't parted on good terms.

Sam pivoted to leave. Quickly Jocelyn unlatched the lock and pulled the door open.

Halting, the over six-foot FBI agent glanced back at her. Dressed in a black suit with a red tie, dark hair cut short, he fixed her with his intense stare, his tanned features making a mockery of the cool January weather.

"Jocelyn, it's good to see you again."

The formality in his voice made her wonder if he was only trying to be polite.

"I'd like to have a word with you. Sheriff Reed said that Leah Farley left a message on your answering machine. I'd like to listen to it."

"The FBI is working Leah's disappearance?"

"Yes." He took a step forward, forcing her to move to the side to allow him into the office.

"Really. I got the impression from the sheriff that he didn't think Leah had met with foul play. I'm surprised he requested your assistance."

"The mayor did. I don't believe the sheriff was too happy, but he's cooperating."

"Good, because I don't think Leah would run away and leave her daughter behind. She adores her."

"So you knew her well. Professionally or personally?" He wore a no-nonsense facade as if they hadn't dated for four months right before she had moved to Loomis. As if he hadn't saved her life once.

Jocelyn waved Sam toward the chair in front of her desk in her office. She sat in hers behind it, biding her time while she gathered her composure. As a psychologist, she'd learned to suppress any emotions she might experience in order to deal with a client's problem. His presence strained that skill.

"Personally. We're neighbors." She knew she was stating the obvious, but Sam's intense stare unnerved her, as though he remembered their time together but not fondly. He was one of the reasons she had come to Loomis nine months ago to open a private practice and teach a few classes at Loomis College.

Grinning, Sam threw a glance at the pawnshop across the street and said in a teasing tone, "Yes, I can see." Then as though he realized he'd slipped too quickly into a casual, friendliness toward her, he stiffened, the smile gone.

His sudden change pricked her curiosity. He didn't like

this any more than she did. That realization made getting through the interview a little easier. She relaxed the tensed set of her shoulders.

When she had started seeing Sam in New Orleans, she had known it wasn't wise to date someone she had to work with from time to time in volatile, intense situations. Being a consultant on kidnapping cases where children were involved had thrown them together over the course of the year he'd been in the Big Easy.

Jocelyn gripped the edge of her desk. "Look, I'm happy to let you hear the recording, and I'll help in any other way I can, but I insist on us putting our former relationship in the past where it belongs." Their relationship started when Sam rescued her from a patient's father who tried to kill her, and it fell apart when they worked together on a kidnapping case that ended violently. Brutality had surrounded her in New Orleans. She thought she'd escaped it by coming to Loomis.

"Do you mean it? You'll help with this case? Because I was thinking we need someone with your experience." His frosty gaze melted a few degrees.

Although she now worked with all ages, in missing-persons cases she'd dealt only with the children involved. "Well, yes. I'll help. But since children are my specialty, I'm not sure how..." She drew in a deep breath. "Sarah. You want me to work with Leah's daughter?"

Sam nodded. "I think the key to Leah's disappearance may be wrapped up in her husband's suicide, so I'll be looking into that, too. Were you aware that Sarah might have witnessed her father's death?"

Leah's heartbeat quickened. Poor little Sarah!

Leah swallowed and said, "I hadn't heard that before I had to leave or I wouldn't have left. I thought Sarah was asleep

upstairs in her bedroom. Earl shot himself downstairs in his office in the store.”

“Apparently Leah’s brother told the sheriff his sister was beginning to think that Sarah might have seen or heard something from a couple of things the child said to her mother.”

“What?”

“Clint didn’t know. Leah left Sarah with him before he could question her further about it.”

“That poor child.”

“I need to know what she knows.”

“She’s only three. It may be very little. Have you talked with Clint? The sheriff said that Sarah is staying with him.”

“No, but I’m heading out to his house to interview him after I leave here. I want you to come along and assess Sarah.”

Just like old times—unpleasant ones. Don’t go there. *Why, Lord, are you doing this?* “Do you want to hear the message?”

“Yes.”

“I’d give you the tape, but I use an answering service.” The second time she heard it Jocelyn was even more convinced Leah was in trouble. Was it due to her husband’s suicide or something else? Where did Sarah fit into this? Had the child heard or seen something she shouldn’t have?

“Why would she call you? Isn’t Shelby Mason her closest friend?”

“My, you have been busy. How long have you been in town?”

“A few hours.” He captured her gaze, intensity pouring off of him. “You aren’t seeing Leah professionally, are you?”

Clenching her teeth, she curled her hand around her pen until it dug into her palm. “No. We’re friends, but lately she has used me more and more as a sounding board when something’s bothering her.”

“What was she bothered by, and don’t tell me it’s confidential because she isn’t a client.”

“Her marriage. She and Earl were having trouble.”

“The kind that could drive her to kill her husband and leave her child?”

“I told you I can’t see Leah doing anything like that.”

“Leave her child or murder her husband?”

“Both.” Before she snapped her pen in half, Jocelyn placed it on top of the folder she was working on.

“You, better than most, know that when people are pushed too far, they are capable of doing something you’d never think they could.” Sam rose, hovering in front of her desk. “Will you come with me to Clint Herald’s?”

She wanted to say no, not be dragged into the seedy side of life that had taken up so much of her time in New Orleans, but she couldn’t. Leah was a friend. Shelby, Leah and she had once been a tight threesome in high school. What if she was in trouble and needed her help? “Yes.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

The formal tone returned to his voice and bearing, and she grasped it like a life preserver. So long as he kept things professional, she would be able to help Leah—that was, if she could keep herself from remembering her and Sam’s past relationship.

She locked her office and trailed him to the parking lot at the side of the building. He headed for his black nondescript sedan.

“I’ll drive myself.” Jocelyn paused a few feet from her yellow T-bird.

Over the top of his vehicle he studied her for a moment, then shrugged. “Suit yourself. I’ll follow you, since I’m not familiar with Loomis.”

When she pulled out onto Main Street, she noticed the sheriff coming out of the pawnshop with several plastic bags,

probably full of evidence. Seeing them brought to mind the other child from her past—the one she hadn't been able to save.

His hands tight on the steering wheel, Sam kept sight of the yellow Thunderbird a few yards in front of him. He'd known that Jocelyn had left New Orleans for a job in a Louisiana town north of the city, but he hadn't been prepared to see her again today—and worse, needing to work with her.

Being with her brought back the memories of the last case they'd handled together. For several seconds the image of the little five-year-old boy's body, bruised and beaten, and the horror on Jocelyn's face at the sight flashed across his mind like a strobe light. Jocelyn's reaction drew his own repulsion to the foreground. He'd almost quit his job.

He gripped the wheel until his hands ached. He hadn't found the child in time, and that would haunt him for the rest of his life. It flashed in his mind alongside his own younger brother's face the last time he'd seen him twenty-five years ago.

He shook his head to clear the disturbing images as Jocelyn turned into the driveway of an older two-story house with huge oaks dripping Spanish moss standing sentinel in front. Parking behind her, Sam shut down his thoughts of the past. He couldn't let anything cloud his judgment while working the case. He'd concentrate on solving it soon and be gone from Loomis.

After joining Jocelyn on the porch, he leaned around her and pressed the bell. She kept her gaze trained forward, the silence between them taut. Her faint scent of vanilla tempted him with memories. The sight of her long blond hair, free from the usual clasp at her nape, billowing about her shoulders or the feel of her soft hand in his...

A click wrenched him back to the present. Relieved when the door opened to reveal a large man with dark features and a grim



expression on his face, Sam pulled out his badge. "I'm Special Agent Pierce with the FBI. I'm here to look into your sister's disappearance and wonder if we could have a word with you."

"I'm glad someone is finally taking this seriously. I couldn't get the sheriff to listen to me yesterday when I told him that Leah wouldn't leave Sarah unless something bad had happened to her." Clint stepped to the side to allow them into his house. "Come in. And hi, Jocelyn. I was just about to put Sarah down for a late nap. I'll take care of that and then we can talk."

"I thought Jocelyn could inter—talk with your niece."

"Why? Sarah was here when Leah went missing."

"But Sarah was at the apartment at the time of her father's death." Sam stuffed his badge back into his pocket.

"She's only three. She can't tell you anything!" Clint's voice roughened as he shifted his gaze to something behind Sam.

Sam glanced back. A little girl with blond hair and sea-green almond-shaped eyes came out of a room and rocketed toward them. Holding a blanket and sucking her thumb, Sarah latched on to her uncle's leg and buried her face against him, occasionally peeking up at Jocelyn.

"Clint, I'd love to put Sarah down for a nap. She's stayed with me some when Leah needed a sitter. That way you and Sam can talk."

"But, she—" Clint settled his hand on Sarah's shoulder as though he would keep her glued to his side.

"Don't worry. Sarah and I are good buddies."

Clint stared at Jocelyn for a long moment, then nodded. "I know."

She knelt next to the little girl and held out her hand. "Sarah, I'd love to see your room. Will you show me?"

The child clung to her uncle for a few more seconds, then

walked over to Jocelyn. Jocelyn rose with Sarah in her arms. "Which way?"

Clutching her blanket, Leah's daughter took her thumb out of her mouth and pointed toward the staircase.

Jocelyn left Sam alone with Clint, who watched his niece disappear up the stairs. Sam knew firsthand how traumatic it was when a family member went missing. That was why he was part of the Missing Persons Unit, although at times it was painful not to provide a happy ending to each case.

"Let's go in here," Clint said, gesturing toward his den, tension threaded through each word. "Leah and Sarah are all the family I have left. I'm glad my call to the mayor produced results because Sheriff Reed wasn't doing anything."

Sam folded his long length into a chair across from the couch and took out his notepad. "Tell me about the day Leah dropped off Sarah for you to watch her."

Clint stared toward the entry hall as though Leah were still standing there with Sarah and he could erase the past thirty hours. "The last time I saw my sister, she was acting a little strange. She was fidgety and talking fast as though she was anxious or afraid of something. At the time I thought it was because of Earl's suicide, but now I don't know. I should have questioned my sister more before she left."

"What did she say to you?"

Another long pause, then Clint swung his attention to Sam. "She said she had some business to take care of and wouldn't be gone long. She was worried that Sarah had seen something when Earl killed himself. When she said the word *business*, she said it with such firmness. I got the feeling she was confirming something in her mind."

"She didn't say who she was meeting or what Sarah had seen?"

“No, and before I could ask, she kissed Sarah goodbye and thrust her into my arms, then hurried away.” Clint dragged his hand through his hair. “I thought at first she was just running late, but when she didn’t come back to pick up Sarah, I knew something was wrong. I’ve called her cell phone repeatedly, but it goes straight to voice mail.”

“What did you do next?”

“I called her friends, the hospital, highway patrol and the sheriff after putting Sarah down early last night. I didn’t want her to know what was going on.”

“There’s nothing else?”

Again he plowed his fingers through his hair. “You don’t know how many times I’ve wished there was something else. A lead. A hint. Anything.”

Sam pulled a business card from his inside coat pocket. “If you remember anything else, please call me. That’s my cell number. I’m setting up an office at the sheriff’s station. I’ll be staying at the Loomis Hotel while working on this case.”

Clint flinched at the word *case*.

“I’ll find your sister,” Sam said. What he didn’t add was that when he found Leah, he couldn’t guarantee she would still be alive. But Sam would find her—one way or the other. He never wanted a family to go through what his had—what Sam still went through when he allowed himself to remember.

When Jocelyn entered Clint’s spare bedroom upstairs tucked under the eaves, she noticed the profusion of toys and items that had to belong to Sarah since Clint was single and childless. Next to the double bed sat a box of dolls with their accessories. Perfect.

Jocelyn sat cross-legged on the hardwood floor and patted the area rug beside her for Sarah to join her. “I’ve seen you playing with a couple of these. Will you tell me their names?”

Sarah's eyes brightened as she plopped next to Jocelyn. She carefully laid her pink ballerina blanket down on the rug, then picked up the top doll. "Madison." The child hugged the blond-haired baby to her chest.

"Which one is your favorite?"

Sarah rummaged in the box until she pulled out a doll with red hair. Her wide gaze fixed on the baby's head.

Suddenly the child paled and dropped it. Screams erupted from her while tears welled in her green eyes.

## TWO

Shocked for a second from the abrupt change in Sarah, Jocelyn froze, then suddenly scooped the little girl into her arms. “Honey, what’s wrong?”

Instead of replying, Sarah just shook her head and cried, most unusual for a child who usually talked nonstop. The three-year-old had her face against Jocelyn’s neck and clenched her tightly. Sarah’s sobs continued, the sound muffled against Jocelyn’s shoulder.

“Sarah, it’s okay. You’re safe,” she said in a calm, soothing voice while she stroked the child’s back.

The door pushed open as Sarah wailed, “Don’t like. Don’t like.”

Clint started across the bedroom. Jocelyn stopped him with a raised hand and a small shake of her head. Sam stayed by the entrance, his expression stoic. That was the man she’d gotten to know in New Orleans and had finally come to the conclusion she couldn’t break through his barriers.

“Honey, what don’t you like?” The soft touch of Jocelyn’s hand and her steady tone helped Sarah begin to calm down.

The young girl lifted her head and through blurry eyes stared at Jocelyn. Her breath wavered as she drew in air, and she sniffled.

Jocelyn waited, aware of Clint hovering close, concern puckering his brow.

“Don’t like Ashley now.” Sarah raised a trembling hand and pointed at the doll lying on the top.

“Why don’t you like Ashley?”

Sniveling, the child popped her thumb into her mouth and lowered her head.

“Sarah?”

“Just don’t,” the little girl mumbled, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“That’s okay. I can put Ashley away, and you won’t have to see her.” Jocelyn reached around Sarah for the doll, but her uncle picked it up first and stuffed it under the other toys in the box, then hefted the container.

“Princess, I’ll take care of it. You don’t have to see Ashley anymore.”

The child watched her uncle take his load out into the hallway. He returned a few seconds later, his arms empty. Sarah leaped to her feet and raced across the room, propelling herself at him.

Clint swept the three-year-old into his embrace. “Why don’t I read you a story?”

“I want Mommy. Where’s Mommy?”

“She’s gone away on business, but she wanted me to take care of you until she came home.” Smoothing the child’s blond hair from her face, Clint moved toward the bed and placed his niece on the rose-colored coverlet.

As he twisted around, Jocelyn stepped closer and murmured, “If you need me, call anytime, day or night. I’ll come right over. I’ll talk to you later.”

He nodded once, then picked up Winnie-the-Pooh on the nightstand and sat beside his niece.

Jocelyn backed up toward the entrance, hesitating at the door. She didn't want to leave, but Clint needed time with Sarah. She'd phone in a while and try to persuade him to let her see the little girl again. Everything wasn't fine with Sarah. Supposedly she'd been in her room sleeping when Earl killed himself downstairs. But what if she hadn't? What could she have seen? And why, all of sudden, didn't she like her favorite doll?

Outside on the porch Sam grasped Jocelyn's arm, stopping her procession to the sidewalk. She stiffened at the touch, so familiar to her at one time.

He immediately dropped his hand. "What do you make of that scene with Sarah? Why did the doll frighten her so much? Do you think she knows something?"

"Whoa." She descended to the sidewalk, wanting to get away from the house. "I intend to talk with Clint about Sarah seeing me tomorrow. I think something has spooked her. The last time I talked with Leah she said Sarah had been asleep in her bedroom when Earl killed himself. Sarah seemed unaffected by his death. Leah didn't think she really understood that her daddy was gone." She glanced at the front door. "But now, I think there's more going on. I think what Leah told Clint is true. Something's definitely not right here. That was one of her favorite dolls. She loved playing with it."

"You need to find out. A woman has disappeared and may be in trouble."

The urgency in his voice heightened her own. "I'll do my best, but Sam, I'll do it my way. Sometimes there's nothing I can do to speed the process, especially when a child's involved."

"I know." He clenched his jaw, a faraway look entering his eyes.

"I tried my best with that last case in New Orleans. The two friends who witnessed the abduction were suppressing their memories." If she said it enough, maybe she would believe it. She should have been able to do something to help the kidnapped child.

She pivoted to escape, a flood of emotions washing over her. Guilt that she couldn't get the description of the man in time to help the FBI stop him. Anger that Sam had backed so far away from her right after the boy's body was found. And still, after all the cases she'd helped with, horror that someone could do that to a child.

"Jocelyn, I'm sorry." Sam caught up with her at her car. "That kidnapping isn't something I want us to rehash."

"You're right, because I won't let you make me feel any worse than I already do." She swung around to open her car door, tears blurring her vision. She fumbled with the handle, wishing that time would remove the guilt, that she hadn't become so emotionally involved in the case.

Sam captured her hand and turned her around toward him. "It wasn't your fault. I never felt that way." He searched her face. "Did you think that I did?"

"What else was I to think when you wouldn't return my calls? I didn't hear from you for weeks." Then when she finally did, he wasn't the same man.

He peered away. "I was having a hard time coping with the case and its final—result."

*And you thought I wasn't?*

"We can't change the past. We need to focus on what happened to Leah."

Although his words were formal, distancing, there was nothing like that in his expression, full of a vulnerability she'd never seen. Regret, mixed with the need to protect herself,



tightened her throat. Suddenly, Sam looked directly at her, his eyes softening.

“Come to dinner with me. I know it’s a little early, but I don’t want to eat alone. Besides, we were always good together at bouncing ideas around on a case.”

Yes, the case. If she could help him solve Leah’s disappearance, Sam would leave. She wanted her friend Leah back and Sam gone from her life. Maybe dinner would hasten that process. “Fine.”

“I saw a restaurant not far from the pawnshop. I know how much you like Italian. Let’s go there.”

“It’s our best restaurant and pretty pricey.”

He smiled, more relaxed now. “Only the best for you.”

She actually blushed, the heat scoring her cheeks. Only Sam could do that to her. He still had power over her, and that scared her more than she cared to admit, even to herself. “I’ll meet you there.”

“Do we need reservations?”

“It’s five. I don’t think there’ll be a huge crowd at this time.”

“You never know. People could come from New Orleans. We’re not that far away,” he said with a chuckle.

Jocelyn opened her car door, gripping the top of it. “It depends on how fast you drive. Some can make it in forty-five minutes. Others at least an hour.”

“And which one are you?” A gleam danced in his eyes.

She slid into the driver’s seat, giving him a saucy grin, although somewhat forced because his look made her legs go weak. “I’m not telling. You’re part of law enforcement, and I don’t want a ticket. But let’s just say I don’t have a fast car for nothing.”

“I won’t tell.” His laughter spiced the air as he made his way to his sedan.

Jocelyn glanced at his retreating back, remembering the two of them together in the French Quarter, holding hands, then strolling on the Riverwalk that ran along the Mississippi River. She'd just started dating Sam, and their relationship was slowly moving from a business to a personal one. She wanted to know everything about him, but now looking back, she was the only one who talked about anything of substance. He was great at pulling information from her, but he never revealed much about his life before the FBI. She trusted him with her dreams and goals, and he betrayed it after that last case.

She started her car and took the lead back to Main Street, finding a parking space near the entrance. This dinner would be just a dinner. It was a means to an end, nothing more than a way to help Sam solve the case so he could leave.

Her resolve fortified, Jocelyn hurried toward the front where Sam waited for her. He opened the door and allowed her to go first into the restaurant. Scanning the dimly lit, intimate surroundings before her, she slowed her pace.

*What would he say if I turned around and left? Why didn't I realize this place wouldn't be appropriate for a strictly professional relationship? Because I wasn't thinking, that's why. Sam does that to me.*

Reluctantly, she continued to follow the maître d' to a table set with a snow-white linen cloth, crystal stemware, gold flatware and fine china with a beige-and-ivory pattern. A glittering gold candle on a glass pedestal sat in the center, sending off alarm bells and a flurry of memories of past dinners in quaint, out-of-the-way restaurants in New Orleans.

"I can't stay long. I need to call Clint," she said as she took the ivory-padded chair the maître d' pulled out.

Sam didn't reply until after the waiter in a black tuxedo re-

cited the specials and wrote down their order. "I want you to work with Sarah to find out if she witnessed anything. Something doesn't feel right here. I had Evelyn Nelson, one of the agents I brought with me, look over the report on Earl's death. She called me on the way here."

"Did he commit suicide?"

"Forensics suggest it's not likely from the angle of the shot, but possible. The sheriff is content to let it stand as a suicide. It was Earl's gun, and his fingerprints were the only ones on it. Personally I don't think the man wants to deal with something messy like a murder."

"Sheriff Reed is a good old boy, nearing retirement and ready to spend his days fishing and collecting his pension."

"Yeah, I kinda got that feeling."

Sam's smile melted some of her apprehension. "Did y'all find anything out of place in the apartment or pawnshop?"

"No, everything was neat and tidy. Nothing looked gone. No clothes were missing that we can tell."

"Just as I said. Leah was expecting to come back home. She didn't flee." Her stomach muscles clenched. Her hand holding the water goblet trembled as she lifted it toward her mouth. Leah could be lying dead or hurt somewhere. "It would be easy to get rid of a body in the swampland around Loomis."

"So you don't think this is a kidnapping?"

"No. Why would someone kidnap her? The Farleys didn't have much money. What could someone have against Leah or Earl that would be worth harming them?"

"That's a good question. One of the things that's bothered me about this whole affair is the whereabouts of Leah's car. That points to her leaving, since it hasn't been found."

"What if someone either killed or kidnapped her and didn't want the car to be found?" Jocelyn hated thinking Leah was

kidnapped or dead, but the alternative wasn't great, either. Leah wouldn't have abandoned her daughter.

"True." He shook his napkin out and laid it in his lap. "We'll stay around a few days and see what we can come up with. If nothing materializes, we'll call this a local issue and turn it back over to the sheriff."

She forced a shaky laugh from her lips. "He's not equipped to handle something like this. That's probably why the mayor called y'all."

"Then the state can take over."

Jocelyn leaned toward Sam. "Then Leah may never be found. If she's dead, the family needs to know that, and if by some chance someone has kidnapped her for some unknown reason, then you're the one to find her." Part of her wanted to snatch back her words, but the other part knew Sam and his team were the best prospect of bringing Leah home—dead or alive.

"Let me see what I can come up with," he said in a low voice as the space between them shrunk even more.

When Jocelyn caught a whiff of his lime-scented aftershave, she quickly sat back. "Have you told the sheriff that Earl was probably murdered?"

"He knows I have my doubts about it being a suicide. When we finish, I'm going to the station to review Evelyn's notes and the photos of the scene. If it's murder, that changes things. It raises the questions of who killed Earl and why. The prime suspect will be Leah, and with her disappearance, people will say that she ran away to avoid capture."

"Then they don't know her very well. That isn't Leah. She'll do anything for her daughter."

"Even kill?"

"As I told you earlier, she didn't kill Earl. My friend hasn't

changed over the years I was gone. Granted I've only been back nine months, but I've learned to read people pretty accurately. I have to in my profession." *Then why did I let myself get hurt by Sam? Maybe reading others accurately is only possible when my heart isn't involved.*

The waiter set their salads before them. "Do you need anything else?"

While she shook her head, Sam said, "No." The second the man left, he continued. "What do you think about Sarah being so upset by her doll? Could there be a connection with all that's happened?"

"That's definitely a possibility. I've seen Sarah play with that doll a lot, and she's never done anything like that before. In fact, once she told me it was her favorite. It's almost exactly like the other one she was playing with except it has red hair. The other is blond."

"So the red hair scared her?"

"Maybe. It could be a lot of things."

"The only thing different I saw is the color of the doll's hair. That's got to be something. We don't have much else to go on with Leah's disappearance."

She sighed. "I guess it could be something. Her reaction was more than just deciding suddenly she didn't like the doll. She went pale, and it dropped from her hand." Averting her gaze, Jocelyn stared at the front of the restaurant and noticed how dark it had become outside. "But it might not have anything to do with what's going on. Maybe it's suddenly hitting Sarah what happened to her father. With her mother gone now, too, she's got to be confused. They were so close."

"I need to start somewhere, so will you try and work with Sarah?"

"Yes."

“I’ll review Earl’s case tonight. I’ll check the physical evidence and see what was collected.” He gave her a lopsided grin. “Humor me for the time being. You don’t think Leah could have killed her husband—or run away. So who’s got red hair that’s connected with Leah and Earl? I’ll start with them before looking at others in this town.”

“Well, there’s Shelby Mason, Leah’s best friend. She and Sarah are close, though. Then there’s Vera Peel. She owns the boardinghouse. I’ve often seen her go into the pawnshop, especially over the past month.” Jocelyn picked up her salad fork and speared a few dark greens.

“Anyone else?” After withdrawing his pad from his inside coat pocket, Sam wrote down the two names.

She tried to picture the people who might have something to do with either Leah or Earl. “Angelina Loring is another one. I remember she and Leah were arguing the day before Earl’s death.”

“About what?”

“Leah wouldn’t say, and I couldn’t hear the words. I saw them as I came back from lunch. Neither one was happy with the other.”

“Interesting. I’ll have to pay a visit to Angelina Loring and discover what happened.”

“Oh, I almost forgot. Leah was using Georgia Duffy as a real estate agent. She was showing Leah houses. Leah didn’t want Sarah to grow up in an apartment above a pawnshop. Leah wanted a yard for her to play in and so they could have a dog. Sarah has been wanting a puppy for a year. Her friend has one.” Jocelyn paused a moment, thinking back to a conversation with Leah. “Honestly I wouldn’t have thought about Georgia, except that Leah told me last week she wasn’t happy with the woman.”

“Did she tell you why?”

“Not exactly, but when I came into the shop a couple of weeks ago, Leah and Earl had been fighting about Georgia. She wanted to get another real estate agent while he didn’t. He looked like the cat that swallowed the canary. Earl is a big flirt and Georgia is, too.”

“Okay, you’ve given me four names so far. If you think of anyone else, let me know. I’ll have one of my team check these people out.”

“Sam, the red hair might not have anything to do with Earl’s death. Wait until I have a chance to talk with Sarah again. I might find out more.”

“We don’t have time to wait. Leah’s life could be in the balance, and I don’t have much to go on right now.”

“Getting information from a child, especially one so young, doesn’t occur on a schedule. In fact, it may never happen.”

“Don’t you think I know that better than most?” A closed expression descended over his features.

This was the Sam who had intrigued her so much last year. He was good at shutting his emotions off from others, but she’d thought she could get through his defenses; she had with many reluctant clients. Maybe she should become more like him. Then she might not have so many problems. She wanted to help children, yet dealing with them, especially as victims of crime, was taking its toll on her. She didn’t know how much longer she would last even in a small town like Loomis if she couldn’t grow a thicker skin.

The waiter approached and set their dinners before them. Thankful for the reprieve, Jocelyn drew in a deep breath of the garlic-and-basil-laced air. Her grilled shrimp Caprese over angel-hair pasta and asparagus parmesan made her mouth water. She hadn’t eaten lunch but until this moment hadn’t realized how hungry she was.

After the server left, Sam bowed his head for a moment, then picked up his fork and knife to cut into his *tagliata di manzo con rucola*.

“Do you still go to that little church near your apartment?” Jocelyn said as he began eating.

“Yes, when I’m in New Orleans.” Sam sliced off a piece of his peppered steak. “I know you used to live here for a while. Tell me about Loomis. Help me understand the place.”

“Let’s just say it isn’t your typical warm, friendly Southern town, at least now. The town’s division is more pronounced than when I lived here before. Thankfully Leah and Shelby greeted me the first week I moved back here and went out of their way to include me among their friends. Otherwise this would have been a lonely nine months.”

“So I shouldn’t expect smiles and waves when I walk down Main Street?”

“There are a few friendly people, but many try to emulate the matriarchs of our two prominent families, the Renaults and Pershings. Charla Renault and Lenore Pershing hate each other, hence the town’s division. They put the Hatfields and McCoy feud to shame.”

“Could Leah and Earl have gotten caught up in this feud somehow?”

“I don’t think so. They move in different circles.”

“Has it been hard establishing a new practice?” Sam asked, then sipped his ice water with a lemon slice.

“I became reacquainted with Charla’s daughter, Ava Renault. Being her friend has helped me build a practice fast. There are plenty of people in this town who need help.”

“So it may be difficult to get much out of some of them?”

“Not for you. I’ve seen you at work. You’re very good at interviewing reluctant witnesses.”



He inclined his head. "Thank you. I've seen you, and you aren't too bad yourself."

"What's your first impression of Loomis?"

He angled toward her. "You want to know the truth?"

"Always."

"Creepy." He suddenly pulled back as though he realized he was too close. "But I'll deny it if you tell because I won't get a thing out of anyone if they know I feel that way."

She reflected back to that day she'd arrived in Loomis and had almost left immediately. It had changed in the twelve years since she'd been gone. Or maybe what had changed was her perception, since she was an adult now and viewed things differently. "You just have to look beyond the glares and frowns," she said with a little chuckle. "But if you meet Charla Renault or Lenore Pershing, you'll see why there's a certain tension in the air when you hit the outskirts of the town."

"So they take the feud between their families seriously?"

"Most definitely, although Charla has been at a disadvantage since the car accident. She is confined to a wheelchair. I'm not sure—" laughter drifted to her, and she peered over her shoulder at the couple entering the restaurant "—that's stopped her much."

"Even though you don't think Earl or Leah were caught up somehow in the feud or socially involved with the Renaults or Pershings, did they have anything to do with either family in some other way?"

"Leah used to work for Charla's son, Dylan, four years ago before she became a secretary for the mayor. I imagine that's why the mayor was the one who called you. Leah was—is invaluable to him." She made a small gesture to indicate the couple weaving their way through the maze of tables to a private corner, off to the side of the rest of the customers. "That's Dylan with Angelina Loring."

Impeccably dressed in a charcoal silk suit with a black tie, Dylan waved the waiter away and sat without helping Angelina into her chair. He immediately flipped his menu open, burying his head behind it. His date pouted, glaring at him.

“Ah, one of the redheads I need to interview.”

“She’s a beauty queen and doesn’t let anyone forget that she was Miss Magnolia several years ago. She has her sights on becoming Dylan’s wife, but she has her work cut out for her. I don’t see that man settling down anytime soon.”

Sam chuckled. “You’re a fountain of information, and you’ve only been back nine months.”

“The good people of Loomis love to gossip, and if giving you a sense of the town helps Leah in any way, then I’ll gladly impart what I know.”

Sam peered at the man and woman a few tables over. “Are there any other ties between Earl and Leah and the two prominent families?”

“Other than the fact that Earl paid rent to the Pershings for the building his pawnshop is in, no. They own most of the property along Main Street so being Earl’s landlord isn’t that unusual.”

“There’s not any real connection then?”

“No. They did all go to Loomis High School. I knew many back then. There was definitely—”

Raised voices intruded. Jocelyn glanced toward Dylan and Angelina. The beauty queen shot to her feet, tossing her napkin onto her plate. Tears sprang into her eyes. She said something to Dylan in a fierce whisper that wiped the smug expression from his face. Grabbing her black clutch, she started for the door. Dylan grasped her arm, stilling her exit and drawing her close to him. His words were lost but not the steely look in his eyes. Angelina wrenched her arm from his

clasp and stalked toward the front door with her head held as high as if she were walking down a runway.

Jocelyn shivered as Dylan's hard gaze swept across the other diners, as though daring them to say anything.

Dylan Renault was not a man to cross.

## THREE

The red numbers on the digital clock taunted Jocelyn. 12:15. Ugh!

She rolled over and pounded her frustration into her pillow. The gesture did nothing to alleviate her sleeplessness. Every time she closed her eyes she saw Sam's face. She wasn't ready for him to be back in her life, however briefly, and she certainly didn't want to work a kidnapping case with him, even if the victim wasn't a child.

Releasing a deep breath, she turned and stared at the ceiling. In the darkness shadows danced across it. She wanted—peace.

The phone ringing blasted the quiet. She jerked to a sitting position while fumbling for the receiver on her bedside table.

"Hello."

"Jocelyn. I have evidence that it might definitely have been the red hair on the doll that freaked Sarah out," Sam said without preamble.

"Hello, to you, too—but what evidence?" She swung her legs over the edge of the bed and stood.

"I'm at the station right now and staring at a plastic bag with several strands of red hair in it. They were processed at Earl's crime scene."

“Is there any other hair?”

“There’s some that looks like it might be Earl’s and some that are probably Leah’s. Do you know if many people go into his office?” Excitement, the kind she’d heard before when Sam felt he was on the right track, entered his voice.

“I don’t think he used it much at all. Leah would laugh about how she would clean it every Monday night even though there was hardly anything but dust.”

“Monday, and Earl died on Tuesday, so the office was pretty clean.”

“If Leah followed her usual schedule, probably. I got the feeling Earl liked a tidy place from a few things Leah said to me.”

“Like what?”

“One Saturday we’d planned to do some Christmas shopping in New Orleans. She ended up not going because it was her day to clean the apartment and Earl didn’t want her to go before it was done.” Jocelyn’s throat ached at the thought of the failed outing.

“I’m not liking the picture developing of this man. It doesn’t sound like Leah and Earl had the world’s greatest marriage.”

She didn’t like the image forming in her mind, either. Why hadn’t she suspected something might have been wrong—very wrong? *Because I was running away from my own problems, and I allowed my friend to dismiss any of my concerns.*

“They fought. All married couples do.” Jocelyn squeezed her hand tighter about the phone, another memory intruding. Pressing her lips together, she kept silent about a fight the couple had the weekend before Earl died. Her friend had told Jocelyn about it only because she’d caught Leah crying in the kitchen when she’d brought Sarah back after watching her a few hours.

“You know this could be a reason Leah was involved in Earl’s death.”

His softening tone did nothing to lessen the effects of his statement. *What's wrong with me, Lord? Why can't I help people anymore? That's all I ever wanted to do. If I had been there more for Leah, maybe—*

“Jocelyn, I’m still gonna look into every possibility and that includes the red hair clue. We need to know what Sarah saw.”

“That may never happen.”

“I have a plan that might help us find out.”

Later that day Jocelyn pushed open the door to a room in her office suite. “Sarah, you can play with anything inside here. It’s for the children who come to see me.”

The child’s eyes grew round as though she’d been told she could eat any sweet in the candy store. She raced into the playroom, making a beeline for the miniature kitchen with a play refrigerator, counter, sink and stove. Most of what was in the room was left over from her practice in New Orleans. So far she hadn’t counseled that many children in Loomis.

Sitting cross-legged on the tile floor, Jocelyn watched the little girl explore all the drawers and cabinets in the play kitchen. Sarah found the baby, mommy and daddy dolls in the corner and scooped them up, moving to a make-believe bedroom with a doll crib.

Exhaustion plagued Jocelyn. She might have slept an hour last night, especially after the call from Sam. Most of the time she’d paced her bedroom or stared up at the ceiling in the dark while trying in vain to relax enough to fall into a deep, dreamless sleep.

While Jocelyn stifled a yawn, Sarah carried the baby doll over to the crib, laid it down, covered it with a blanket, then picked up the mommy and daddy. The child tiptoed away

from the crib with the others and plopped down on the tile in the kitchen area again.

Suddenly Sarah took the daddy doll and knocked the mommy doll down, then dropped both of them and curled up into a ball on the floor.

Jocelyn waited to see if Sarah would do anything else. The little girl stuck her thumb in her mouth and squeezed her eyes closed as though she were taking a nap.

“Sarah, are you going to sleep?”

The child bolted up, grabbed the baby doll from the crib and clutched it to her chest. “I don’t wanna play.”

“Why not?”

Sarah’s head sagged forward. “Mommy and Daddy mad.”

“Sometimes grown-ups fight with each other.”

The girl looked straight at her, her bottom lip quivering. “Mommy and Daddy mad.” Again the thumb went into the child’s mouth.

Jocelyn moved to Sarah and smoothed her blond hair from her face. “When?”

The girl began rocking. “They yelled. Loud.” She scrambled into Jocelyn’s lap and laid her head against her shoulder.

“You’re okay, Sarah. You’re safe here.” Jocelyn peered toward the two-way mirror where the child’s uncle and Sam were listening and gave a slight nod.

A few seconds later, Clint entered the playroom with a forced smile. “Honey, are you ready to leave? I finished what I needed to do. We can go home now.”

Sarah lifted her head, saw her uncle and leaped from Jocelyn’s lap, flying into Clint’s arms.

“Thanks for watching her for me.” He hugged the little girl to him.

Having decided it would be best if they pretended that

Jocelyn was babysitting Sarah as she had done in the past occasionally, Jocelyn approached the child and stroked her arm. "Sarah, I enjoyed playing with you. Clint, anytime you need me to look after her, I will."

"Thanks," he muttered, and made his way toward the front of her office.

As planned, Sam now sat in the waiting area with a female agent, Evelyn Nelson, who was wearing a medium-length red wig.

Clint paused in front of Sam and Evelyn and asked, "How's the investigation going?"

Sarah twisted around to see whom her uncle was talking to. When her gaze lit upon Evelyn, Sarah blanched. Her eyes saucer round, she buried herself against Clint as though she could hide in plain sight. "I wanna go home."

Her half scream, half cry shook Jocelyn's composure. The girl's response to seeing Evelyn confirmed Sam's suspicion that the child had witnessed something traumatic, and it was connected to someone with red hair. The important question now was exactly what did she see—and was it tied to her father's death?

Jocelyn touched Sarah's back. "Honey, what's wrong?"

"Don't wanna be here," the child mumbled against her uncle's shoulder.

"Sam, I need to go to the sheriff's." Evelyn rose and quickly headed toward the front door.

Her thumb in her mouth, Sarah turned to watch her leave. After the female agent slipped out of the office, the little girl hid her face against her uncle's shoulder.

Clint patted his niece's back, his voice soft and calm. "We're going home now." He started for the entrance.

"Clint, I'll call you later, and if you need me for anything,



don't hesitate to get in touch." Jocelyn wanted to talk with Sam to see what he thought or if he had any theories concerning Sarah's reaction. But she would follow up with Clint after he took his niece home.

The second the door shut, Jocelyn rounded on Sam, who'd come to his feet. "Now we do it my way. If I have to take it slow and easy, then we'll take it slow and easy."

"We need to know what Sarah saw. Her father was murdered. The evidence, what little they collected, doesn't point to a suicide unless that's all you want to see."

"Like Sheriff Reed? It certainly didn't take him long to declare it a suicide."

Sam frowned. "Earl was most likely murdered. Sarah's mother is missing. Maybe she went into hiding. If not, Leah's life may be in jeopardy."

"Leah didn't kill Earl."

"Something happened. She was upset when she left you that message. The time on it suggests she called not long after she left Sarah with her brother."

"I wish I had gotten it and been able to respond, then maybe she wouldn't have gone missing." There. She said it out loud. But it did nothing to ease her feeling of guilt for failing her friend. Trembling, Jocelyn hugged her arms to her and tried to rub some warmth back into them.

"Everything goes back to Earl's death. I need to know more than red hair and that Leah and her husband were fighting. What were they fighting about? Is it only women with red hair or anyone with it that frightens Sarah? The couple of strands were medium-length. They could belong to a man who wears his hair a little longer or a woman."

Jocelyn held up her hand. "Stop right there. I agreed to this little experiment this morning because Clint did, but I draw

the line there. I'll continue to see what I can get from Sarah, but my first priority will be her and her well-being. Leah would insist on that even if her life were being threatened."

"Fine, but getting her mother home safely is the best thing for Sarah."

His statement made sense, but she wasn't going to confirm that. Sarah wouldn't be all right until her mother came home.

"Jocelyn..." He paused for a few seconds as if he were finally coming to a decision. "I'd like you to go with me to interview the people with red hair who were connected to Earl and Leah."

"Why?" That meant spending even more time with Sam, which wouldn't be easy.

"You know them better than I do, and you're very perceptive."

She had her doubts on that score. *With her patients, maybe—but in real life, her track record wasn't so good. Not with Sam at least.*

"We always made a good team." Sam's statement struck her as ironic.

They had worked well until that last case when everything fell apart. The one person she'd needed to read was Sam, and she had failed miserably in that department. She shrugged resignedly. She'd have to help Sam in order to help Leah. "I can't until after lunch. I have another appointment in a few minutes."

"Good. It gives me time to go over each person's background. I'll be back here at two to pick you up. Okay?"

"I'll be ready." Still chilled, she pulled her plum-colored sweater tighter about her.

After Sam left, Jocelyn sank onto the love seat where he'd been sitting only moments before, his lingering presence conveyed to her in the warmth of the cushion. In less than a week her peaceful existence had shattered. Her past had walked

right in to her present, casting her back into the memories of her time in New Orleans. The cold embedded even deeper into her bones. Teeth chattering, Jocelyn was afraid she would never be rid of the feeling of being lost.

A brisk January wind cut through Jocelyn as she hurried into Paul Fayard's law office. Sam came in right behind her and immediately crossed the reception area to the secretary's desk, slipping his wallet out to show Angelina Loring his FBI badge.

"Miss Loring, may I have a word with you?" Sam's professional tone and bearing left no doubt that it really wasn't a question.

Angelina's blue eyes flared, then instantly a smile tilted her pouty lips upward. "I heard the FBI was in town looking into Leah's vanishing act. My goodness, she has everyone hopping around here like she didn't run off."

"Why do you say she ran off?" Sam took out his pad and pen.

"Why? Because her husband just killed himself and there were some in this town that probably celebrated that."

"Who would celebrate Earl's death?" Sam positioned himself several feet from Jocelyn, forcing Angelina to turn in her chair slightly to look at him.

This gave Jocelyn a better opportunity to assess the secretary's answers without the young woman knowing. Striking, with flawless features of alabaster, Angelina wore clingy, low-cut dresses that emphasized her curves. When Jocelyn had first come in to see Paul about a legal question last summer, she'd been surprised that the distinguished attorney, one of the best in the area, had hired Angelina as his secretary. However, it hadn't taken Jocelyn long to see the effect the woman had on men, even her boss.

Angelina slanted closer to Sam, who kept his gaze trained

on her face. "Lenore Pershing for one. Earl used to work for the Pershing family until some money went missing. Right after that Earl was fired."

"Charges were brought against Earl for stealing?" Sam slid a questioning glance at Jocelyn, who gave a slight shrug.

"No. They probably didn't have any proof." Angelina moved in even closer and lowered her voice. "There were also some shady characters in and out of that pawnshop. Rumor had it Earl was in debt. Leah probably left to avoid having to pay off his debts. I would."

Jocelyn dug her fingernails into her palms. She wanted to deny the woman's words, but she'd heard the same gossip about Earl. Leah had been silent about her husband, but lately Leah had seemed stressed and exhausted from worry. Jocelyn had thought it was the money issue, but now that she was starting to put the past few weeks' events together, she wondered if maybe it was something beyond that.

"Speaking of Leah, why did you two argue the day before Earl died?" Sam asked.

A slight shift in Angelina's demeanor alerted Jocelyn. The woman tilted her head and twirled her long auburn hair around her forefinger. "We didn't really argue. It was more like a little disagreement." Jocelyn could tell there was more to it.

"About what?"

Angelina peered down at her lap. "I hate saying anything bad about a person who isn't here to defend herself." Reestablishing eye contact with Sam, she straightened her shoulders. "Leah has always been a little jealous of me. I heard that she said something spiteful to a friend concerning me. I asked her kindly to refrain from talking about me."

"What did she say?" Sam asked before Jocelyn had a

chance to demand that very piece of information. Leah wouldn't do something like that.

"I'd rather not say." Angelina looked away.

"I insist," Sam countered immediately.

The woman huffed. "Well, if you insist. Leah thought I had gained some weight." Angelina rose and gestured down her body. "Now do I look like I'm an ounce over one hundred three pounds?"

"No." Sam cleared his throat and jotted something on his pad.

Jocelyn bit back a chuckle at the flustered look on his face and stepped forward. "Do you work out at Clancy's Gym near the college?"

Angelina peered at her as if she finally realized someone else was in the office with her and Sam. "Why, yes, I do. Every morning before work. Thankfully Paul doesn't need me here before ten. Do you belong?"

"No, but I've been thinking about joining. I'm not very big on exercising."

The woman's gaze skimmed down Jocelyn. "I see. You should. Our bodies are our temples. We have to take care of them."

Jocelyn gritted her teeth, trying to think of something polite to say after the woman's distinct look of disdain. "Maybe I'll see you there sometime," she finally muttered, relieved to see Sam slipping his pad back into his pocket.

"Thanks, Miss Loring, for your cooperation. Good day." Sam waited for Jocelyn to exit first, then he followed her out onto the sidewalk along Main Street.

His soft laugh floated to Jocelyn, who halted a few feet from the front door. She spun around. "Don't you say a word." He knew how she felt about exercising, as often he'd tried to get her to jog with him in New Orleans.

"Sorry." He sobered. "What kind of impression did you have of Angelina?"

"She's lying, but you didn't need me to tell you that."

"Yeah, she's pretty obvious. Although her weight is a subject I'm sure she cares about, that wasn't what she and Leah *disagreed* over."

"Which makes me wonder what she's hiding. It's certainly not her figure. She's very proud of that."

"I may have to pay Miss Loring another visit later. By the way, I thought the Farleys' only connection to the Pershing family was that they rented from them. She said Earl worked for them."

"That must have been before I came back to Loomis. Leah never said a word about that to me. It has to be several years ago because he ran the pawnshop for at least two and a half years."

"So you don't know anything about him possibly taking money from the family?"

"No, although I did know Earl and Leah were having money problems."

"It's probably nothing but I'll see what the sheriff has to say about that." Sam indicated his car parked nearby. "Next stop is Pershing Real Estate to have a word with Georgia Duffy."

Jocelyn glanced over the top of the black sedan at Sam. A movement across the street caught her attention. A short, thin man with tufts of red hair sticking out wildly stood with his face pressed up against the large front window of Farley's Pawn Shop.

"Who's that?" Sam asked, tossing his head toward the man.

"Chuck Peters. He has the reputation of being the town drunk," Jocelyn whispered."

The small man shot a glance toward them, then scurried around the corner as though a hive of angry bees were after him.

"What does he have to do with the Farleys?"

“Noth—” Jocelyn peered over to where Chuck had been, then turned back to Sam. “Come to think of it, maybe he doesn’t know that Leah’s missing. She always used to give him some food when he came by. If Earl saw him, he would run him off, calling Chuck the town’s disgrace. I actually saw Earl kick the man once when he didn’t move fast enough.”

“Homeless?”

“No, he does odd jobs for Vera Peel for room and board, but he only works enough to feed his drinking habit.”

“He has red hair, long enough to fit what was found at the crime scene.”

“Well, yes, but he’s harmless. He’s all over the place, but most have learned to ignore him. I don’t think half the town even sees the man anymore. Leah was one of the few people who was nice to him.”

“But Earl wasn’t.” Sam raked his fingers through his hair. “He might be another one worth looking into.”

“Chuck? I can’t imagine his hands being steady enough to shoot anyone.”

“Still, we can’t ignore anyone, especially a red-haired man connected to the Farleys, until we rule that out as a clue.”

Jocelyn climbed into his car at the same time Sam did. “You didn’t say much about Vera Peel. What did you think about her?”

“Not very friendly or interested in helping the Farleys.”

“That about sums her up. Leah told me once that the woman didn’t care for either one of the feuding families, which is unusual in Loomis because most take one side or the other. Charla has openly snubbed Vera, and there have been rumors for years that Amelia Pershing Gilmore ran off with Vera’s husband. According to Leah, Vera was never the same after that.”

“Betrayal can do that to people.” A shadow flitted across his features and his eyes darkened.

A strained quiet fell between them as he drove the short distance to their next destination. Had Sam been betrayed? Was that why he avoided any relationship that got too serious? Was that why, from the very beginning, she’d felt a connection to him? Jocelyn wished she could ask him, but the wall between them stayed firmly in place. At least that was safer for her heart. She couldn’t go through what happened in New Orleans again.

“Interestingly, she goes to church every week like clockwork,” she said to break the silence. “I just don’t think she listens to what the preacher is saying.”

“That’s sad. The Lord has been the only thing that has kept me going at times.” Sam parked in front of the real estate office.

“I always wondered how you managed to do your job and not seem affected by what you saw.” She hadn’t learned to master that.

His eyebrows shot upward. “Not affected? Whatever made you think that?”

“In the year we worked together, I never saw you get upset or angry except for that one case at the end.”

“We all have a breaking point.”

“Was that yours? Why that case over the others? You’d dealt with child abductions before.”

Sam didn’t reply, just shoved his door open. “We need to get moving. We still have Shelby Mason to interview after Georgia Duffy.”

Obviously, Sam wasn’t going to open up any more now than he had in their shared past. The wall between them remained firmly in place. “Interviewing Shelby is a waste of time. She and Leah are best friends. They have been for many years.”



“That doesn’t mean she isn’t capable of doing harm to Earl at least. It doesn’t sound like Earl was a good husband to Leah. That could make a best friend angry. People have been murdered for less.”

She paused at the front of his car. “I’m surprised you have a strong faith in the Lord. You have such a jaded outlook on life.”

“Believing in Jesus doesn’t mean I should be unrealistic. My job requires me to look at every situation from a different perspective than most. I have to suspect everyone and everything until I can rule them out. You can’t tell me you haven’t been affected by your job and your consultations with law enforcement agencies. Isn’t that the reason you left New Orleans?”

*Yes, but an equally important reason was you.* She might have been able to weather the last case and the aftermath if he’d been there for her. “My faith isn’t strong like yours. I have a hard time understanding how God can allow such bad things to happen to children. They’re innocent.” Jocelyn marched toward the building. Their conversation was heading into an area she wanted to avoid.

“The Lord never guaranteed us an easy life. But he has guaranteed us His love and faithfulness through the trials we face.” Sam reached around Jocelyn and opened the door.

In her head she knew that, but in her heart she’d lost that belief each time she’d dealt with someone mistreating a child or with her own personal losses. “That’s Georgia behind the last desk,” she whispered, glad there were people around, something to distract them from the subject of faith.

When they approached her, the tall woman with shoulder-length, fiery red hair offered Sam her hand. “You must be the FBI agent from New Orleans.” When his forehead furrowed, she continued, “You’re the talk of the town, sugah. Everyone who’s come in here today has been discussing you and the fact

that the first person you visited was Jocelyn.” The Realtor’s gaze skipped to Jocelyn for a brief moment before returning to Sam, a smile lighting her moss-green eyes. “How can I help you?”

“I understand that you were helping Leah Farley look for a house.” Sam sat in a chair that Georgia indicated.

“Yes, but what’s that got to do with her running away from Loomis?”

“So you think she left on her own?”

Jocelyn sat next to Sam, but it seemed as far as Georgia was concerned she might as well not have been there. The woman focused totally on Sam, even to the point of scooting her chair behind the desk closer to him.

“She was certainly distraught after Earl’s suicide, so yes, I think she did.” Georgia crossed her long legs, her action meant to draw Sam’s attention.

“Earl didn’t commit suicide. The evidence points toward murder.” His gaze didn’t stray from the Realtor’s face.

Georgia arranged her features in an appropriate expression of shock, but Jocelyn noticed how quickly it faded as the woman said, “I suppose that shouldn’t surprise me. A lot of people didn’t like the man. Even Leah wasn’t too happy with him lately.”

“Were you one of those people?”

“Oh, no, sugah. The Farleys were clients. I’ve learned not to bite the hand that feeds me.”

“How about flirting with the hand that feeds you?”

This time genuine surprise flashed into Georgia’s expression. “How did you—” Her regard sharpened on Jocelyn. “Never mind. I know how. What’s your role in the investigation?”

“I’m a consultant.” Jocelyn lifted her chin and returned her gaze. “Sam and I worked together in New Orleans.”

“Interesting.” The Realtor’s pinpoint stare drilled into Jocelyn for a moment longer.

She refused to let Georgia intimidate her with that haughty look she often wore when she was dealing with someone she thought was beneath her.

Finally the Realtor swung her attention back to Sam. "There was nothing, I repeat nothing, between me and Earl. Other than being clients, I wouldn't be involved in either Leah or Earl's life. We don't move in the same circles, so you were misinformed. Probably someone confused being merely friendly with flirting."

Jocelyn balled her hand in her lap, her teeth digging into her lower lip. Hanging all over Earl wasn't being merely friendly.

"So Leah didn't fire you as her Realtor?" Sam scribbled a few words on the pad he always carried with him.

"Well, of course not, sugah." Georgia giggled. "I'm the best Realtor in the area. I even have some listings along this side of Lake Pontchartrain."

"Thanks for the information." Sam rose.

Outside on the sidewalk Jocelyn stopped his progress toward his car. "She's lying. I was there when Leah called her last week and told her she no longer wanted her services."

"And yet, she felt compelled to lie to us. I wonder why."

"I'd say because she had something to hide, but then with Georgia, appearance is everything. Maybe she didn't want people knowing Leah fired her and the reason why."

"As she said, interesting." He started for his black sedan again. "One more to go unless you have thought of anyone else who has red hair."

"There is another person. I almost forgot about him. Bartholomew Hansen and Earl nearly got into a fistfight a month ago."

"Over what?"

"I don't know. I was attending the lighting of the Christmas tree in the town square. They were off to the side speaking in low tones, then suddenly Bartholomew took a swing at him.

Earl danced back, laughing at the man. Bartholomew came at him, but Max Pershing stepped in front of them. Earl was furious at Max for interfering, and Bartholomew slunk away, but the look on his face was chilling. He has red hair that he wears rather long because he's going bald."

"Loomis is a regular Peyton Place."

"There are good people here. Leah *is* one of them."

"Good people do get in over their heads sometimes. I'll add Bartholomew Hansen to my list to interview later."

Luke Dupree sat on the couch in Jocelyn's office, hands folded in his lap, his chin resting on his chest. "Nuthin's wrong."

"Your dad thinks there is. He told me you're yelling at everyone in the family, that you almost hit your little sister." Jocelyn was pretty certain she knew what was wrong, but she wasn't sure the child really did. The anger stage of grief could take a long time to get through.

The twelve-year-old shrugged. "She's a dork and a baby. Always whining."

"Is that why you like to stay in your room?"

"Yeah, I guess." Another shrug accompanied his mumbled words.

"How's school going?"

Luke twisted his hands together. "Okay, I guess."

Not according to his father. Luke's grades had plummeted in the past few months, but until lately the anger hadn't been present. His mother had died from an aneurysm almost a year ago. That was when everything in the child's life began to change, and Mr. Dupree didn't know what to do with his oldest son.

"I'd like to see you on Wednesdays after school."

Luke yanked his head up. "What for? Nuthin's wrong."

“We’re just going to talk.”

“I have nuthin’ to say. I wanna be left alone.”

“I’ll see you next week at this time, and if all you want to do is sit there, fine. But I’m a good listener, and what you say in here stays in here.”

“Can I go now?” Glaring at her, Luke jerked to his feet.

“Sure.”

The boy flew across the office and thrust the door open. He stormed past his dad in the reception area and disappeared outside. The look of despair on Mr. Dupree’s face was one Jocelyn had seen many times before in other parents. He’d tried everything and didn’t know what to do next.

“Did he tell you what’s going on?” Mr. Dupree said in a thick, Southern drawl.

Jocelyn nodded toward the door that had slammed shut a few seconds before. “He’s not happy to be here.”

“Can you help Luke?”

“I believe so. Grief comes out in different ways.”

“But he was fine right after his mom’s death. He went on with his life as if nothing had happened. I thought that strange at the time, especially since he was close to his mom, but I was so glad he wasn’t going through what I was.”

“He managed to suppress it, but no one can do that forever. Grief comes out eventually. Ignoring a problem doesn’t mean it will disappear.” She knew better than anyone that it didn’t; she should take her own advice.

“He’ll be here next week after school.”

“He’ll probably give you a hard time about coming.”

“I figured that.” Determination firmed the man’s features into a grimace. “But he’ll be here. Thank you, Dr. Gold.”

As Luke’s father left, the phone in her inner office rang. Jocelyn hurried to answer it.

“Dr. Gold speaking.”

“Jocelyn, this is Sam,” she barely heard through the poor connection.

Children crying sounded in the background. The urgency in his voice sent a bolt of alarm through her. “What’s happened?”

“Someone tried to kidnap Sarah Farley at the Loomis Pre-school. I need you.”

## FOUR

*I need you.* Those three simple words blared through Jocelyn's mind against the backdrop of the children's cries as she drove to the preschool. That was the problem with their relationship in New Orleans. Sam didn't need anyone, really. He had barriers around his heart so high she'd given up trying to scale them.

In the church parking lot Jocelyn pulled to the curb of the sidewalk that led into the preschool, slamming on her brakes and then racing toward the building. At the entrance she weaved her way through a dozen people, some deputies, a few parents, their faces pale. One father stood toe-to-toe with the sheriff at the door, demanding to be let inside.

"The children are unharmed. We're processing the crime scene. You'll be able to take your son home soon." Sheriff Bradford Reed's voice boomed beyond the man in front of him to the other parents gathering, more coming as the news spread.

The father mumbled something only the sheriff heard then stomped a few feet to the side, glaring at the lawman. Bradford shifted uneasily, his gaze falling on Jocelyn. Relief washed over the sheriff's face.

She hurried forward. "Special Agent Pierce called me to come to the scene."

"I'm glad you're here, Dr. Gold." Bradford moved to the side and pulled the door toward him.

She rushed inside, surprised by the man's warm welcome. In the past he'd always been a bit hostile as though he didn't trust anyone who wasn't born here, which on second thought was like a lot of people in Loomis.

Evelyn Nelson appeared in the foyer, her expression reflecting the seriousness of the situation. "Sam's waiting for you."

"Is Sarah okay?"

"Yes. She hasn't said a word. Sam has her in a room with her teacher. He's called her uncle, who should be arriving soon. Until then Sam has been interviewing the adults involved." Evelyn stopped in front of one of the classrooms and opened the door.

Sam motioned her inside, then turned back to speak to Loretta Johnson, the woman who ran the preschool and taught one of the classes. "The children were on the playground, which is enclosed by a four-foot, white picket fence with one gate, padlocked unless the parents are dropping off or picking up their kids."

"Yes, sir, they prefer coming into the preschool that way. But it's locked otherwise. I make sure of that."

"What happened today?" Sam asked after scribbling down something on his pad.

"I was out there with my class after lunch. Sarah's teacher, Jennifer Morgan, brought hers out at their usual time. Our kids share the playground for about fifteen minutes before I take mine in. One of Jennifer's boys fell off the slide and hurt his knee. She took him in to get cleaned up."

"I've asked Dr. Gold to sit in on the interview with Sarah as soon as her uncle arrives." Sam waved Jocelyn to the table, pulling out a short chair for her to sit next to him.



The older woman with dark hair streaked with gray nodded toward her as Jocelyn fit her body into a chair meant for a young child. Poor Sam looked even worse with his knees almost up in his chest.

“Mrs. Johnson, I want Dr. Gold to hear what happened from your perspective. It might help when she’s working with Sarah. Please continue,” Sam said in a no-nonsense voice, his professional facade completely in place.

“I was left to watch *thirteen* children. I did my best. I didn’t expect Jennifer to be gone long.” A defensive tone entered the woman’s voice.

“I understand. No one is blaming you for what happened.” For a few seconds a sympathetic smile cracked Sam’s sober expression.

“I want to help that poor baby. I can only imagine what she’s going through right now. So much has happened to her over the past week.” Loretta wagged her head. “I just don’t know why.”

“That’s what we hope to find out. Proceed, Mrs. Johnson.”

Seeing the tight rein on Sam’s patience, Jocelyn pressed her lips together to keep her smile from emerging. He’d interviewed countless people over the course of his career and no doubt listened to lots of ramblings in order to get at the truth.

“Well, as I was saying—” Loretta glanced down at her lap where she clasped her hands “—I was sure that Jennifer would be back any sec or I would have called someone to come out and help me supervise the children. Thirteen can be a handful.” Pausing, she swallowed several times. “Anyway, I was keeping an eye out and didn’t see anything suspicious or I would have brought the children in immediately.”

Sam shifted in the small chair. “Mrs. Johnson, sometimes events happen that we can’t change. It’s not your fault.”

Jocelyn studied him for a moment, wondering if he really

believed that. She'd seen him put people he interviewed at ease in order to get to what he wanted. She also knew he suspected everyone, even those who appeared innocent and incapable of being involved in a crime.

"Goodness me, I don't believe it's my fault. It was that awful man." Loretta sighed while tightening her clasped hands. "Let's see, I knew something was dreadfully wrong when I heard Katie Matthews yelling she wanted to pet the puppy, too. We don't keep any animals on the playground, and with the fence there shouldn't be any inside the play area. I immediately went to investigate the second I knew something wasn't right."

"What did you see?"

"Everything happened so fast. There's one place where the fence connects with the building that was out of my view. That was where that awful man must have been, back in that corner. There just isn't anyplace I could stand and see everything. I was in the best place to keep an eye on the children. I..." Tears shining in her eyes, Loretta dropped her head, digging for a tissue in her pocket. She brought it to her face and dabbed at it. "I'm sorry. I just can't believe what happened."

From Leah and some of the other mothers, Jocelyn knew that Loretta devoted a lot of time and care to all the children at the preschool, not just the ones she looked after directly. Sniffles sounded in the quiet. Jocelyn slanted a glance at Sam, silently pleading with him to let her speak. He gave her a slight nod.

"Mrs. Johnson, the parents know how you feel about the children. Leah was always singing your praises. She was so happy she found a preschool like this one."

The woman lifted her head, wiping her tissue across her cheeks. "Please call me Loretta." She cleared her throat. "I wish Leah were here."

“We all do.”

“Poor Sarah. That baby doesn’t need any more heartache.”

“I know, but her uncle will take good care of her. Do you want me to get you a drink of water? I know how dry my throat can get when I’m trying to tell a story,” Jocelyn said to refocus Loretta’s attention on the task at hand.

Shaking her head, the woman stuffed her tissue in her pocket and straightened. “I need to get back to my babies. Make sure everyone is all right. Talk with the parents. Calm their fears.” She turned toward Sam. “What else do you need to know?”

“Describe the situation you saw.”

“When I came into view, Katie started to scream. She whirled around to look for me. I was a few feet from her when I saw a man holding Sarah by the arm. She had a puppy and was crying. When the man saw me, he let go of Sarah’s arm and rounded the corner. I only really caught a glimpse of his back.”

“Describe him.”

“Since I talked to the sheriff, I’ve been thinking about that.” She stopped for a moment as though picturing the would-be abductor in her mind. “A mountain of a man. Six and a half feet at least. Not fat but very large. Long, dark hair.”

“How long?”

“To his shoulders.”

“Curly. Straight.”

“I think—straight. He had a red ball cap on.”

“What else was he wearing?”

“Jeans, I think. It happened so fast, and Sarah and Katie both began wailing. I thought Sarah was hurt bad or something. She was holding the puppy in her lap and cradling her arm.”

“Did she say anything?”

“No, and she wouldn’t let go of the puppy. She just began crying more when I tried to take it away to check her out.”

“Did Katie say anything?”

“Not that I recall, but, oh—” The woman’s hand covered her mouth, her eyes wide.

“What?” Sam slanted forward.

“Katie is the mayor’s granddaughter. Do you think this could have been about Katie, not Sarah? Maybe the man wanted Katie.”

“Did Katie say anything about what happened?”

“She kept saying, ‘The bad man grabbed Sarah.’ By that time, Jennifer was back outside and took Katie to calm her down and call the sheriff. I went to see about Sarah.”

“But she didn’t say anything to you?”

“Not a word.”

Evelyn stuck her head into the room. “Sam, Mr. Herald is here. Do you want to talk to him first?”

“Yes. Thank you, Mrs. Johnson. I may have more questions for you later.” Sam rose.

“Whatever I can do to help.” Loretta pushed herself to her feet, her eyes red. “I need to fix my face before I see the children and parents. They don’t need to be alarmed any more than they already are.” She headed to a bathroom connected to the room.

“I appreciate your coming so quickly.” Sam held the door for Jocelyn.

“When did this happen?” she asked as she stepped into the hallway and noticed Clint at the other end with Agent Nelson.

“An hour ago, one o’clock. One of my team and a couple of off-duty deputies called in are canvassing the area and interviewing people around here.”

“But with the church taking up the whole block, most people aren’t nearby.”

“And the bayou isn’t far from here. If he came that way,

he's long gone. Do you know anyone that large with long, dark hair?"

"No, but I don't know many who live in the bayou."

"I hope the sheriff has an idea. All he knew when we arrived was that the man was huge, which he said fit quite a few people in the area. The hair color may help narrow the suspects down. I'll go talk with him and be back in a minute. Can you talk with Clint and reassure him Sarah is all right? I know Evelyn has told him, but coming from someone he knows may help. I want to talk to him before he sees Sarah."

"Yes." Jocelyn strode toward Leah's brother, each step laden with all that had occurred in this relatively peaceful town. At least it was until Earl died—murdered if what Sam suspected was true.

"Jocelyn, I need to see Sarah." Clint twisted away from Agent Nelson.

"I know. And you will in a minute. Sam wanted the sheriff to have the latest description of the man."

"What is it?"

"I'll let him tell you." She hated saying that to Clint, but the police didn't always let out all the facts about a case.

His mouth firmed into a deeper frown.

"This isn't easy, Clint, but Sarah's okay."

"You and I both know she isn't really okay. She's lost her father and possibly—" he gulped then inhaled a deep breath, releasing it slowly "—her mother. Now this. Why?"

"I wish we knew. It would make solving this a lot easier."

"She's three. She's—" His gaze flew to Sam striding toward them. "What's the man look like, Agent Pierce? I know a lot of people around here."

His expression carved in seriousness, Sam paused next to Jocelyn. "He's around six foot six and his frame isn't fat but

large. He has dark, shoulder-length hair. He was wearing a red ball cap and, I believe, jeans. That's all we know for the time being. The sheriff says that narrows down the search to maybe five men he's familiar with in the immediate area. Four of them live in the bayou and don't come into town much."

"And from the description the other one must be Robert Broussard."

"Yes, the sheriff is sending someone to bring him down to the station."

"He works for me, and I can't see him doing something like that."

"Would Sarah know him?"

Clint shook his head. "I don't think so. He keeps to himself, but he's like a huge teddy bear."

"Bears have been known to bite."

"How about the others? I know the David family lives in the swamp and has several members who would fit that description. Then there are the Martin brothers. I have to admit there are a few people who never come into Loomis, but I don't see someone like that doing this. Why would they?"

"That's a good question. Why?" Sam pointed toward the last room at one end of the hallway. "All of them will be checked out. Sarah is with her teacher. She has a puppy and doesn't want to let it go."

"A puppy? How?"

"The man used it to lure her to him."

"Sarah's always wanted a pet, but Earl wouldn't let her have one. Leah was looking for a house so they could have a yard for a dog."

"Was it common knowledge she was drawn to dogs?"

Clint shrugged. "What kid isn't?"

"True." Sam put his hand on the doorknob but didn't turn

it. "I want Jocelyn to talk with Sarah and see what she can find out. Is that all right?"

Clint's gaze shifted to Jocelyn, some of the tension melting. "Yes, anything she can do to help me with Sarah. Right now she's keeping it all inside. She isn't talking much, which is so unusual for her. But one thing she wanted to do was come to school to see her friends."

"That's good. She's looking for something normal in her life." Jocelyn laid her hand on Clint's arm. "I'll do whatever I can to help you and Sarah."

"I appreciate it because I'm in over my head on this one."

Jocelyn just hoped her relationship with Sarah would help her break through the barriers the child had erected.

Sam allowed Clint and Jocelyn to go into the room first and waited while Jennifer stood and headed toward the door. Stopping her departure, Sam said something to the teacher before she left.

Sitting cross-legged on the carpeted area in the room, Sarah saw her uncle and her face lit with a grin. He was at her side before the child could get up.

Kneeling next to his niece, he combed her hair from her face. "It looks like you have a new friend."

The little girl nodded, but her smile vanished.

"I'm gonna sit here with y'all while Jocelyn talks to you. Okay?"

Sarah nodded again, then dropped her head forward while her hand stroked the brown fur of the puppy cradled in her lap.

Jocelyn seated herself in front of Sarah. "May I pet it?"

"Yes," the child mumbled.

That was a good start although Sarah's head was still lowered. Jocelyn patted the small animal. The puppy rolled over

enough to permit her to tickle its stomach. She saw that the puppy was a girl.

"Where did you get her?" Jocelyn removed her hand so Sarah could continue stroking her.

Nothing.

"Are you going to name her?"

The child shook her head.

"All pets need names. I used to have a cat called Peppers."

"Not mine. Bad man's."

Jocelyn barely heard Sarah's words. "She'll need a home. He's gone and he left her."

Sarah looked straight into Jocelyn's eyes. "He hurt her."

"The puppy?" Jocelyn noticed the red marks on the girl's arm.

Sarah nodded, her eyes saucer round.

"Then we need to find her a new home."

"Princess, we can give her a home," Clint said, petting the puppy, too.

Sarah swung her attention to her uncle. "We can?"

"Sure. I've got a yard she can play in. Will you help me take care of her?"

"Yes!"

"Then we'll take her home with us today." Clint gave Jocelyn a relieved look.

"That's a wonderful plan." Possibly Jocelyn would be able to use the puppy as a way to get Sarah to talk about her experience.

"The bad man won't get her?" Sarah peered at Jocelyn, then her uncle.

"No way. I won't let him near her or you." Determination like steel glinted in Clint's eyes.

Sarah stared a moment at him, then lifted the puppy against her cheek. "You can live with me, Molly." Burying her nose



into the brown fur, she closed her eyes, a peaceful expression on the child's face for the first time.

"I think Molly will like that, too."

The puppy began licking Sarah's cheek. The little girl giggled. "She's tickling me." When she put the animal in her lap again, she glanced toward Clint. "Can we go home now?"

He peered at Jocelyn, one eyebrow lifted in question.

"I think that's a great idea, Sarah. You can show Molly all around her new home."

The child jumped to her feet. After Clint rose, he placed his hand on Sarah's shoulder while she held her puppy, then they moved toward the door.

Sam stepped to Clint's side and whispered something to him before the pair left. "I'm having one of my agents placed at Clint's until we find the man responsible."

"Do you think Sarah is still in danger?"

"Possibly. We don't know what's going on so we have to think that. It's nice for a change to be able to be a part of foiling a kidnapping. Always coming in after the fact is hard."

For a few seconds Jocelyn got a glimpse of the Sam usually hidden from the world. "Then why are you working missing persons cases?"

He pivoted away, his expression concealed. "Someone has to do it."

As usual when he'd give her a peek into his life, he quickly slammed the door—in her face. She tried to stamp down the hurt that rose in her, but she couldn't. He had hurt her before. She had to remember that and not let down her guard.

"I asked Jennifer Morgan to come back in here when Sarah left." He stepped into the hallway and motioned for the teacher. "Please stay, then we'll talk about how to proceed next."

Jocelyn took a chair while the young woman came into the classroom.

“Miss Morgan, did Sarah say anything to you about the man who tried to kidnap her?”

“No, not a word the whole time, even when I asked her. She seemed to curl up protectively around the puppy.”

“Before you went in with the little boy who hurt himself, did you see anyone outside the fence?”

“No.” The teacher drew herself up straight. “If I had, I would have said something to Loretta.”

“Why did it take so long to take care of the boy? Mrs. Johnson said you were gone longer than she expected.”

“We were out of antiseptic cream, and I had to go to the storeroom and get some more.”

“You never saw the man who tried to take Sarah?” Sam closed his notepad on which he’d written a few lines.

“No. I came out as Loretta was running to the side where Sarah was.”

He stood. “Thank you, Miss Morgan. I may have more questions later.”

After the teacher closed the door to the classroom, his gaze sought Jocelyn’s. “We’ll process Sarah’s clothes and see if we get any forensic evidence from them. We’ll continue to track down the men that fit Mrs. Johnson’s description. I need you to work with Sarah. If you can get anything from her besides what Mrs. Johnson told us, that would be great. Large with long, dark hair fits a lot of men.”

“But hasn’t the sheriff narrowed the list to five?”

“Yes, but what if the man wasn’t from around here? That leaves a whole lot of men to check out, even if we confine it to just the state of Louisiana.”

“I get the picture. Sorta like a needle in a haystack.”

“Yep. A large haystack.”

“I’ll call Clint and set up a time to see Sarah at his house. Right now that little girl has had more than her share of trauma. If she’s in familiar surroundings while I talk to her, that might help, but Sam, I can’t offer any guarantees.”

“I know. I just hope this time—”

Stiffening, Jocelyn shot to her feet. “Do you want me to talk with any other children?”

“Jocelyn, I didn’t mean what you think.”

“And what is that?” She tilted her chin up a notch, throwing a challenge in his face.

“I’m not thinking about that last case in New Orleans.”

“Sure.” But nothing in the sound of her voice indicated she agreed with him. She started toward the door.

He halted her progress and spun her toward him. “It wasn’t you who messed up that case. I did it. I was the agent in charge. I was the one who couldn’t bring him back safely.”

“You did everything you could.”

“Yeah, tell that to his parents.”

Suddenly Jocelyn was whisked back to nine months before when she went to see the boy’s parents to offer her condolences. Their accusations still rang through her mind. “I can’t do this, Sam. When you’re ready for me to interview Sarah, let me know.” She headed to the door. Her lungs burned with each breath she dragged in. The air lacked oxygen, and the walls closed in around her.

Not able to face the crowds out front, Jocelyn escaped out the back door of the church. Rounding the building, she made a beeline for her car, her whole body trembling, her chest constricting even more.

When she slipped behind the wheel, she tried to fit the key

into the ignition but dropped it. That was when the scene with the boy's parents flooded her memory again.

"Why couldn't you get Kevin to tell you sooner about the car? If he had, my boy would be home now."

The mother's cries reverberated through Jocelyn's mind as though she stood in front of her again, wanting somehow to find a way to appease her own guilt. The woman had only verified what Jocelyn thought herself.

Jocelyn rested her forehead on the steering wheel and inhaled gulps of air to steady her racing heartbeat. She closed her eyes to calm her spinning surroundings.

*Lord, why? Why did the little boy have to die? Why is Leah gone? Why is someone after little Sarah?*

Sam watched Jocelyn hurry from the classroom, letting her go. He let her go in New Orleans because he could not be what she wanted, an open man who shared himself. If she knew about his little brother, she might walk away with hate in her heart for him. He couldn't stand to see that in her eyes. He would carry the burden of his brother's disappearance alone. Then maybe his guilt would be appeased. He made that decision when he realized she wanted too much from him. He couldn't share his past with her.

Yet he needed her help right now. With Jocelyn having lived in Loomis as a teenager, she had established a relationship with some of the people involved in this case. In a town like Loomis that was important. If he brought in another child psychologist, a complete stranger, he would lose time he couldn't afford to waste, especially when working with Sarah.

*Which means I need to go find Jocelyn.*

She was probably halfway to her office by now. He peered out the classroom window that overlooked part of the park-

ing lot and noticed her yellow car still there. When he saw her lay her forehead against the steering wheel, he stalked from the room.

This was why he didn't get involved too deeply with women. He wasn't good at emotions, something he'd learned in order to survive. He was usually good at shutting his feelings down, but Jocelyn made him feel things he had no right to.

When he exited the back of the building and rounded the corner to the parking lot, he saw several parents escorting their children to their vehicles. He'd told Evelyn to send all of the kids home unless they witnessed what had happened on the playground. By the steady stream coming from the main entrance, there wouldn't be too many children left for Jocelyn and him to interview.

As he approached her car, her hands gripped the steering wheel so tightly her knuckles whitened. When he rapped on her side window, she jerked up and twisted toward him. Glittering, large blue eyes stared up at him. His gut knotted at the sight of her pain.

Quickly she masked her feelings and pushed her door open. "Did you want something?" Her voice still reflected turmoil.

"Yes, I need you to sit in on the interviews with the children who witnessed the attempted kidnapping. Actually I would like you to take the lead."

One eyebrow rose. "Are you sure about that?"

"Yes, Jocelyn." He opened the car door wider. "You are good at your job." As she stood, he continued, "I'd like us to start over—as though we didn't have a relationship in New Orleans." And he hoped he could forget how close he'd come to telling her everything.

"No references to that time?"

"None. Gone from my mind—" he snapped his fingers

“—just like that.” He extended his hand. “I’m Special Agent Sam Pierce.”

She stared at him for a few seconds, then fit her hand in his. “I’m Dr. Jocelyn Gold. How can I help you?”

“I need to talk to Katie Matthews and any other child who saw what happened. Evelyn will have them waiting with a parent in separate rooms. I need your insight and expertise with their interviews.”

“Fine. I’ll help. To fill you in on some background, Katie is the mayor’s granddaughter. His only granddaughter. Katie and Sarah often had playdates together. Leah had become friends with Katie’s mom since Leah worked for her father as his secretary.” Jocelyn started for the front entrance because the back one was kept locked from the outside.

“I appreciate all the background information you can supply. It helps speed everything up.”

A few parents were still exiting the church with their children when Sam reached the sidewalk leading to the double doors inside. A man dressed in an expensive suit stopped in front of Sam. A little boy stood plastered to the man’s side.

“It’s about time I was allowed to see my son. What’s the FBI going to do about this?”

“Sir, we’re doing everything we can.” Sam had seen parents’ frustration many times before.

“You better. I know the governor, and if something isn’t done soon, I’ll be calling him. I can’t believe my son isn’t even safe at preschool.” Hefting his now-crying child, the man stomped off.

“Kevin Pershing. He’s part of one of the warring families in Loomis.”

“Ah, I remember. The feud like the Hatfields and McCoys.

Now you see why you're so important. I've found where there's smoke there's usually a fire."

"You think the Pershings and Renaults have something to do with what happened to Leah and Earl?"

Sam shrugged. "It's something that needs to be checked out."

"I already explained Leah and Earl's connection. That's hardly much in a small town."

"But it's a connection." Sam held the door open for Jocelyn. "And Angelina Loring did say that Earl worked for Max Pershing for a brief time three years ago. The sheriff didn't know why he was fired, but Mr. Pershing informed me he couldn't trust Earl. That was all he would say. Remember, Angelina said some money went missing."

Inside the church Sam quickly found the classroom where Evelyn had put Katie and her mother. When he and Jocelyn entered, the agent sitting with the pair left. Beth Matthews had her arm wrapped around her daughter, who burrowed her face in her mother's chest.

When Jocelyn settled into the chair across from Katie, she grinned. Sam tried not to react to her smile, but he suddenly remembered the times she'd turned a beaming one on him. For a short while he'd felt special, as though he really meant something to her.

"Katie, I'm Miss Jocelyn, a friend of Sarah's. She enjoys playing with you at your house."

The four-year-old peeked out at Jocelyn.

"She told me you have a big Lab that likes to lick her face. What's your dog's name?" Jocelyn kept her focus on the little girl.

"Blackie," Katie said slowly, her words mumbled against her mother.

"Is your Lab black then?"

Lifting away from her mother, Katie bobbed her head up and down. "I've seen you with Sarah."

"Yeah. Sarah's mom is my friend like you and Sarah."

Katie glanced up at her mother who said, "She wants to know how Sarah is."

"She's happy to have a new pet. Sarah named her puppy Molly."

"Is the puppy okay?" Katie relaxed in the shelter of her mother's embrace.

"Yes, why wouldn't she be?"

Sam loved watching Jocelyn working to get information from a child. He'd picked up pointers from her on how to deal with children. An air of calm and safety surrounded Jocelyn, reassuring the child.

Katie twisted back against her mom, hiding her face from them.

"The last time I saw Molly she was happily lying in Sarah's lap, enjoying the petting." Jocelyn's voice enrobed the child with serenity.

"She was?" Katie finally murmured. "*He* dropped her."

"Why?"

"*He* grabbed Sarah."

"The man wasn't being nice, was he?"

Katie shook her head, facing Jocelyn again.

"What did he look like?"

"Bad."

Her mother squeezed Katie reassuringly. "Did he have a beard like Grandpa?"

She peered up at her mother. "No. He spit like Uncle Tim. I was gonna tell him not to..." Katie's expression clouded.

"What happened?" Jocelyn asked.

"He hurt Sarah and the puppy. Bad."



“Anything else, honey?” Beth Matthews smoothed her daughter’s hair back from her face.

Katie wagged her head.

“Can you show me where he spit?” Sam asked, hoping there would be enough to run a DNA analysis on it.

Katie looked at her mother. “It’s okay, honey, if you don’t remember.”

“I’ll try.”

Sam led the way out onto the playground. Jocelyn, Beth Matthews and Katie followed. Katie stopped several feet from the area where the man grabbed Sarah. When her mother took an extra step forward, the little girl refused to go any farther.

Sam came back to the child. “Can you point to where he spit?”

Fear crept into Katie’s expression. She lifted her hand and gestured toward a patch of grass on the other side of the fence.

“That’s great, Katie. Thanks,” Sam said.

“I want to go home, Mommy.”

“I think that’s a good idea, Katie. You’ve been a wonderful help.” Jocelyn started leading the pair back into the building.

Sam walked the few paces to the fence and studied the area Katie indicated. He spied a wet place in the grass near a pebble. He would make sure his team processed it if they hadn’t already taken a sample. Then he would put a rush on a DNA analysis.

This might be the break he needed, especially if the man was in the system.

“What brings you by?” Jocelyn leaned into the doorjamb, her bright porch light emphasizing the tired lines around Sam’s eyes and the sag to his stance.

“A friendly face.”

“Friendly? You must be even more tired than I thought.”

“Okay, a familiar face. Is that better?” His exhaustion invaded his voice.

“You look like you could use a good night’s sleep.”

“That isn’t gonna happen.” One corner of his mouth tilted up.

As much as she didn’t want to respond to that heart-melting smile, Jocelyn’s pulse sped up. “Well, then you look like you could use a cup of coffee. Come in. I’ll fix you some.” Although Jocelyn held the door open for Sam to enter her house, she suppressed any hope they would renew their previous relationship.

He trudged inside, halted in the middle of her small foyer and turned toward her. “Thanks. I remember your coffee is especially good, and I need a whole pot right about now.”

“Bitzy’s Diner out by the college is open until one in the morning. It serves the best cup of joe around these parts.”

“Someone told me that, but I doubt the waitress would want to listen to me talk about the case.”

“Ah.” Jocelyn passed him in the foyer and headed toward her kitchen in the back. “Now we’re getting to the real reason you stopped by.”

“You can’t deny we worked well together in New Orleans.”

“I seem to remember you saying New Orleans was off-limits.” She kept herself busy preparing the coffee, fighting the ever-present urge to insist that Sam keep her out of this latest case. Interviewing Sarah today had nearly done her in. All the self-doubt and guilt threatened to crush her earlier. She’d gotten too close to that little boy’s case in New Orleans, and she was way too emotionally invested in this one, too.

With her back to Sam, she searched through her cabinet as if she were looking for something. Anything to stall for time. Anything to delay talking to Sam.

“Jocelyn, I know this is hard on you.”

She pivoted. “Then why are you here? Why are you ignoring what you said in the church parking lot?” All the conflicting emotions colliding inside her sharpened her voice to a razor’s edge.

“Because someone’s life is in jeopardy, and you’d be the first person to tell me to use the best resources available to me to solve this case.” His gaze zeroed in on her face. “You’re one of those resources.”

“I know.” She slumped against the counter. “I just don’t know if I’m the right person for this job.”

As the scent of brewing coffee perfumed the air, he studied her. “I was wrong about New Orleans. I think it’s time we talk about little Bobby Carson.”

## FIVE

Twisting away from Sam, Jocelyn fumbled for two mugs on the tree stand near her stove. She'd never forget how five-year-old Bobby's body looked when they found him. The unspeakable horrors were engraved into her thoughts permanently. Her hold on the pot trembled as she poured the coffee and sloshed some onto herself. She instinctively released the glass carafe, and it dropped to the hardwood floor, shattering at her feet.

Sam's hands settled on her shoulders, and he pulled her back against him. "I thought I could do this without bringing up that last case you and I worked on, but until we deal with it, it will stand in our way and affect how we work together. I need us to be in sync, like we used to be when working together."

"Too much has happened to go back in time." Wrenching herself from his hold, she stooped to pick up the glass.

"I wish I hadn't taken you to the crime scene that day, but I was so hoping the child would be found alive and need your help." He bent down to aid her in cleaning up.

"So was I. I should have stayed back, but I wanted to see the child alive, free at last. I was sure we'd come in time..." The rest of the sentence clogged in her throat.

"Me, too." After he took her pieces and tossed both their

shards into the trash, he drew her to her feet. He kneaded the tension in her neck, his strong fingers working wonders.

“Please, Sam, I don’t want...” Again she couldn’t finish what she wanted to say because all her senses were centered on the feel of his hands. Somehow she managed to step away from him and put some distance between them. She gathered her composure enough to say, “We can’t change the outcome of that case. I’d rather not talk about it right now. Our focus needs to be on finding Leah and whoever tried to take Sarah.” She sent him a look she hoped would convey displeasure. “Period. I won’t let anything interfere with that.”

“I understand and you’re right, Jocelyn.” He guided her to a chair and gently pushed her down, then went back and finished cleaning up the shattered pot. “So let’s talk about Leah’s case.”

“Do you still think Leah could be behind Earl’s death?”

“Actually this attempted kidnapping might be a way for Leah to get hold of her daughter. You’re the one who told me she wouldn’t do anything to harm Sarah, that her child was the most important part of her life.”

“Exactly.” She folded her arms over her chest, trying to warm herself. “Which means she would never subject her child to a fake kidnapping in order to get her. She would never traumatize Sarah like that.”

“Frankly I agree with you, but the idea is on the table and has to be looked into.”

“Who came up with that?”

“Sheriff Reed thinks that’s what happened. And the fact that her car hasn’t been found only fuels the theory in his mind.”

She laughed, the sound full of derision. “That’s our good sheriff for you. Let’s take the easy solution. Leah wouldn’t have done this to her child. Just as she wouldn’t have left her daughter for Clint to raise alone. Sarah was her life.”

“Okay, then we are back to the list we began with concerning Earl’s death.”

“You think one of them could have done it? Why would they try kidnapping Sarah or rather paying someone to do it because no one on that list fits the description?”

“Sarah saw something, maybe the murderer killing her father.”

“So you think this all ties into Earl’s death and that’s why someone tried to kidnap her—to keep her quiet?”

“That’s what my gut tells me. Solve Earl’s murder and the rest will take care of itself. But at the moment that has to take the back burner to this attempted kidnapping.”

“But if they are connected, then when the man who tried to take Sarah is found, you’ll be one step closer to Earl’s murderer. Did the canvassing of the area produce any clues?”

“No one saw a car or truck leaving the preschool at that time. But they found his footprints. The trail was lost at Bayou Road.”

“The road that leads to the swamp?”

“Yeah. I understand there’s an old pier at the end of it.” Sam rolled his shoulders, the lines of his face drawn in exhaustion. “The sheriff, at my urging, is bringing in a dog tomorrow morning to see if it can pick up the trail.”

“How about the men that fit the description Mrs. Johnson gave? Have you talked with any?”

“Only the guy who lives in town, and he has a solid alibi. He was at town hall seeing the mayor, who, by the way, is putting pressure on Reed to find the culprit.”

“Good. He ought to light a fire under our sheriff,” Jocelyn said with a chuckle.

“Yeah, the deputies are going into the bayou to bring in the other suspects so we can interview them tomorrow. Will you listen in, see if you can pick up anything?”

"I may have to rearrange some clients. I have two new ones, children. I suspect it's connected to what's going on in town lately. Something like today will be extra hard on the kids. They'll be faced with possibilities they've never thought about. I'm also seeing Katie tomorrow at her house."

"How about Sarah?"

"Yeah, tomorrow, as well. Clint's really worried. When he has to go to work, Sarah's going with him."

"I don't blame the guy. The threat is out there and will be until we catch who is behind it."

"And you don't think the man Mrs. Johnson saw is the person behind it?"

"No. I have a feeling he's only a means to an end. That it's all connected." Through his weariness, Sam managed to smile. "I could be wrong, but I don't think so in this case."

"I agree."

"Ah, we agree on something. That's a start."

She eyed him. His teasing gleam captured her interest. For a split second their relationship had been like it was a year ago before they began getting serious. Serious wasn't allowed in Sam's life. "Well, Sam Pierce, don't get too comfortable. It probably won't last."

His laughter erupted, erasing the tired lines about his eyes and mouth. "I'd forgotten how sassy you can be."

"Especially when I'm exhausted." She rose before she responded to his amusement. "It's time for both of us to get some well-deserved sleep."

"Yeah, before long I won't be able to put two sentences together. I'll give you a call tomorrow about when we'll be interviewing the suspects."

Jocelyn walked him to the foyer. When Sam opened the front door, instead of leaving right away he turned back to her.

“Jo, thanks for not throwing me out. I needed to unwind before I tried to get some sleep.”

His usage of the nickname threw her off-kilter. He’d shortened her name when they started dating. The only other person who had called her Jo had been her father who died several years ago.

“Anytime.” Jocelyn gripped the doorframe, leaning into it for support, while she tried to grin. The corners of her mouth quivered.

After he left, afraid she would never be able to forget the power Sam had over her, she shored up her defenses and told her heart not to notice how appealing he still was. She was afraid her heart wasn’t listening.

The door opened into the small room between the two interview rooms where an observer could watch without being seen. Sam entered, his mouth set in a grim line. “Did anything jump out at you, Jo?”

She wanted to tell him not to use that name, that it tore at all the barriers she’d put around her heart concerning him. Instead she shook her head.

“This is the last Martin brother. If nothing pans out with him, we’re at a dead end. I don’t want to be the one to tell Clint Herald that.”

“Me, neither. When I left Sarah and him earlier, he was counting on one of these guys being the one who tried to take his niece.”

“Did he and Katie’s parents give you permission to tell us anything you discovered about the attempted kidnapping?”

“Yes, but with both girls I wasn’t able to come up with anything new. I’m establishing a routine with them, especially Katie, whom I’m not as familiar with as Sarah. It will take time.”



"I know. I just wish we had that time." He raked his fingers through his hair. He'd been doing that a lot today. Jocelyn could remember running her own hand through it. He'd fussed at her when she told him it felt silky, but it had. "Maybe it isn't one of the Davids or Martins."

"It's looking like that more and more. Which means we'll have to look farther away from Loomis."

"New Orleans?"

"Whoever it was came through the bayou to the pier, probably by boat. That's what the tracking dog confirmed this morning, which means they are likely familiar with this area."

"Maybe, or just familiar with living in a swamp."

"We'll have a better chance of getting him if he has ties to Loomis and the bayou around here."

A noise from the interview room pulled Jocelyn's attention toward the two-way mirror. Rafael Martin bolted to his feet and pounded on the table, shouting, "Hello! I'm a busy man." He started for the door.

"I'd better go and have a little chat with him." Sam strode into the hallway as Rafael tried to exit the interview room and was stopped by two deputies standing guard.

Jocelyn followed the brief exchange, noting the rising fury in the man's expression as the two lawmen blocked his escape. Sam approached from behind, said something too low for her to hear. But it seemed to deflate Rafael's anger some.

The man swung back into the room and stomped to the chair he'd vacated, plopping down. Sam strolled in right behind him, as well as Evelyn Nelson.

"Thanks, Mr. Martin, for coming in," Sam said, settling into the seat across from the man while Evelyn stood by the door.

"Ha! As if I had a say when two deputies show up at my cabin, demanding with their guns drawn that I come with them."

By his speech it was obvious that Rafael was an educated man whereas his brother couldn't have gone beyond elementary school. The others that Sam had interviewed earlier had been more like Rafael's little brother. Jocelyn sat in a chair provided for the observer, the long day with little sleep the night before finally catching up with her.

She'd actually tried to go to bed after Sam left the past evening, but she couldn't wipe his image from her mind. When she'd finally succeeded in drifting off to sleep, Leah and Sarah haunted her dreams. She'd given up at four in the morning and gotten up.

"We need to know your whereabouts yesterday," Sam said, centering Jocelyn's attention on the interview.

"All day?" Rafael frowned.

"Let's start with midmorning."

"I was in Covington most of the day."

"Can anyone verify that?"

"Nope. But then I didn't think I would need an alibi." The glare directed at Sam would make most men back off from the man—the largest of the four who had been brought in.

"If you can't furnish us with one, then we'll have to keep you overnight while we do some checking in Covington to see if anyone remembers seeing you."

His eyes became slits. "I was with a lady, and I don't kiss and tell, mister."

"In this case you might reconsider."

The hard set to Rafael's jaw emphasized his determination to remain quiet. "Check. I did get gas at a station outside Covington about three o'clock."

"That won't help. The time we're investigating is between twelve and two."

Rafael shrugged, then set about examining his fingernails

on his right hand. "Go ahead. I have nothing to hide. What I was doing at that time wasn't illegal."

Sam stood, started to say something to the man, but decided not to. He strode from the room and was beside Jocelyn in less than half a minute. "What do you think?"

"Actually I think he's telling the truth. He's either a very cool criminal or unconcerned because he was really in Covington. Still, I would definitely check out his whereabouts yesterday."

"I've sent Evelyn with a deputy to see what she can find out. Now all we can do is wait."

Jocelyn glanced at her watch. "Well, if you're finished with your suspects, I'm going to head home." She started for the door.

"Come to dinner with me, Jo."

She squeezed her eyes closed. She started to tell him no, but what came out was, "I tell you what. I'll fix you dinner at my house tonight. I don't feel like being around any crowds. It's been a long day."

"That's great! In fact, perfect, because I remember how well you cook."

She slowly turned toward him, trying to control her rapid pulse. "I'll cook if you do the dishes."

"You've got yourself a deal. Are you ready? I want to blow this joint."

His teasing comment produced a reluctant chuckle. *Quit being charming*, she wanted to shout at him. "I have to go by the grocery store first. I'm not prepared for company."

"Then I'll go with you. Give us some downtime together."

"Oh, please, you don't have to."

"But I insist. I'll follow you to the store."

"Fine." A slow smile spread across her face.

When she settled behind her steering wheel, she wanted to

bang her head against it. *Why did I invite him to eat at my house? Where's my resolve not to get personal with Sam Pierce?*

Sam parked next to her car at the grocery store and climbed from his vehicle. *Where's my resolve to keep this strictly professional between Jo and me? See, there I'm going and calling her by her nickname.*

But it was so easy to fall into the same routine as in New Orleans. He approached her as she headed inside and grabbed a shopping cart. He'd forgotten how comfortable he felt with her, how easy it would be to expose his vulnerability and pray she understood. His own mother hadn't been able to. How could he expect Jocelyn to?

"I'm paying," he said as he strolled next to her through the produce section.

"You'll do no such thing. You're my—guest." The mutinous expression on her face solidified her words.

"Fine."

She charged forward as though she were a woman on a mission, which she probably was. He realized she regretted asking him the second she had, but he wasn't letting her off the hook. Her mouthwatering shrimp gumbo still made him salivate at the thought.

In the meat area she came to a halt, her gaze fixed upon a man and woman talking a few feet from her.

"Who is that with Max Pershing?" Sam asked, his curiosity piqued.

"Ava Renault."

"Of the two feuding families?"

"Yep. I didn't realize they were on speaking terms."

The strawberry blond, green-eyed Ava stood regally in front of the well-dressed Max, gesturing with her hand toward

the parking lot. After saying something to her, Max moved away, his long strides quickly putting distance between them.

Ava glanced toward Jocelyn, her attempt at a smile failing miserably.

"Excuse me, Sam." Jocelyn pushed her cart toward the stately Ava. "I haven't seen you much lately. How's everything going, Ava?" She tossed a look toward where Max Pershing had disappeared.

"I just came from the first meeting of the Mother of the Year Pageant organizers. Max and I are on the committee together, but I would prefer you not say anything to anyone about us talking here. Mother has been under the weather lately, and it wouldn't set well with her if she heard through the grapevine I was talking to Max in the grocery store."

"I won't say anything." Jocelyn scanned the area and saw that no one else was around except for Sam. "I'll tell Sam, too."

"Thanks. I appreciate it. How's the investigation coming on finding Leah?"

"Slow," Sam answered as he came up behind Jocelyn.

She nearly jumped at the sound of his voice so close to her. "They're focusing right now on the attempt to kidnap Sarah."

"I heard about that. I thought I would drop by later and see if Clint needs any help."

"I'm sure he'd appreciate it. Sarah is not talking much, which has him worried."

"I can see why. When I've seen her, she's usually talking nonstop." Ava shifted her attention to Sam. "Are you one of the FBI agents from New Orleans?"

"Yes, Sam Pierce." He shook Ava's hand.

"I'm Ava Renault."

"I'm sorry. I should have introduced you two," Jocelyn said to Ava.

“No problem. I hear you’ve been helping the FBI with the case so I’m sure your thoughts have been focused on that.”

“Yeah, I’ve been quite busy with all that’s been happening in Loomis. I hope your mother is feeling better. I heard she was sick and had taken to her bed for a few days last week.”

“Ever since the car accident, Mother’s health has declined. She spends a lot of time in her bedroom. I wish she would come see you, but she won’t hear of it. She said she has always managed her own problems, and she will manage being in a wheelchair.”

“Do you think if I stop by to see her, she’d talk?” Jocelyn saw signs of depression in Ava’s mother, which with the trauma she’d had to deal with, were completely normal.

“I’m afraid she would have Bosworth slam the door in your face. No, she doesn’t see anything is wrong. Except for Bosworth and Rhett, she doesn’t have much to do with people outside the family.” Ava slid a glance toward the aisle Max had taken to leave. “I’d better go. I still have plans for a wedding reception to finalize. It was nice meeting you, Mr. Pierce.”

After Ava placed a few cups of yogurt into her basket, she took the same route as Max toward the front of the store.

“Satisfy my curiosity, Jo. Who are Rhett and Bosworth? And is Ava getting married?”

“No, Ava’s a wedding planner. Rhett is Miss Charla’s Jack Russell that goes everywhere with her. And Bosworth is her—I guess you could say butler. He drives her around town and looks after the house.”

“I get the impression Charla Renault is a force to be reckoned with.”

“You’ve got that right,” Jocelyn said with a laugh. “I didn’t think she would see me, but I had to offer. Some people want to live with their misery rather than seek help.”

“Grief is hard for some. If she lost her husband and the use of her legs in the car wreck, that could have overwhelmed the woman to the point that she fell into a routine she thinks is living. She probably sees herself as coping with the situation given her.”

Jocelyn studied Sam. For a moment she wondered if he was also talking about himself. She knew firsthand the effects of grief. What had caused such grief in Sam? Was that why he was so closed to others—like Charla Renault was?

“If I’m going to fix dinner anytime soon, we need to finish shopping,” Jocelyn finally said, realizing, like Ava’s mother, Sam didn’t want her interfering.

Quickly, she completed filling her cart with items she needed, then wheeled it toward the checkout counter. After a brief skirmish over who would pay for the groceries, which Sam won, Jocelyn sat in her car, taking a moment to ready herself for the evening with him.

She’d selected a simple meal to prepare, hoping to send the FBI agent on his way in a couple of hours. Time spent with him wasn’t any good for her peace of mind.

Ten minutes later she pulled into her driveway with Sam parking behind her. Their bumpers only a foot apart mocked her intentions of keeping away from the man. She was the one who had invited him to her house. A moment of insanity, she thought with a chuckle as she slipped from her car.

“So the red hair found on Earl was real?” Jocelyn refilled their tea glasses, then sat again across from Sam at her kitchen table.

“Yeah, but there were no follicles so we couldn’t get any DNA. And the other hairs at the scene belonged to Earl, Leah and Sarah.”

“Have you thought that maybe someone like Georgia stopped by and was trying to persuade Earl to have Leah reconsider her being their Realtor? I’ve seen Georgia use her wiles to get what she wants.” She could remember how the woman acted toward Sam, flaunting herself in front of him.

“True. I’ve had the privilege of seeing that woman in action, but what about Sarah’s reaction to someone redheaded?”

“Shelby came over while I was with Sarah this morning. The child threw her arms around Shelby and didn’t react at all to her red hair. Granted it was pulled back in a ponytail, not down like our little test or her doll, but would that make a difference?”

“I don’t know. There’s a lot that doesn’t add up, but just about every clue we’ve come up with has been discounted so far.”

“Except the saliva sample you’ve sent off.”

He stabbed the air with his fork. “I’m hoping they can get DNA from it. Thankfully some of it was on a pebble in the grass.”

“Are you going to expand your search for the man who tried to kidnap Sarah?”

“We’re gonna have to unless something comes up with Rafael’s story. We won’t be able to keep him for long. We have Mrs. Johnson coming down to do a lineup with Rafael.”

“But she didn’t see his face.”

“I know. I want to show Katie and Sarah, too. I’ve talked with Mrs. Matthews and she has agreed. What do you think Clint will say?”

Jocelyn sucked in a deep breath. “He badly wants the man caught, but if there is any other way not to expose Sarah to the added trauma, take it.”

“Let me see what happens with Evelyn’s trip to Covington to check out his story and the lineup with Mrs. Johnson. With



Katie we'll do things a little differently because of her age. I may need you to talk to Clint. It might be better coming from you."

Jocelyn shook her head. "I don't know, Sam. I have to think of Sarah's well-being first and foremost."

"What would happen to her if she was kidnapped because we don't get the person responsible?"

The force of his words chilled her. There was no easy way. "Let's see what happens tomorrow."

For the next few minutes, silence ruled while Sam finished his meal, whereas Jocelyn couldn't eat another bite. Worry twisted her stomach into a huge knot.

"What was this called?" Sam asked as he put his fork down, no food left on his plate.

"It's just a seafood casserole." Jocelyn wiped her mouth on her napkin, still surprised that she had set their places with her nicest dinnerware and even used her good linens. Was her subconscious out to sabotage her attempts at keeping her distance?

"It's delicious, but then I've never been disappointed in what you cook. You could have been a chef."

"I learned from my father. He loved to be in the kitchen. It was a kind of therapy for him after my mom died."

"That's right. Both of your parents are gone, aren't they?"

She nodded, still getting a lump in her throat when she thought of them, especially her father, who she had grown close to after a brief period of rebellion. That was why her recent adolescent client Luke Dupree touched her so much. She'd been in his shoes at one time and knew the feelings he was experiencing over the loss of his mother at a young age.

"How about your parents, Sam? Are they alive?"

"Yes, living in St. Louis."

"You never talk about them. Do you get to see them much?" She wished she could hug both her mom and dad at

least one more time. They were never far from her thoughts or her heart.

"It's been a while." He shoved to his feet and took his plate and utensils to the sink.

Ah, she'd hit a sore subject with Sam. She gathered up the rest of the dishes and carried them to the counter. She shouldn't pry, but his taut posture presented a challenge to her. The counselor in her couldn't let it slide.

"How long, Sam?"

"I saw my father a couple of years ago."

"How about your mother?"

His jawline hardened into a piece of granite. He turned the tap and began rinsing a plate.

She clasped his arm. "What happened?" Was this what was eating away at him?

He shrugged away from her touch and stepped back. "My mother and I don't get along. It's no big deal. I'm certainly not the first child estranged from a parent."

"No, you aren't, but—"

"If you want me to clean up, I suggest you go into the living room and let me get to work."

The look in his eyes proclaimed the discussion of his parents had now ended. She felt the door slam in her face—again. Waving her hand toward the sink, she said, "Forget it. I'll take care of it later."

"We had a deal."

"That I'm changing. I'm tired."

He stared at her for a long moment. She tilted her chin up in a dare, meeting his gaze with her own unyielding one. She wanted him gone. Now. Before she revealed her true feelings at yet another rejection—because that was the way she saw it.

“Okay. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” He strode toward the foyer and quickly left.

She heard the door shut, its sound reverberating like ripples through the wide gulf between them.

## SIX

Sam met Jocelyn at the entrance to the sheriff's office. "I'm glad you could come. In a lineup Mrs. Johnson couldn't say positively one way or the other if Rafael Martin is our man. She thought he might be, and he was the only one she hesitated on."

"Which means you're going to show him to Katie."

"Mrs. Matthews brought her in a few minutes ago. The mayor wants all this resolved. The townspeople have been calling his office all day."

"I can imagine. I got a couple of calls from some concerned parents. I even had one mother tell me that the Lord had sent me to the town at the right time." Which made Jocelyn stop and wonder if that was the reason she had been drawn back to Loomis nine months ago. It certainly wasn't a warm, welcoming place at first glance. But she had put down roots for the second time and intended to stay.

"What did Clint say?" Sam headed down the hallway toward the small room with the two-way mirror.

"He would prefer not subjecting Sarah to it, but he also understands that to keep her safe the man has to be caught. He's bringing her down. She'll be here in half an hour."

"Good. Katie should be gone by then." Sam opened the door and allowed Jocelyn to enter first.

When she saw Katie with her mother, she smiled at the child. "This is great. I get to see you twice in one day. Did you put that picture you drew up on the refrigerator, Katie?"

"Yeah, right on front, Miss Jocelyn."

"Among all her other pieces of art," Mrs. Matthews said, standing right behind her daughter with her hands on her shoulders.

"In a moment a man's going to come into that room in there—" Jocelyn gestured toward the place "—but I want you to know he can't see you. You can see him, but this window only works one way."

"It does?"

"Yes, do you want to see?"

"Can I?" Katie peered back at her mother, who nodded.

Jocelyn took Katie's hand, led her to the interview room and allowed the four-year-old to go up to the mirror and press her face against it.

"I can't see Mommy. Is she in there?"

"Mrs. Matthews, would you rap on the glass for us so Katie will know you can see her?"

When the sound filled the room, the little girl's eyes grew round. "Wow!"

"Ready to go back?" When the child took Jocelyn's hand again, Jocelyn guided her back to her mother.

A few minutes later a deputy brought Rafael Martin into the room. He plopped into a chair and drummed his fingers against the table.

"Katie, we want to know if you've seen this man before."

The child stepped toward the two-way mirror and studied Rafael for a long moment, cocking her head to the side. "Nope. Who is he?"

"Mr. Martin."

“Oh.” Katie spun around, completely calm, no reaction to the man in the next room. “Is that all?”

Sam came forward. “Yep. You’ve been a big help. Thanks. I think your mother said something about taking you for an ice-cream cone. I love ice cream. What’s your favorite flavor?” He escorted the pair into the hall.

Left alone, Jocelyn examined Rafael while she waited for Sam’s return. He tapped out a lively beat against the tabletop as though he had not a care in the world.

When Sam came back, she said, “He isn’t the one.”

“Because of Katie’s reaction?”

“Yes, and the calm way he’s behaving. Did Evelyn discover anything in Covington?”

“Not yet, but she has a lead. We both know that children can repress memories.”

“Not only children, but yes, I’m aware of that. Sarah should be here soon. I’ll go out and meet them. I want to set it up before she comes in.”

“We’ll take Rafael back to his cell, and when you think Sarah’s ready, we’ll bring him back.”

“That’s great. I want to make sure Sarah feels safe.”

Jocelyn made her way toward the front of the sheriff’s station and within five minutes Clint brought Sarah, holding her in his arms, a grim expression on his face.

“Hi, Sarah. How’s the puppy doing?”

“Kay.” She laid her head on his shoulder.

“Come this way.” Jocelyn indicated the hallway that led to the interview room. “It’s a good thing Molly has you taking care of her.” At the door, she paused. “I want to show you something I think is neat.”

“What?” Sarah lifted her head from Clint’s shoulder.

Jocelyn entered the small room and pointed toward the two-way mirror. "See how you can look in there?"

The little girl nodded, curiosity on her face.

"Well, guess what? A person in there can't see you. It's just a plain old mirror in that room. It's a special one in here."

"Really?" She wiggled in her uncle's arms, wanting down.

"Yeah. You want to see?"

When Sarah indicated yes, Jocelyn took her hand and showed her the mirror in the other room. She went through the same demonstration as she had with Katie.

"Clint, why don't you come in here?" Jocelyn asked while Sarah checked the mirror out.

When he came into the interview room, his niece ran up to him. "Did ya really see me?"

"Yeah, Princess."

"Sarah, why don't we go in there and see if we can see your uncle?"

The child grabbed Jocelyn's hand and pulled her toward the hallway. Back in the small room Sarah pointed toward the glass. "That's my uncle." In a moment Clint returned and Sarah asked him, "Did ya see me in here?"

"Nope. I just saw myself in the mirror." He hefted her into his arms. "I'd much rather see you. You're prettier."

Sarah giggled.

Jocelyn stepped out into the hallway and gave the deputy at the end of it a signal to bring Rafael to the interview room.

"Sarah, two people are going in there." Jocelyn gestured toward the mirror. "Let me know if you know either one. Remember this place is a secret. They can't see us or hear us."

"Kay."

When Sam escorted Rafael back into the room, Jocelyn turned the intercom off so Sarah wouldn't hear their conver-

sation. She fixed on the little girl, watching for any indication she was upset.

"I know him. That's your friend." Sarah pointed at Sam.

"Yeah, he is. Do you know the man with Sam?"

"Nope. Is he a friend?"

Jocelyn smiled at the little girl. "No, I haven't met him before. Just like you."

"Uncle Clint, do ya know him?"

"No, sweetheart."

The child yawned.

"Someone I know missed her nap. Are you ready to go home? Molly's probably wondering where we are." Clint headed for the hallway.

"Thanks for coming down here." Jocelyn waited until the pair had left, then rapped on the glass.

Sam said something to Rafael, then called the deputy to take the man back to his cell. As Sam reentered the small room, he looked eagerly at Jocelyn.

"Anything from Sarah?"

"Not one flicker of recognition. He isn't our guy."

Sam started to say something when his phone rang. "Evelyn, what have you found?"

He listened for a moment, then said, "I'll get the photos and send them to your cell phone. It'll take me a few minutes."

"What has she discovered?" Jocelyn asked the second he hung up.

"Rafael Martin was with a young redhead at a bar at lunch-time the day in question. They left together. Evelyn wants me to send her the pictures of the redheads we interviewed. I had one of the agents get me some photos of them a few days ago. I'll be a sec while I send them to her."

"That's my cue to leave then."



"Aren't you curious to see who the redhead may be?"

"Call me. I'll be at my office. I have an appointment in an hour." She needed to get a breath of fresh air; she needed some alone time without Sam's appealing presence, tempting her to forget their past.

"I'll see you next week," Jocelyn said to her client as she escorted the man into her outer office.

At the sight of Sam flipping through a magazine she came to a halt. Her client left before Sam closed the *National Geographic* and tossed it on the table. She needed a receptionist. If her business kept going like it was, she'd be able to afford one—but not before Sam was gone from Loomis. These surprise visits disturbed her equilibrium. Too bad she didn't have an appointment after this last one.

"Well, fancy seeing you here." She forced a smile.

"It's such a beautiful day I thought I would tell you in person who the redhead is."

"It's nearly night outside."

"Yeah, but it's still warm and nice. Aren't you curious about the mysterious woman?" His eyes danced.

"Okay, who is it?"

"Georgia Duffy."

"Why am I not surprised."

"Sarcasm from you. What's wrong? You usually don't use it unless you're upset or tired."

"Gee, let me see. A friend has disappeared and someone tried to kidnap her daughter." It concerned her that he knew her so well. He could easily tell when she was troubled.

He inched even closer and placed his hands on her shoulders, kneading them. "I know this can't be easy for you, but your insight has been a big help."

"It has? I don't feel that way. Leah's still gone. Sarah is still in danger."

"You're very good at your job. Why do you think I asked you to help me?"

"Because I'm the only counselor in town."

"I could have brought someone in from New Orleans."

His hands worked wonders on her tense muscles—they always had. She wanted to sway against him and feel his arms wrap around her. She wanted him to tell her everything would be all right.

"Guess what? Georgia wasn't the only woman the bartender identified when Evelyn showed him the photo array."

"Rafael is seeing two women with red hair?"

"No, but Angelina Loring frequents that bar quite a bit. According to the bartender, she's almost a regular."

"Does she go alone or with a man like Dylan Renault?"

"Alone."

"A double life? I guess things aren't going well with Dylan then." Remembering the scene between the pair at the Italian restaurant, she wasn't surprised. "Thanks for personally telling me." She walked toward her office to get her purse.

She was halfway across the reception area when Sam asked, "Will you come with me to interview Georgia? I may need protection from that woman."

Chuckling, Jocelyn spun around. "You needing protection, even from a femme fatale. Thanks. I needed that laugh."

"Believe it or not, I'm only half joking. With this woman I wouldn't mind an extra pair of eyes. C'mon. It's turning out to be a beautiful evening. Walk with me to her condo. I understand it's only a few blocks from here."

*Don't do it.* "Fine. Let me get my purse because I'm going

home right after we interview Georgia.” Somehow again she ignored that warning blaring in her mind.

Two minutes later she locked her office door and began strolling with Sam toward the Pershing Condos. Vegetation from the nearby swamp scented the air, mingling with the aromas from the burger joint next to the pawnshop.

Passing the Farleys’ store, Jocelyn looked down the alley behind it and saw in the glow of the security light Chuck Peters slouched by the back door, his arms on his knees, his head buried against them. “He seems so lost without Leah. Not too many people are kind to him. About all they do is tolerate him. Wait here.” She started toward the man.

“I’m coming with you.” Sam fell into step next to her.

“Chuck, are you all right?” Jocelyn gently shook the man’s shoulder.

Chuck reeked of alcohol. An empty bottle lay a few feet from him. Sam picked it up and threw it in a nearby trash can.

“Chuck?” Again she jostled him, fear taking root.

“What? What?” The man lifted his head up and stared blearily at Jocelyn, recognition slowly dawning in his eyes.

“Are you all right?”

“Just need to hide.”

“Why, Chuck?” Jocelyn stooped down in front of the man, trying not to gag at the stench.

“Need some money.” He scanned the area. “Don’t have any left.”

“I’ll pay for you to get some coffee and food at the Super Burger.” Jocelyn watched the man’s reddened gaze dart all around him.

He waved his hand. “Don’t need food. I need booze. I need a place...” His slurred words faded as he dropped his head back onto his knees.

“He needs a place to sleep this off. I’ll call the sheriff to come and pick him up.” Sam slid his hand into his pocket.

She grabbed Sam’s arm, stopping him from retrieving his cell. “No, let’s take him to his room at the boardinghouse. He can sleep it off there.”

Sam studied the man, now snoring. “Tell you what. Let’s interview Georgia, then I’ll get my car and take him to Vera Peel’s while you go home and get some rest.”

“But Chuck isn’t your problem.”

“He isn’t yours, either.”

“Someone’s got to look after him since Leah’s—gone.”

“I’ll look after him tonight. You don’t need to worry about him.” He took her hand. “C’mon. Let’s get this interview over with.”

“You sound so excited about it.”

“Let’s just say I’ve seen her type before. Men are merely toys to her.”

“And you don’t like being played with.”

“Do you?”

“Touché.” But then what were they doing? She wondered if it was even good for them to be in the same room, yet they always seemed to be. “What are we doing?”

“Working together.”

*Is that what we’re doing?* She felt like they were tap-dancing around each other, suppressed emotions churning just beneath the surface, ready any second to burst loose.

Entering the condominium complex, he whistled. “These are nice.”

“For the Pershings only the very best. Max lives over there—” Jocelyn pointed across the common area “—while Lenore, his mother, lives on this side where Georgia’s condo

is. Although she works for Max's real estate business, Georgia comes from money."

Sam rang the bell at Georgia's and waited a minute. Inside music blared and lights blazed from the front of the place. He pressed the button again.

The door yanked open and a scantily clad redhead stood in the entrance. Her frown quickly evolved into a smile when she laid eyes on Sam.

"Why, sugah, what brings you by my little ole place?"

Jocelyn winced at the extra thick Southern accent and wanted to throttle the woman. She kept her mouth shut—barely.

"I need to talk to you."

"Well, come on in." Georgia threw Jocelyn a perturbed look and hooked her arm through Sam's to lead him into her living room off the foyer.

Jocelyn trailed behind the pair. The woman practically laid her head on Sam's shoulder. Jocelyn curled her hands into fists.

"Can I get y'all anything to drink?" Georgia's gaze remained fixed on Sam, who sat on the love seat.

"No, thanks," Sam muttered.

Georgia sat right next to Sam, forcing Jocelyn to take the chair across from them. "I must look a sight. I've been exercising."

Jocelyn's fingernails dug into her palms. *I'd exercise more if I could look that good. She must not have been doing it more than a minute or she doesn't sweat when she works out.*

"We won't be long, and then you can get back to what you were doing." Sam inched as far from the woman as possible on the two-seated couch. "I just need you to verify that you were with Rafael Martin the day of the kidnapping, having lunch with him at Pelican Bar and Grill in Covington."

"Whoever gave you that idea? If Rafael Martin claimed I did, he's lying."

“Actually he didn’t say a word.”

“He didn’t?” The color bled from Georgia’s face. She flipped her hand in the air. “Well, whoever did was ly—”

“The bartender and a waitress picked you out of a photo array.”

Georgia gulped, averting her gaze.

“Now, would you like to tell me the truth?” Hardness edged each of his words.

“Okay, I ran into him in Covington, and I went to lunch with him. I hadn’t seen him in years. We went to school together. What’s the big deal? What I do with my time is no one’s business.” She shot Jocelyn a glare, as though warning her that she had better not hear about this from one of the notorious gossipers.

“It was reported you left with him at twelve-thirty. Where did you two go?”

Again Georgia’s gaze slid away. “Nowhere. I went my way. He went his.”

“I can always check the hotels and motels in the area, but if I go to that kind of trouble, I’ll charge you with obstructing an investigation if you’re lying, Ms. Duffy. I’m not too keen on doing extra work.”

Georgia rose, her body rigid with anger. “Don’t bother. We were together until about three.”

“Where?”

“None of your business.”

“I want to verify your story.”

“Why? I just told you I was.”

“Because if you can lie about one thing, you can lie about another.”

“I don’t...” She let out a huff. “Okay, we went to some motel on the highway to N’Awlins about a mile out of town.

I don't remember its name." Her voice stripped of her extra thick Southern drawl, she headed toward the foyer. "Now if that's all, I'd like to complete my exercising."

Sam and Jocelyn took the hint and rose from their seats, meeting Georgia by the front door. "If we need anything more, ma'am, we'll let you know," Sam said as they walked out.

The slamming of Georgia's front door echoed through the condominium complex. Jocelyn chuckled. "I don't think she was very happy. Of course, if it gets out that she's slumming with the likes of Rafael Martin, her good name will go down a few notches in Loomis. He's definitely from the wrong side of the tracks, and the two don't usually mix—at least out in the open."

"If she doesn't want it known, then she should go farther than the next town over to do that—" he coughed "—uh, mixing."

Jocelyn hooked her arm through his and plastered herself along Sam's side. "Why, sugah, you are merciless."

"I'll do anything to get at the truth."

"Anything?"

"Yes." He headed back toward her office building.

Glad it was dark, she hid her expression from his sharp, assessing gaze, relieved he wasn't questioning her about her feelings toward him. She was afraid the truth would prevail. She cared about him, more than she should. He would end up hurting her again, and she couldn't see any way to stop it, unless he solved Leah's disappearance and left soon.

Passing the alley behind the pawnshop, Jocelyn glanced toward where Chuck should have been. He was gone. She stopped. "Where is he?"

"Chuck? Maybe he found his way home. He'll be fine after he sleeps it off."

"Until he starts drinking again." She peered again at the spot. "I'll check tomorrow. You know he might have wit-

nessed someone coming or going from the pawnshop that day Earl was murdered. Has anyone talked with Chuck about where he was that day?"

"Are you suggesting he's involved in the murder? He does have red hair."

"No, but I am suggesting he might have seen someone on that Tuesday Earl was killed."

"He wouldn't be a credible witness."

"If he was drunk. But he isn't always that way."

"I'll check into it. I'll interview him. You can come to make sure I go gentle on him." Sam crossed Main Street and strode toward the parking lot where she kept her car.

"No relentless pursuit of the truth?"

"With Chuck, that could always be tainted. His view of the truth may be a far cry from what really is the truth."

At her car, Jocelyn turned to say goodbye, but the words died in her throat. A look of longing, revealed by the street-light, made her stomach flip-flop. He quickly masked it, but she saw it lingering behind his eyes.

"I guess..." Her feelings for him swelled into her throat, closing it.

"Jo," he whispered, brushing her hair behind her ears, then framing her face. "I'm so glad you're here."

He feathered his lips across hers, then kissed her in a deep, heart-wrenching union that robbed her of any thought except what he was doing to her senses. His scent of lime aftershave teased her while the smooth texture of his suit coat didn't hide his muscular build.

When they parted, he immediately backed away. "I shouldn't have done that. I..."

"Good night, Sam."

She hurriedly slipped into her car and peered where Sam



stood. He was gone. Laying her forehead against the cool steering wheel, she tried to right her world. It remained topsy-turvy, just like it had been ever since the day Sam came to Loomis.

## SEVEN

“Why did you skip school?” Jocelyn sat in a chair across from Luke Dupree in her office on Monday. Upset, his father had brought the boy in a few days early after seeing the principal at Luke’s school.

The twelve-year-old lifted his shoulders. “Because I wanted to.”

“Now you’re suspended for two days.”

“Good. I hate school.”

At least the child was talking, which was better than last week. “Where were you going when your father picked you up?”

“Anywhere but school.”

Anger defined his expression, but beneath the narrow eyes, the frown, the slouched posture, Jocelyn saw something else. Something she’d experienced when her mother died—fear. “No plans, then?”

“Why should I have any?” He snapped his fingers. “They could be changed just like that.”

She knew how life could spin out of control so quickly. It had happened a number of times to her, and the last one had sent her running to Loomis. “That’s true. Change will occur in your life. Sometimes you’ll have control. Sometimes you won’t.”

He looked away, his mouth tightening even more.

“The only thing in those situations that you can control is your reaction and how you deal with the change.”

Luke stared down at his hands in his lap, his fingers laced together. “I was going to my mom’s grave,” he mumbled.

“Do you visit her gravesite a lot?”

He shook his head.

“Have you thought about telling your dad you want to go and letting him take you?”

“No! He’s forgetting about her. He never mentions her name anymore. He...”

“What, Luke?”

Silence fell while the young man twisted his hands together, his chin against his chest. The ringing phone cut through the quiet. She almost rose to answer it, something she never did during a session. But what if something happened to Sam while they went after their latest suspect in the attempted kidnapping?

With great difficulty, she forced herself to stay put and let the answering service take the call. But as she waited for Luke to continue, she bit her teeth into her lower lip.

Focusing on the boy across from her, Jocelyn asked, “Luke, have you talked to your father about this? Maybe he isn’t saying anything because he doesn’t want to upset you.”

He snorted in reply and continued staring at his lap. For the next fifteen minutes, Jocelyn couldn’t get the child to respond except with nonverbal body language, which screamed *leave me alone*. Luke hunched his shoulders, pressed his folded arms to his chest and clamped his mouth closed.

When she stood and said, “I want to see you on Wednesday at our usual time,” he jumped up.

“Why? I’ve met with you this week.”

*Because you are determined to carry this burden by your-*

*self*. “Because I want to help you. Your dad told me you like to write. You should think about getting a notebook and writing down your thoughts and feelings whenever you feel like it. No one has to see it but you.”

“I don’t like to write anymore.” He bolted from her office before she had time to turn.

In the reception area she noticed that Luke had left totally, but his dad stood by the outer door waiting for her.

“I’d like to see him on Wednesday during his regular appointment time.”

“Did he tell you why he skipped school?” Worry etched Mr. Dupree’s features into a frown.

“No, not really, but he did open up a little. It’s a start.” A small one, but she would take anything she could get. Her heart broke when she thought of the pain he was going through, confused, angry, grieving, unable to express his true feelings.

“He’ll be here.”

After Luke’s father left, Jocelyn hurried to the phone to check her answering service. It wasn’t Sam. The only message was from a client wanting to reschedule an appointment. She jotted down the information and number to call him back later. Her thoughts returned to Sam, who had told her that he and his team were going after a Harry Finch, the man who was identified by the DNA spit sample. The results had come back that morning and the hunt had begun. Sam had called earlier to tell her they found that Finch lived south of Covington and were going to pick the man up.

That had been three hours ago. Covington was only twenty minutes away. What was taking them so long?

Jocelyn settled into her chair behind her desk and stared at the stack of reports she needed to work on, had neglected

because of what was happening in Loomis in the past few weeks. She couldn't concentrate on them like she should.

She buried her face in her hands, wishing she could wipe Sam Pierce from her mind. She wasn't doing a good job of it.

The ring of the telephone caused Jocelyn to lunge for it. She snatched it up, noticing the call was from Sam. "Yes?" Her heart hammered against her rib cage.

"We're bringing him in. We're about fifteen minutes away."

Relief sagged her shoulders. "Did he give you any trouble?"

"He wasn't home when we got there. We had to wait. But everyone is okay, Jo. Which is great because the man was packing a gun."

Had Harry Finch had the gun on him when he tried to get Sarah? The question stirred panic in Jocelyn. So much violence in Loomis. He could have hurt that precious little girl.

"I'd like you to come down to the station and view his interrogation. Any insight would help."

After what this man put Sarah through, she'd like to do more. "I'll do whatever I can to help put him behind bars. Has he said anything?"

"No. See you soon."

After replacing the receiver in its cradle, Jocelyn stared at the phone for a long moment. Her heart pounded in reaction to Sam's last sentence. She wanted to see him. She wished she could tell herself it was just to make sure he was all right, but she would be lying. She missed him, walls and all.

She called her last appointment and rescheduled, then jotted a few notes in Luke's file before grabbing her purse and heading out of the office.

Despite it being January, the late afternoon was beautiful with temperatures hovering in the low sixties. Jocelyn hurried along the edge of the park.

At the stoplight she paused to cross Main Street. In front of the town hall Charla Renault sat in her wheelchair with Rhett in her lap, probably waiting for Bosworth to pick her up. Lenora Pershing came out of the office building next door, saw her enemy and approached her on the sidewalk.

The light turned red and Jocelyn made her way to the other side, coming within a few feet of the two women. Lenore slowed as she passed Charla, each glaring at the other.

Lenore, with her fashionably styled silver-gray hair, stopped next to the wheelchair. "Have you heard what your son has done now?" Before Charla could say anything, she continued in a hateful sneer, "He publicly dumped his latest, making a scene."

Dressed in her trademark black cashmere twin set and pearls, Charla remained silent, steering herself closer to the curb and averting herself so she couldn't see Lenore.

Lenore snorted. "No wonder your son is so ill behaved. The apple doesn't fall too far from the tree."

The matriarch of the Pershing family marched past Jocelyn and crossed Church Street, quickly striding toward the family's general store, Pershing Provisions. Charla's pinpoint gaze drilled first into her enemy's back, then Jocelyn.

She hurried across Main Street and escaped into the sheriff's office, still feeling the scorn of the Renault matriarch burning a hole into her fleeing form. She'd learned, almost right away, that people didn't cross either woman unscathed.

Jocelyn tried to put the episode from her mind as she strode toward the small viewing room to wait for Sam. Taking the time to compose herself, Jocelyn went through some deep-breathing exercises she had learned to calm herself in stressful moments.

Not five minutes later the door to the interview room

opened and an FBI agent escorted a handcuffed Harry Finch inside. She expected to see Sam follow the suspect, but instead he suddenly appeared next to her. She'd been so absorbed she hadn't heard him approach.

When she peered at Sam, a small streak of joy spread through her. He looked fine—not a scratch on him. She smiled so automatically at him that she wanted to clamp a hand over her mouth to hide her reaction to his close presence.

"He certainly fits the description Mrs. Johnson gave y'all," she said to break the silence between them.

"And he has a record. That's how we got a match. He went to prison several years ago for robbery, second time."

Jocelyn shivered, thinking about his hand around Sarah's arm, so tight it left bruises on the child. "He's escalated to kidnapping. Nice."

"I've got the feeling he didn't come up with the plan to take Sarah all by himself. Even in the robbery he was part of a team—not the mastermind."

"We've got to find out who hired him. What's to stop that person from trying again with someone different?"

"That's my goal." He thrust a device into her hands. "I'm wearing an earpiece. While watching, if you have any questions you think I should ask him, tell me."

An FBI agent and the sheriff came into the viewing room and stood behind Jocelyn while Sam took his place across from Finch. Evelyn leaned against the wall behind Sam, staring at the suspect.

"I'm Special Agent Sam Pierce, and Special Agent Evelyn Nelson is also in the room. We're recording this. For the record, state your name."

The huge man pressed his lips together. Finally he muttered, "Harry Finch."

"Have your rights been read to you?" Sam asked, studying the man across from him.

"Yes."

"Do you understand your rights?"

The man nodded.

"Please answer for the tape."

"Yes," Harry bit out in a furious voice.

"Do you waive your right to an attorney?"

"I did nuthin' wrong."

"Do you waive your right to an attorney?"

"Yes."

"Do you understand the charges against you?"

Harry angled into the table, his fingers gripping its edge. "I ain't kidnapped nobody."

"Because you failed in your attempt. What were you doing at one o'clock last Wednesday afternoon?"

"I don't remember." Harry lifted his shackled hands and scratched his head. "Wait! I remember. I was at home that whole afternoon."

"Can anyone verify you were there?"

Harry snorted. "If'n I thought I needed that, I would have asked a pal over and we could have partied."

"Then I take that to be a no." Sam rose. "I would suggest you get yourself an attorney. The charges of attempted kidnapping are serious and our evidence against you is strong."

"I don't care what the evidence is. I ain't kidnapped nobody!"

"Fine." Sam leaned across the table, getting in the man's face. "But it isn't you we care that much about. We want the person who hired you. We're prepared to make you a deal when you decide to tell the truth." He strode toward the door. "Think about that while you spend some time in confinement. I understand you're familiar with other facilities in this area."



After Sam and Evelyn left Harry alone, Jocelyn watched the large man glare a hole into the tabletop, his hands coiling into fists.

“How’s our man taking the news?”

She instantly zeroed in on Sam, who came up behind her, her senses sharpening. The sheriff with the FBI agent ambled out into the hallway. Suddenly the room, although already small, shrank in size, the walls pressing in from all sides. “I think he’s seriously contemplating your words.”

“Good. It would be a lot easier if he gave us the name of who hired him. I’ll let him stew in his cell for a while. Do you want to go get a quick dinner?”

“Let’s go to Super Burger. I want to check out the alley behind the pawnshop and see if Chuck’s there again.”

“You’re really worried about him.” Sam placed his hand at the small of her back as he guided her from the room.

“Something isn’t right.”

“How so?”

“He doesn’t usually hang out in that alley.”

“I thought he was the town drunk. Where does he hang out?”

“Not this close to the jail and sheriff station. Besides, Earl would run him off whenever he saw him near the pawnshop.”

“But didn’t you say he might have seen something?”

She shrugged. “Just a slim possibility that popped into my head Friday night.”

Jocelyn relished the still warm-day as they exited the building. The gray of dusk blanketed the street, casting shadows. The sensation of something sinister lurking near quivered down her length, and she crossed her arms, as though that would protect her. What was going on in Loomis? If she looked back over the nine months she’d been in the town, she had to acknowledge that something evil had been simmering

under the surface of the town. Now it had erupted, so far causing one death and an attempted kidnapping, as well as a disappearance.

The scent of grilled meat wafted through the air as Jocelyn neared the burger joint. Her stomach rumbled its hunger. She'd forgotten to eat lunch again. In fact, she'd worked her way through the noon hour seeing clients, anything to take her mind off what was going on in Loomis and what Sam was doing that day.

As she neared the entrance to the alley, a pounding sound echoed through the quiet. Sam pulled her back behind him as he rounded the corner of the pawnshop, wariness in his stance.

"Stay put." His hand on his gun, Sam moved slowly forward.

Having already stepped into the alley, Jocelyn kept following Sam, still hearing the noise but unable to tell where it was coming from.

Then a wail accompanied the pounding. "Where are ya?"

Behind a large trash can near the pawnshop's back exit lay Chuck, propped up, beating his fist into the wooden door. His red hair was in wild disarray, tears streaking down his cheeks. He didn't even see them approach, he was so fixed on his mission.

Jocelyn hurried around Sam and knelt next to the older man. "What's wrong, Chuck?"

"Where's Leah? She's been gone too long."

Surprisingly, the man didn't smell of alcohol. "She disappeared over a week ago."

"She's dead!" He shot to his feet and swayed against the door. Jocelyn steadied him.

Sam came forward. "Why do you say she's dead?"

"Someone killed Earl. Must have killed her, too."

Sam narrowed his eyes on the man, sober for now. "You

heard someone murdered Earl but didn't know about Leah disappearing?"

Chuck dropped his head, his hands shaking.

"Where were you the day Earl was killed?" Sam stepped between the man and Jocelyn.

She wanted to shake Sam for his rough tone and menacing stance. Chuck was harmless. He wouldn't hurt anyone, even Earl.

"I saw nuthin'. I ain't talkin' to the police." Chuck shoved at Sam and, with a quickness that took Jocelyn by surprise, darted around Sam and fled down the alley.

Sam started after him.

"Sam, Chuck lives in a fantasy world half the time. Even if you manage to catch him and get him to tell you something, it would be highly suspect." She repeated what Sam had said to her on Friday.

He whirled on her.

"Besides, he can hide from most people. He knows all the nooks and crannies this town has to offer. Let me see what I can find out from him when you aren't around. As you heard, he's not too fond of the law."

"He has red hair. What if he isn't as harmless as you think?"

"I'm rarely wrong about a person." *Except you*, she thought. Although if she were truthful with herself, she hadn't really been wrong in her first assessment of Sam. She just made the mistake of thinking he would change his ways for her.

"There's a first time for everything."

An hour later when Jocelyn and Sam returned to the sheriff's station, Bradford Reed informed Sam that Finch was ready to make a deal. Although she'd been planning to go

home and had only returned to get her sweater she'd left in the viewing room, Jocelyn didn't want to go until she heard what Harry had to say. She'd feel better—and sleep better—if she knew that Sarah would be safe now.

“May I stay and listen to what he confesses?” Jocelyn asked as they strode down the hallway.

“Sure. Although I'll have him take a lie-detector test later, I want to know if you think he's telling the truth.”

While Sam left to talk to Harry, Jocelyn snatched up her sweater and threw it over her purse so she didn't leave it behind again. By the time she faced the two-way mirror, Sam had seated himself across from the suspect and said the necessary information for the tape to set the interview in motion.

“Your cooperation will go a long way in helping your case. What do you have for us?”

“What are ya givin' me in return for my information?”

“The DA has told me he would ask for a reduced sentence depending on what you provide. How reduced will be based on its value to our investigation.”

“I was hired to take that girl and keep her 'til a ransom was paid.”

*Ransom?* Jocelyn straightened, leaning closer to the mirror as though that would help her hear better. Who would pay one? Earl was dead and Leah was missing. There wasn't any family around to pay any amount, except Clint, and he didn't have much money. What was going on?

Sam's hard gaze fixed upon Harry. “How much ransom?”

“If'n I kept her safe, I'd get ten thousand. That's all I know.”

“Then what?”

Harry shrugged. “I ain't no killer. I guess I'd let her go. I can git lost with ten thousand.”

“Who hired you?”

“Don’t know.” A mutinous expression descended on Harry’s face.

Sam chuckled, the sound chilling. “And you think the DA is going to ask for a reduced sentence with the dribble you’ve given me so far? Did I tell you the forensic evidence is piling up against you as we speak? Right before I came in here, I was informed we’ve matched your shoe print to the ones found at the scene and the soil embedded in your boots matches what’s at the church right down to the same kind of winter fertilizer used. And we’ve only just begun.”

“I ain’t lying.”

“Sure. You’re an upstanding citizen, and I should believe every word you say.” Rising, he stretched, rolling his shoulders. “That might not seem like much evidence to you, but it’s just one more piece in a large puzzle we’re putting together to convict you.”

As Sam started for the door, Harry shouted out, “She called me. I never met her. And I was paid five hundred by mail with the name of the girl I was to take.”

*She?* Jocelyn hugged her arms to her. A woman had wanted to kidnap Sarah. Would they all think it was Leah? Every fiber in her clamored it wasn’t. Not her friend.

“You take jobs over the phone without knowing the person? Pretty risky if you ask me.” Skepticism laced Sam’s voice.

“She knew someone I knew.”

“You keep saying she. How did you know it was a woman?”

“I know when I’m talking to a woman.” The suspect puffed out his chest and glanced toward Evelyn, who had taken her place as before. His gaze skimmed down the length of the female agent.

Sam hovered over Harry and blocked his view of Evelyn. “So you could never be fooled.” A sneer accompanied his words.

Returning his attention to Sam, Harry wiped his blatant interest in Evelyn's female form from his expression. "I could tell it was a woman. She didn't disguise that fact, but her voice was funny sounding, like she was trying to sound different."

"How so?"

"Low, husky, like she'd smoked for years."

"Could you recognize it?" Sam backed off, rounding the table and sitting again across from the suspect.

"Probably not."

"Who's the mutual friend?"

"Won't help ya."

"Let me be the judge of that."

"He's gone. Left for Florida last week."

"Before or after last Wednesday?"

Harry rubbed the dark stubble on his face. "I think before. Yeah, before."

"What's his name?"

"Tony Smith."

Sam arched a brow. "That's his real name?"

"Could be. It's the only one I have."

"How long did you know him?"

"Maybe six months. We worked on—" Harry glanced down at his shackled hands "—something together."

"Where'd you meet him?"

"At a bar on the lake."

"Which one?"

"Sea Breeze."

"Did you go there a lot?"

"Nope, just a couple of times. I hooked up with Tony, we worked together once and then he was gone." Using his handcuffed hands, the suspect motioned like a bird flying away.

"Okay, Florida is a big state. Where in Florida?"

“I don’t know. One day we’re talkin’ about another—job—and the next he’s gone. Beats me where he went. But he was always jawin’ about the next big score, so I ain’t really surprised he left. There are some rich old people in Florida plum for the pickin’.”

Massaging her temples, Jocelyn eased into the chair by the mirror. Why couldn’t the man just have the name of the woman? *Lord, why can’t it be simple?* Jane Doe wanted Sarah Farley kidnapped because... That was the biggest puzzle of all. Why would anyone want to take Sarah for a ransom? Just trying to come up with a reason made her head ache.

The sound of Sam’s voice drew her back to the interview with Harry. “I’m bringing in a sketch artist tomorrow morning. I want you to work with him and get me a picture of this Tony Smith.” Coming to his feet, Sam rounded the end of the table.

“I’ll try, but I ain’t good at rememberin’ details.”

Sam got in the suspect’s face. “You’d better have a revelation between now and the morning.” Every line in his posture conveyed his tightly leashed control.

Harry looked down at the chains that bound him and mumbled, “Yeah.”

After Sam and Evelyn exited, the suspect covered his face with his shackled hands, his shoulders hunched as if defeated. Although they had caught the culprit of the crime, the threat was still out there against Sarah—someone she knew, cared about. A child. Jocelyn spun from the mirror and hurried toward the door. She needed fresh air. She needed to get out of the station *now*.

While Sam talked with Evelyn outside the interview room, Jocelyn headed for the front entrance. She heard Sam call her name, but she didn’t stop. A child was still in danger—just like Bobby. Helplessness enveloped her.

Outside on the sidewalk, she paused for a few seconds to take a deep breath and shake off the feeling of despair. The sound of the door opening propelled her forward. She hurried across the street even though the light was red. Thankfully no cars were coming.

The footsteps behind her quickened her own. She didn't want to talk with Sam. If she cut across the park, she could end up behind her office building, her car parked nearby. Five more minutes and she could be out of here.

A soft breeze tossed strands of her hair while carrying the scent of the bayou. Shadows created by the live oaks with swaying fingers of Spanish moss cause her to falter.

*What was I thinking? There's a murderer loose in Loomis. Someone who wants to take Sarah. And I'm helping the FBI. Maybe it isn't Sam who's behind me.*

The beating of her heart sped up as she picked up her pace. She was almost to the rear of Pershing Provisions, when she glanced back and gasped.



## EIGHT

Sam's sudden appearance filled Jocelyn with relief, then dread. She couldn't take much more of this emotional roller-coaster ride.

Sam clamped a hand on her arm and hauled her against him. "Why were you running away?"

She shook her head as if that would rid her thoughts of images of Bobby in New Orleans and Sarah blending together to mock her inability to save those she cared about. "I just can't do this anymore. You don't need me on this case. You don't need—"

He laid a finger against her lips to still her words. "You don't know what I need."

Plunging his hands into her hair, he cupped her head and brought his lips down on hers. The hard pressure of his mouth on hers quickly evolved into a soft enticement that held the memories at bay for a few precious moments. She clung to him, relishing the feeling of safety.

When he pulled away slightly, Jocelyn cradled his strong jaw in her palm. "What do you need?"

"I need—your help. We're getting closer. I can feel it. You know this town. You know the players in this game."

"I'm finding I don't know anything. Even though I lived

here for a while as a teenager, I was gone for a long time. So much has changed. I didn't fit in then and I don't fit in now."

"What made you come back here then?"

"This was where my dad and I were the happiest after my mother's death. I thought I could capture that feeling again."

"And you haven't?"

"They say you can't go home again, and they are right."

"Probably. Nothing stays the same for long." He grabbed her hand. "C'mon. I'm taking you to your place."

She waved her hand toward her coupe sitting beneath the security light. "But I have my car."

"I've always wanted to drive one of those." Grinning, he held out his flat palm for the keys.

"I can—"

"Please, Jo."

Those two words—said as though he needed it more than she—made her hesitate. "But how are you going to get back here?" She dropped her keys into his grasp.

"I'll walk. It'll do me some good. I can use the time to think about what Finch told us."

"We still don't know who hired him."

"No." Sam opened the passenger door for Jocelyn, then rounded the front and slipped behind the wheel. "But we've got some good information to work with. We'll find out who this Tony Smith is and then we'll find this woman." After pulling onto Main Street, he continued, "I have to say this because you'll hear it. The woman could be Leah."

"No!" Jocelyn gripped the handle. "It isn't. She wouldn't—"

"Hold it, Jo. I didn't say I believed it was Leah, but I know that Sheriff Reed will want to believe it. I just wanted to prepare you."

Relief trembled through her. “Good. Then I’ve accomplished something if you don’t believe Leah would try to kidnap her daughter.”

“To tell you the truth, I wish it was Leah behind it.”

“Why?” She practically shouted the word at Sam.

Sam turned onto Jocelyn’s street. “Because it would at least let us know that she was alive—and because then we would know Sarah isn’t in any real danger.”

“You think Leah’s dead, don’t you?”

“It makes sense. There hasn’t been a ransom demand for her. It’s that or she deliberately ran away from Loomis, which you tell me she wouldn’t do.”

“Oh.” Jocelyn pressed her fingertips into her mouth, wishing she didn’t see the logic in what Sam said. “Maybe she’s hurt somewhere.”

“There haven’t been any reports of an injured woman in this area. Clint checked and we double-checked.”

“There’s another possibility. Someone kidnapped Leah for some reason other than a ransom.”

“True, which makes me ask why. Why has someone targeted the Farleys? First Earl, then Leah and finally Sarah.”

Jocelyn released her tight hold on the door handle and twisted toward Sam. “Earl was hated in this town, but Leah wasn’t. And honestly, I can’t see anyone here in Loomis killing Earl because they didn’t like him. They have tolerated him and his ways for years.”

“So we’re back to the murder of Earl, which started all this.” After parking in her driveway, he turned to Jocelyn. “And that list of people with red hair.”

“Four of them are women.”

“Yeah, and it was a woman who called Finch.” Sam pushed his door open and climbed from her car.

When Jocelyn slipped from her coupe, she collapsed back against it. "It can't be Shelby Mason. I know her as well as Leah, and besides, Sarah isn't afraid of her. So that leaves Georgia Duffy, Angelina Loring and Vera Peel."

"We'll look at everyone's phone records, but when we checked Finch's cell around the time of the kidnapping, there were only two calls, one from his mother in New Orleans and the other was blocked."

Pushing herself away from her car, Jocelyn made her way toward her porch. "Which means you probably won't find anything because the woman was smart enough to block the call in the first place. She may not have even called from her own phone. Probably didn't."

"Yep, but we have to run through the motions. Let's hope she'll make a mistake or we'll discover who Tony Smith is and he'll lead us to her."

"For Sarah's sake, I hope it happens soon." She held her hand out for her keys.

Sam ignored it and stepped around her, inserting a key into her lock and twisting it open. "Delivered safe and sound."

Remembering back to her chills in the park, she asked, "You don't think I'm in danger, do you?"

"No." He ran his calloused finger down her cheek before hooking a length of her hair behind her ear. "I wouldn't leave if I thought you were, *ma chère*."

His murmured endearment used in this part of the country drew her to him. "Don't leave, Sam." The words slipped out before she thought of the lack of wisdom in them. She was putting herself out there to be hurt by him again. She quickly backtracked. "I mean, I won't be able to sleep for a while no matter how tired I am. I can make us some coffee, and we can talk about what Harry told us tonight."

Sam cut the distance between them, his arms brushing hers. Dipping his head close, he whispered against her lips, "I've never been able to resist talking shop with you."

"With that line you must have the women lined up at your door." She grinned, despite the beating of her heart thundering in her ears.

He chuckled, reached around her and shoved her door open. "After you, Jo."

She almost stumbled through the entrance. She wasn't even sure if he was coming inside, but she didn't dare look back at him.

She centered her attention on fixing the coffee to keep herself from thinking about the man who had just come into her kitchen. His proximity undermined her composure and left her shaken.

As if it were the most fascinating piece of equipment, she fastened her gaze onto the carafe, dark liquid splashing into its bottom reminding her of the color of his eyes.

"Hmm. I love the smell of coffee brewing, especially yours."

She gulped at the sound of his voice, low and husky. Still she refused to face him. "Yeah, I grew up on strong coffee."

All too soon it stopped perking, and she had to pour two mugs and move to the table. With the width of the table between them, she cradled her hands around the ceramic. "Tony is a pretty common name in these parts, and Smith is everywhere."

"I'm hoping the sketch will help. We can circulate it and see if anyone knows him. If we find him, we might get a good line on who he knows in Loomis. I'm having Evelyn talk with the sheriff and a few others to see if there's a Tony Smith in town, maybe in the bayou. We'll check with other surrounding towns, too."

“What about the three redheads?”

“We’ll interview them again tomorrow. Care to come along?”

*And watch Georgia make her moves on you? No, thanks.*

“I think you can go solo. I’m going to talk with Chuck. He might say something to me he wouldn’t with you around. I was with Leah a few times when she would see him.”

“Be careful. There still could be something going on with him.”

“You know Chuck wasn’t that way when I lived here as a teenager. I’m not sure what happened, but it’s sad to see.”

They sat facing each other, and a long moment of silence fell between them as though they both were skirting around the real issue.

After taking a sip, he placed his mug on the table and stabbed her with a probing look. “What happened at the sheriff’s station? Why did you run from me?”

“I wasn’t running from you as much as from the past.” Chilled, she covered the top of her coffee with her palm and let its heat steam against her. Still the memories encased her in an icy shroud. She knew she needed to talk about Bobby Carson. She’d been avoiding her feelings for months, and as a counselor she realized that wasn’t the best way to handle a problem.

“You’re talking about us—and that case in New Orleans?”

She nodded. “I can’t get the picture of that child out of my mind, especially now with what nearly happened to Sarah. I’ve tried. I’ve really tried.”

“I know. It’s never easy, especially with the child victims.”

“How do you do it?”

“Sometimes I don’t do a good job, either. I...” He lowered his head and studied his mug contents. “The only way I’ve been able to manage is to turn it over to the Lord. I couldn’t

do it without Him, and even then I often have to shut myself off emotionally. Most of the time I'm successful."

"And when you can't?"

"Then it takes its toll on me."

"How long have you've been working missing persons crimes?"

"Five years," Sam said over the rim of his cup, before taking several sips.

"Ever thought of quitting?"

"Yes, last year."

"Because of Bobby." A connection leaped between them. Jocelyn wanted to narrow the distance between them and probe further, but as she stared at Sam a closed look entered his eyes. She saw his barriers go up.

"This isn't about me, Jo. What made you run? Why was Bobby's case so hard on you?"

She wanted to fling that question back at him, but she knew he would shut down even more and at the moment she had no emotional energy to push him. "Timing. I don't think I can close off my feelings as well as you can. I've tried and they keep creeping back in. I have a client right now, a twelve-year-old, who I identify with so much. It's important that I help him."

"Don't you feel that way about all your patients?"

"Yes, but even more than usual in this case. It's as if I have a personal stake in his problem. I know that may not be a wise thing for me to feel." She ran her fingers around the rim of her cup. "I let Bobby down. That's how I felt when I walked away from talking with his parents."

"What did they say to you?" Sam reached across the table and captured her hand, clasping it, compelling her to look into his eyes.

The soft, caring expression that greeted her gaze dissolved

all reservations about talking to him. "They blamed me for his death."

"You should have said something to me."

"I tried talking to you. You left town on a sudden 'vacation.'"

"They said the same thing to me."

"I'm so sorry." She put her mug on the table, then sandwiched his hand between hers. "They were grieving and lashed out at us. I realize that, but at the time it didn't matter."

"I know. It struck a chord in me, too. I needed a break."

Why couldn't they have helped each other? The answer lay in the reason their relationship hadn't lasted. They weren't really a "couple" in New Orleans, just two people who dated for a short time.

"Jo, if you realize why they said that, then why is it still bothering you?"

She tugged her hands into her lap and stared at the tabletop. "Because I did let Bobby down."

"We don't always win every time. I wish and pray we do, but we don't. You know that."

"It came at the same time as the anniversary of my mother's death. My father died the same month. He was never completely the same after she passed away, but he always put up a brave front for me." Her fingernails cut into her palms. "I wasn't a match for my mother. She needed a bone marrow transplant, and I couldn't help her. As I watched my mother die of cancer, I was determined to help others. I wasn't going to let anyone down again."

"That's impossible. There are things out of our control."

"I know and usually I'm all right."

"Until you get emotionally invested?"

She nodded. With tears threatening, her throat tightened. "I came back here to see if I could piece my professional life



back together. If I can't, I'll give up being a counselor. I was doing pretty good until all this happened."

"I'm sorry, Jo." His chair scraped against the wooden floor as he stood. He came around the table and drew her to her feet. "Let the Lord help you. You're a good counselor and have helped so many. He's here for us to help us carry our burden. Turn it over to Him. Lay your life at His feet."

"It's never been easy for me to give up control."

He chuckled. "Me, neither. I'm a work in progress."

The sound of his humor and his words alleviated the tension in her. "I appreciate you listening. I'm a good listener, too. Anytime you want to talk, I'll return the favor."

"Thanks. I'm good to go." He turned away. "I'd better leave. Tomorrow promises to be another long day."

Jocelyn walked Sam to the front door, and he softly kissed her good-night. After she closed the door, she realized how gifted Sam was at avoiding anything that would make him open up about his own background. Sadness enveloped her as she headed toward her bedroom. Despite the obvious attraction they felt for each other still, would they ever be able to reach each other's hearts?

Jocelyn approached the Loomis Christian Church, not sure why she'd turned into the parking lot on the way to see Chuck at Vera Peel's boardinghouse. In the sanctuary she sat on the back pew and peered toward the altar with its cross hanging above it.

Sam's words from the night before played through her mind. *He's here for us to help us carry our burden. Turn it over to Him.* She didn't know if she could. She'd always managed her own problems. If she couldn't, then how could she think she could counsel others on theirs?

*I am with you always to the very end of the age.*

One of her favorite Bible verses from the book of Matthew repeated itself over and over in her thoughts. It had all morning since she had awakened. She'd always been determined to go it alone. Her parents' deaths only confirmed that for her.

*But what if I'm wrong? What if there's another way?*

*Show me the way, Father. How do I give up control to You?*

Although an answer didn't immediately blare through the church, serenity eased the strain of the past few weeks. She sat for a while and let the peaceful surroundings seep into her heart and soul.

Reluctantly, she rose and left the sanctuary. She had patients later and still wanted to talk with Chuck. But she would be back.

Out in the foyer Loretta exited the hallway that led to the preschool classes. A troubled look set her features in a frown.

"Are you all right?" Jocelyn stopped near the older teacher.

"No, a lot of the parents are keeping their children home because of what happened to Sarah. We've beefed up security, but there are still some holdouts who I think are influencing others to stay away."

"I'm sorry to hear that. The FBI has caught the man responsible."

"I know." The teacher straightened the slump to her posture. "And a few more returned this morning, but I don't know what to do about the holdouts."

"Have you asked Agent Pierce to talk with your parents and to look at your security?"

"No, but that's a great idea. Do you think he would come?"

"I'll talk with him, and I can also be there. If they have any concerns I can address, I'll help, too."

Loretta clasped Jocelyn in a hug. "Thank you. You're an answer to a prayer."

"I'll do what I can, but there are no guarantees."

"I know. There never are. It's in the Lord's hands now."

"Yeah." Jocelyn started for the double doors. "I'll let you know what I can arrange."

It was a short drive to Vera's. Walking up to the porch of the old Victorian house that sorely needed a fresh coat of paint, Jocelyn saw a drape fall back into place in the front room on the right side. She expected Vera to open the door before she rang the bell. The woman didn't, and when she finally did answer a good minute later, a scowl etched grim lines into her face.

"Yes?" Vera nearly barked the one word at Jocelyn.

"I need to talk with Chuck. Is he here?"

"Yes."

"May I see him?"

"Chuck's upstairs working on a bathroom for me. I'll have to go get him." The older woman, her dark red hair pulled back in a tight bun, remained in the entrance.

Jocelyn pasted a smile on her face. "Thanks. I appreciate that."

"I guess you'd better come in." Vera sidled a few feet away. "I can't afford to pay for the heat going out the door." She waved her hand toward the room on the left, then mounted the stairs.

Jocelyn entered the parlor, furnished in pieces from decades before. Standing in front of the marbled mantel, the focal point in the room, she peered at the array of photos in gilt frames. Most were of the same male at various ages. The last one was of a young man standing in front of the house next to a car. It had to be fairly recent since the vehicle was a Jeep, maybe five years old. That ruled out Vera's deserting husband, who had been gone for twenty-five years now. He'd just up

and left one day, leaving behind a bitter, angry wife and young daughter.

“Miss Jocelyn, what are you doing here?” Chuck asked from the doorway.

Jocelyn spun around and saw the glare that Vera sent her before she strode out of sight. “Would you walk me to my car?”

His eyebrows crunched together. “I thought you needed to talk to me.”

“We’ll talk as we walk.” With Vera possibly close by, there was no way she would discuss anything about the case in the house. She’d brought the photos of the redheaded women to show Chuck, but she’d wait until they were out of earshot of Vera. “I have something to show you.”

“Oh.” A sober Chuck shuffled toward the front door.

Outside near Jocelyn’s car, she withdrew the pictures from her large black leather purse. Tossing her bag onto her hood, she spread the photos out for Chuck. “The day Earl was killed, did you see any of these women at the store?” A few other ladies with different hair colors were scattered among the redheads.

“I know nuthin’, Miss Jocelyn.” His gaze darted toward the trees that fringed the swamp.

“Think, Chuck. This may help the FBI find Leah.”

“Miss Leah is nice.”

“Yes, and she needs your help. If you saw anything that day, it’s important the FBI knows about it.”

He flapped his arm at the photos. “Why do ya have a picture of Miss Vera?”

“The authorities are looking at different people who knew the Farleys.”

“I can’t remember yesterday.” He backed up, then wheeled around and stumbled in his haste to escape.

“Chuck.”

"I gotta work." He picked himself up and fled into the house.

What was Chuck so afraid of? Vera Peel? Did he see her that day going into the pawnshop? Maybe it was his fear of the law or just that he hadn't even been in the alley that day. Or was it something else? She knew talking with him was a long shot. Even if he told her something, would it be valid? Sam was right. He wasn't a reliable witness.

Once in her car she started the engine and pulled away from the curb with the distinct feeling someone was watching her. As she peered toward the house, Jocelyn saw an image of Vera framed in a window on the second floor. She stared down at Jocelyn. Shivering, Jocelyn pressed her foot on the accelerator, wishing she could speed away.

*Away from Loomis. Away from Sam.*

But she couldn't. Too many people she cared about needed her help. She couldn't let them down.

Driving down Main Street, she made a stop at the sheriff's office. She'd talk with Sam and tell him what Chuck said and also ask about meeting with the parents of the preschool children.

A deputy escorted her to the room the FBI agents were using as a base for their investigation. Sam was the only one inside when she entered.

He glanced up from the computer and grinned. "What brings you by?"

"I talked with Chuck, and he couldn't tell me anything, but he's definitely afraid of something. It might be Vera. He asked why I had a photo of her."

"I didn't think we could get anything from him, but thanks for trying. Just a minute." Sam typed something, punched a key on the computer, then gave her his full attention. "I'm sending out to the various sheriffs in a hundred-mile radius the picture our sketch artist drew from Finch's description.

Maybe one of them will know who he is. I got the impression this Tony Smith might have a record.”

“I also came by to see if you’d speak to the parents of the children at the preschool to alleviate their fears. Some of the kids still aren’t going to school. Maybe you could check the security to see if they could do anything else to make it tighter.”

He rose, gathering up a folder next to the computer. “I can do it. How about tomorrow night? That’ll give Mrs. Johnson some time to get hold of the parents and invite them to the preschool.”

“I thought I would also be there to answer any questions they may have about what their children might be going through. I’ve been seeing a few of the kids. I want the parents to know I want to help any way I can.”

“That’s good.” He moved toward the door. “Now I’m going to pound the sidewalk, showing this picture to as many as I can. Several agents are in Covington doing the same thing.”

“Let me see the sketch.”

Jocelyn examined the picture. The thin face and narrow eyes staring back at her niggled her thoughts. Had she seen this man somewhere? She felt as if she should know him, but she didn’t. Or did she?

Jocelyn bolted straight up in bed. She knew who he was—the man in the sketch. Throwing back the covers, she slipped from her bed and switched on the lamp. She watched the number on her digital clock change to 5:44 a.m. She’d give Sam until half past six, and then she would call.

After brewing some coffee, she paced the kitchen with her mug in her hand. At 6:30 a.m. sharp she snatched up her phone and called Sam. He answered on the second ring.

“What’s wrong, Jo?”

“What makes you think something is wrong?”

“Even when we dated you never called me before or after a certain time.”

“I think I know who the man is—the one in the sketch. I may be wrong—”

“Jo, who is it?” Although his voice was gruff, there wasn’t any anger in it.

“Vera Peel had a picture on her mantel of a guy who looks almost exactly like the man in the sketch, so she should know.”

“I saw her yesterday after we talked at the station. She didn’t act like she knew the person. I showed her the drawing.”

“You didn’t see the photos on the mantel?”

“We talked on the porch. She mentioned she was leaving. I even walked her to her car.”

“You need to go back.” She visualized the photo in the gilt frame. “The more I think about it, the more the resemblance is uncanny.”

“Then you’re coming with me.”

“You don’t need me.”

“Remember, you’re part of this town. I’m not. We can grab some breakfast and be at her house bright and early.”

“I can’t but I’ll pick you up in forty-five minutes. You can get something quick in the Café Au Lait at the hotel where you guys are staying. They have great beignets.” Before he said anything, Jocelyn quickly hung up.

She couldn’t eat breakfast with him. She had to keep her distance. Last Friday she had revealed to Sam in a moment of weakness more than she ever had to anyone—no more kisses. They unnerved her.

Too much time with Sam was dangerous.

True to her word, she parked in front of the Loomis Hotel

forty-five minutes later and waited for Sam. He exited the building immediately and got into the passenger seat.

“Those were great beignets, but I sure could have used a cup of your coffee. Yours is ten times better than the café’s.”

His compliment pleased her, in spite of her vow to keep her distance. She tossed him a grin and gestured toward the travel mug in the holder between them. “That’s yours. Just the way you like it. Black. No sugar.”

“You’re a lifesaver.” He sipped the brew. “An appreciated one at that.”

The warmth from his words flowed through her. It didn’t take much for her to react to him. All the feelings she wanted to deny were there in her heart. If she didn’t fight them, she would be hurt all over again.

When she pulled up in front of the boardinghouse, Sam said, “Let’s get this over with. I have to tell you I don’t relish interviewing Vera Peel again. She isn’t a pleasant woman.”

“The story is that after her husband ran off, leaving her to raise their daughter by herself, she changed.” Jocelyn fell into step next to Sam, dreading this as much as Sam.

Vera didn’t answer the bell for several minutes, and when she opened the door, a scowl accompanied her curt words. “Why are y’all back?”

“May we come in? We have something we need to talk to you about,” Sam said in an extra-pleasant voice.

“Suit yourself, but I was just fixing breakfast so make this fast.” Vera allowed them into her foyer and pointed toward the parlor.

The second Jocelyn entered the room she noticed that the photos on the mantel were gone. “She removed the pictures.” She nodded her head toward the fireplace.

“I wonder what she has to hide,” Sam whispered back.



"I have a feeling we'll find out in due time." Jocelyn took a seat on the hard settee covered in blue-and-gold brocade.

Vera didn't sit but stood behind a wing chair, her hands clutching its top. "What do you want at this hour of the morning?"

"I want you to look at the picture I showed you yesterday and tell me if you know him. His name probably isn't Tony Smith, and the sketch might not be an exact likeness of the man."

"I don't have to look at it. I don't know him. I told you that yesterday, young man."

Sam rose from the sofa and covered the space between him and the older woman. In a firm voice he said, "Take a look, Mrs. Peel." Thrusting it at her, he added, "By the way, where are all the photos from the mantel?"

Her glare sliced clear through Sam. She refused to take the sketch. "I moved some. Why should that be any business of yours?"

"Because I think one of the missing photos is of this young man. Bring them here and prove me wrong."

"Who told you that?" Vera pointed at Jocelyn. "Her? She's wrong."

Jocelyn met Vera's direct look with one of her own. She sensed they were close to finding out who hired Harry Finch.

"Who is this, Mrs. Peel?" Sam waved the paper in front of Vera. "To put your mind at ease we aren't looking for this man to charge him with any crime. We need some vital information from him. That's all. So who is he?"

The older woman huffed, looked away then back at Sam. "If you must know, it's my grandson. He visits here some, but he's gone now."

"What's his name and where is he?" Sam dropped his arm and folded the sketch, slipping it into his suit pocket.

"It's Anthony Coleman and he moves around a lot. I'm not

sure where he is. The last I heard he was heading for the Florida Keys.” Pushing herself away from the chair, she straightened to her full height of nearly six feet. “He’s a good boy and doesn’t know anything about what’s going on here. When he was back here, he only came to Loomis one time. Said the town was too boring.”

“Then you didn’t see your grandson much while he was here?” Sam moved back toward Jocelyn.

“I’d go see him and my daughter in Mandeville.” Vera stalked toward the foyer. “Y’all are no longer welcome here.”

“I guess that’s our cue to leave,” Sam said as he ambled with Jocelyn toward the front door.

Its slam reverberated through the yard as Jocelyn hurried toward her car. Again the sensation of being watched crept up her spine, sending waves of shivers through her.

She didn’t breathe decently until she was safely behind the steering wheel and had started the engine. “I’m glad that’s over with. The only good thing I know about that woman is she’s halfway kind to Chuck.”

“She obviously loves her family. There for a moment I thought she would fight me on identifying the sketch.”

“From all the photos she had of her grandson, you’re probably right.” Jocelyn quickly pulled away from the house. “At least now you’ve got a lead on the person behind the attempted kidnapping of Sarah, so it was worth it.”

“Yeah, this Anthony Coleman might be somewhere in the Florida Keys. That narrows the area, but it will still be a search. I’ll contact the Miami office and see if I can get someone down there to look around. I hope we’ll have something soon.”

When she parked in front of the sheriff’s office, she turned toward Sam. “I almost forgot to tell you in the excitement with Vera. We’re on for meeting with the preschool parents tonight.”

“Maybe I’ll have something good to tell them.”

“I like your positive thinking.”

He climbed from the car and leaned into the open door.

“We’re due a break.”

## NINE

“So the guy has been caught?” Kevin Pershing asked at the preschool parent meeting that night in the church rec hall.

“Yes, we have a suspect in custody. He has confessed to the attempted kidnapping.” His expression somber, Sam shifted at the podium in front of the crowd. “Which brings me to the next item I wanted to discuss. I’ve looked over the security measures the preschool has put in place and they are good. In addition to what’s already here, a wooden fence six feet tall will be installed next week around the playground. The gate will be locked at all times. There will be only one way into the preschool section, and that will be monitored.”

“What if there’s a fire and that way is blocked?” one of the mothers in the second row asked.

“There is another way out that can only be opened from the inside. Also the windows in the classroom can be unlocked to allow the children to escape that way.”

Murmurs floated through the vast room.

Jocelyn came to the podium and signaled for quiet. “I want to stress here that we need to keep our children safe, but they don’t need to sense your fear, either. They need to be calmly reassured that everything’s all right or their fears will only heighten and they will be scared to go out of the house.”

Glancing toward an older man off to the side, Jocelyn smiled. “Reverend Harmon has agreed to allow me to have a weekly meeting on Tuesday nights for y’all as long as you need to talk through your concerns. I’m here to support you and your children. But it’s important your children have a regular routine restored as quickly as possible.”

The minister approached the front and scanned his parishioners. “We cannot live our life in fear. Remember the Lord is our support. We will take all the precautions we can. Sarah is safe now—all your children are safe now—that the man has been caught.”

Jocelyn wanted to deny his words but knew that the FBI was keeping the details about the woman who hired Finch quiet until they found her. She wouldn’t breathe easier until the lady was found and brought in. Thankfully Sam had received a call from an agent in Florida. He’d nosed around and located a Tony Coleman in the Keys and was going to drop in for a surprise interview.

“Any other questions?” Sam stepped from behind the podium and stood next to the reverend. “Jocelyn and I will stay to answer any queries you think of. Some ladies of the church have set up a refreshment table, and we hope you’ll enjoy it. Thank you for coming, and we hope to see you all at school tomorrow.”

“Before we enjoy the delicious food and drink, let’s pray for the lawmen working this case, the people involved, Loomis and the children affected,” Reverend Harmon said, bowing his head.

Jocelyn listened to the minister’s prayer and hope filled her. The Lord was watching out for them and was there as their support. Wherever Leah was, He was there, too. As she had in the sanctuary the day before, Jocelyn felt peace.

After Reverend Harmon finished, some parents stopped Loretta Johnson and talked to her while others headed for the refreshments and filled their plates with cookies and finger sandwiches. Jennifer Morgan dipped a ladle into a punch bowl and poured a lime-green liquid into crystal cups.

"If no one else will express their appreciation, I will." Mr. Dupree sidled to Jocelyn's side while he looked over the people assembled. "We need to be thankful that God sent you here in our time of need."

The heat of a blush spread across Jocelyn's cheeks. "We all have to pull together. I'd forgotten that one of Luke's younger sisters is in preschool."

"Yes, and this one is the best in Loomis. I don't want to see it shut down." He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "We probably should have taken measures before this to make sure it was as secure as it can be. So I guess something good came out of all this."

"That's an interesting way to put it. I understand the elementary and secondary schools have taken precautions now, too. How's Luke doing?"

"That's what I wanted to tell you. He wants me to take him out to the cemetery. Is that a good idea?"

"Yes, I don't think he's really said goodbye to his mother. It might help him."

Mr. Dupree's worried expression relaxed. "Then I'll find some time. It's halfway between here and Covington. We've just been so busy at work that I haven't gotten home until dark, and I'm certainly not going to take him then. Well, I'd better be heading home. Luke's watching the girls."

"Good night, Mr. Dupree."

The man shuffled toward the door, carrying himself as if he hadn't gotten sufficient sleep in a long time. Reminded of

what Reverend Harmon said about the Lord being there to support them, she took solace in the fact and said a quick prayer for Mr. Dupree and Luke.

“Well, how do you think it went?” Sam whispered near Jocelyn’s ear.

Still feeling the Lord’s presence, as though she had re-acquainted herself with a long lost friend, Jocelyn glanced toward Loretta. “She’s smiling, which is a good sign. I hope those parents are telling her they’ll bring their children back to school. Do you think I stressed it enough that the kids need their regular routine to be maintained as much as possible?”

“Yes, and from the little I’ve heard some of them saying, I think they understand. What’s Clint going to do about Sarah?”

“Not let her out of his sight until the lady is caught. Thanks for telling him about the complete details of the case. I know you’re not making the connection among Tony Coleman, Harry Finch and the lady we’re looking for common knowledge, but Clint really appreciated knowing how close y’all are.”

“Sarah may still be in danger, but the other children aren’t. Finch has made it clear that Sarah was the target and he wasn’t to hurt the child, just hide her for a while.”

“Does the sheriff still think it’s Leah?”

Sam nodded. “He thinks the mention about getting a ransom was a ruse.”

“Then why didn’t Leah just take her daughter with her in the first place?”

“Exactly,” Sam said with a chuckle. “I didn’t say your good sheriff was the brightest one on the force. Fortunately, he does have a couple of capable deputies.”

“That’s comforting because a lot is happening in Loomis lately.”

“Want some refreshments?”

“Love some—”

The ringing of Sam’s cell cut her words off. He flipped it open and walked away where it was quieter.

When he ended the call, he came back to her unable to fully suppress his excitement. “We’ve narrowed it down, and it looks like either Georgia Duffy or Angelina Loring may have been the one who hired Harry to grab Sarah.”

“Are you going to interview them for a third time?”

“I won’t talk to either lady until we’ve done further investigation, especially their phone records, among other things.”

“But I’m sure Georgia wouldn’t mind you talking to her a third time.” A chuckle accompanied her words.

“She’s a piranha when it comes to men. I may send Evelyn instead.”

“But I doubt she’d get as much information from Georgia as you can.”

“Either way. I have to leave now to see about this latest development.”

“Do you want me to walk you to your car?” She meant it as a cute retort.

But Sam deliberately took it literally, and she saw the mischief in his expression. “Yes, that would be nice.” His gaze swept the crowd. “It looks like everyone is more interested in the food now.”

Jocelyn opened her mouth to snatch back her teasing offer.

With his finger under her chin, Sam closed it. “I’m sure no one will even notice you slipping away.” He took her hand and tugged her toward the door.

Outside in the cool January air, Jocelyn noticed the almost



full moon that lent brightness to the parking lot beyond what the lights illuminated. Although she didn't think she was in danger, it comforted her, that and the fact that Sam's sedan was near the entrance.

"I didn't want to say anything inside in case someone overheard us, but you can't really rule out Vera Peel, can you?" Jocelyn stopped near his car. "I could see her grandson covering for her and having an acquaintance instead of himself do the dirty work for Vera."

"Good point. Have you ever thought of coming to work for the FBI? You're very intuitive."

"I could never do your job. I don't even know how you can."

Brushing his hand along her jaw, he cradled her face. "I don't really have a choice." His voice softened to a whisper and his eyes saddened.

"What do you mean?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. Just the prattle of a tired man."

"Sam—"

He drew her against him and before she could get out the rest of her question, his mouth claimed hers in a gentle kiss. She wanted to surrender to the feel of his lips against hers, but through the haze that clouded her mind voices penetrated. Quickly, she backed away, instantly missing the feel of his embrace.

"I need to go back inside." She hurried toward the church.

It wasn't until she was inside the rec hall that she realized he had effectively diverted her question about why he was so driven to do this kind of work. His actions reinforced yet again that he didn't intend for her to get too close and discover what was deep in his heart.

"Sarah, I brought a new book for you. I know how much you love to be read to." Jocelyn entered the den in the back

of Clint's house while her uncle took the new puppy out back to go to the bathroom, giving Jocelyn some alone time with the three-year-old. "Do you want me to read it to you?"

Nodding, the little girl rose from the floor where she was putting a large puzzle together. When the child plopped onto the couch next to Jocelyn, Sarah's thumb immediately went into her mouth.

Jocelyn opened the book on her lap and began reading. The hero of the story was a young man with red hair looking for a lady to love. Sarah's unresponsive manner to the protagonist caused Jocelyn to wonder if the child's behavior before had been nothing but the stress of what had been happening in her life.

Halfway through, the child's wiggling body went still. A picture of a redheaded princess dominated the page, her hair long with straight bangs in front. A cry erupted from the child as she tore at the paper with the lady on it.

Tossing the book to the side, Jocelyn quickly enclosed the girl in her arms and held her close. "Sweetie, what's wrong? I thought you loved stories about princesses."

"Bad lady. Hurt Daddy."

This was the first reaction in weeks that Jocelyn had gotten out of the child since she had started working regularly with her. In their sessions Sarah had played with Molly and wouldn't even play with her dolls. She had resisted any gentle probing Jocelyn had made. With Sam closing in on the woman who had been behind the attempted kidnapping, they had both wondered if she was also the person who had murdered Earl and possibly was responsible for Leah's disappearance. The red hair was the connection, and a link among all three crimes would be the best news if the FBI were ever to find Leah—or at least discover what happened to her friend.

“Honey—” Jocelyn gestured toward the book next to her “—this is only a story. This princess didn’t hurt your daddy.”

Sarah lifted her tear-streaked face to Jocelyn. “Yeah, she did. Bad lady.”

“I’ll throw this away then.” Jocelyn rose and marched to the trash can by the door and stuffed the book in it. “See. Gone.” Back on the couch next to the child, she continued, “How did the lady hurt your daddy?”

“She made him go to sleep. Wasn’t his bedtime.”

A yelp perked Sarah up. She peered toward the door as her puppy bounded into the room. Leaping from the sofa, she hugged Molly to her.

“Can you tell me anything else about the bad lady? What did she do, Sarah?”

But Sarah just shook her head, hugging Molly tighter. Suddenly Sarah’s uncle stood in the doorway with a question in his eyes.

“I could sure use a cup of coffee, Clint. Do you have any?”

“Yeah, let me get you some.”

“I’ll come with you.” She turned to the little girl. “I’ll be right back. Okay?”

The child nodded, then rolled on the carpet with her puppy, playing tug-of-war with an old dirty sock.

In the kitchen he swerved toward her. “What happened? I noticed the book’s in the trash.”

“She didn’t react to the redheaded man, but she did to the woman. The princess had long straight hair with bangs. I don’t know if that means anything or not, but she said the lady hurt her daddy.”

“Does this mean for sure she saw Earl being murdered?”

“Maybe, or she came in afterward. Possibly the noise woke her up.”

“Before all this happened she slept through just about anything. Since Leah’s been gone, Sarah has been getting up a lot during the night. But before, she slept like a rock. That was why at first Leah didn’t think Sarah had been aware of what happened downstairs in Earl’s office.”

“I think she knows something, but we may never discover exactly what because of her age. I’ll proceed with the assumption she saw her father die and help her through the fear she’s suppressing. Time and a lot of love will help.”

Clint scrubbed his hands down his face. “She needs her mother.”

“I agree, but you’ve been a wonderful substitute.”

“But I’m not Leah. She woke up last night, crying for her mommy.”

Jocelyn retrieved her cell to phone Sam and let him know about what Sarah said. Her call went to voice mail. Frustrated, she left a brief message then disconnected.

“After I talk with Sarah some more, I’ll stop by the sheriff’s office and see where Sam is. This might help.”

“Any bit of info might bring Leah home, but honestly I’m beginning to feel something bad happened to my sister. That’s the only reason she would stay away from Sarah. I don’t want to think she’s dead, but...” His raspy voice faded into the silence.

Jocelyn placed her hand on his arm. “I wish there was more I could do.”

“Me, too.” He squeezed his eyes closed for a few seconds, then focused on her. “One thing I want Sam to know is that it mustn’t get out that Sarah could have seen the murderer.”

“They’re even keeping quiet about the red hair clue, so you shouldn’t have to worry.”

“Good. Sarah’s gone through enough. We certainly don’t need anyone to bother her again.”

\* \* \*

“Look at Angelina Loring’s cell-phone activity. She made a call to that bar where Finch hangs out around the time he was contacted. It was short. Do you think she was looking for him?” Evelyn handed Sam the sheet.

“Maybe. I think it’s time we have another chat with Miss Loring. Nothing shows up on Georgia Duffy’s phone records or Vera Peel’s to tie them to Finch.”

“I’ll make another trip to the bar and see what I can find. Maybe someone will remember the call.”

The door to the FBI’s temporary office in Loomis opened. Jocelyn stuck her head in. “Can I talk with you, Sam? I’ve just come from Clint’s.”

“Come in.” He waved his hand toward a chair that Evelyn vacated as she left. “What brings you by?” The sight of her lifted his spirits. She always could do that to him. Then he recalled his narrow escape the night in the church parking lot. He’d almost told her what he’d done as a child. She would either pity him or hate him. He didn’t want to see either in her eyes.

“Sarah revealed something during our session this morning.” Jocelyn went on to explain what happened at Clint’s. “What do you think?”

“That the woman who hired Finch may have killed Earl and even taken Leah. That she could have long, straight red hair with bangs.”

“Possibly, but three-year-olds live in a fantasy world sometimes. Still, I don’t think it was a man who scared Sarah. I do think it’s a woman. Her hair may be long or she may have bangs. Or it could be both. But it might not necessarily be that.”

“Since I saw you the other night, the agents in Florida discovered that Tony hadn’t seen Georgia except when he first came back to the area months ago, but he has seen Angelina

a few times. Long hair with bangs fits Angelina Loring, and with the information Evelyn is checking into at the bar, this confirms she is our main suspect at the moment.”

“If it is Angelina, I don’t understand why. I know that she and Leah argued right before Earl was killed, but I can’t imagine what they would have fought about.”

“We’ll just have to ask her that question, and this time we won’t accept it was concerning her figure.”

“She works for Paul Fayard. She’ll lawyer up immediately.”

“That’s why we’re gathering the evidence before we make our move. I’ll see what Evelyn can find at the bar before I bring Miss Loring in for questioning. I’ll also get a warrant to tear her place apart.”

“She lives with her mother and younger brother.” Jocelyn pushed to her feet. “I need to go. I have an appointment in half an hour.” She headed to the door.

The lines about her eyes indicated she hadn’t slept well—like him. He wanted to erase them, comfort her and promise her everything would be all right. The night before he’d paced his hotel room and almost called her to tell her everything. Only seeing the red digital numbers, 3:24 a.m., on his clock stopped him from lifting the phone.

*Tell her now.* “Jo,” he called out.

She glanced back.

A haunted look, full of longing he couldn’t respond to, stared back at him. These past few weeks had been difficult for her. Her expression reminded him of that last case they had worked on when she had wanted so much more from him while he’d been fighting his own devastation over Bobby’s tragic murder. “Thanks for your help.”

“Just put an end to this nightmare.”

When she left, Sam sank down at the table. She deserved

the whole truth about him even if it would drive a wedge between them. He would tell her after this was settled, and then he could walk away from her with a clear conscience because her need for him would die with the truth.

“What do you mean she went to work this morning?” Frustrated that he couldn’t put an end to the case, Sam faced Mrs. Loring in the middle of her entryway later that afternoon.

“Just that. She left for work. You’ll have to catch her there, but frankly—” the older woman put her hand on her waist “—you need to stop harassing my daughter. This is the third time you’ve wanted to talk to her.”

“Your daughter isn’t at work. She never showed up at Mr. Fayard’s office. She didn’t call in to tell him she wasn’t coming in, either.”

“What?”

“Do you know where she could be if not at work?”

“No, but she’s always called her boss when she can’t go in because he’s been so good to her. She has to have the job. She left early this morning and didn’t even go to the gym like she normally does.”

“Did she take her car?”

“Yeah.” Mrs. Loring frowned. “Maybe something’s happened to her like Leah!”

Sam wasn’t going to tell the woman that her daughter might be the one behind Leah’s disappearance, especially if she had now fled Loomis. He needed Mrs. Loring’s cooperation to find Angelina.

“She’s been upset lately. What are you gonna do about this? Someone is taking young women in Loomis.”

“I have a warrant to search your house.” Sam produced it and gave it to Mrs. Loring.

“Why? She’s the victim here.”

“We have reason to believe she may have knowledge concerning the attempted kidnapping of Sarah Farley.”

“Not my baby, and the longer you postpone searching for her the greater the chances are she’ll never be found, just like Leah.”

Sam motioned for Evelyn and another agent to come inside. “We still need to go through this house.”

Tears welled up in Mrs. Loring’s eyes.

“Look, I might find something that could help me locate your daughter. If she’s innocent of trying to take Sarah, then you have nothing to lose. In the meantime, I’m putting out an APB on her. Her car wasn’t at the office, either, so I’m assuming she took it.”

“She didn’t leave town if that’s what you’re thinking. We’re close. She wouldn’t do that to me without telling me.” The glare she sent Sam knifed through him.

“Sam, come take a look,” Evelyn said from the hallway that led to the bedrooms.

“Have a seat in your living room, Mrs. Loring.”

Sam started for the corridor when he heard her mutter, “I’m calling Mr. Fayard. An injustice is being carried out here.” She stomped off.

“What did you find?” Sam asked. This was one of those days he didn’t like his job.

Evelyn pointed to a journal on Angelina’s desk in her bedroom, open to the last entry, dated the day before Leah and Angelina had argued in the park. Earl was killed not long after that fight. “I found this under her mattress.”

“She didn’t write anything after this date?” After putting on his gloves, Sam picked up the piece of evidence.

“It’s near the end. Maybe she has another one.”

Sam flipped the page and noticed only two more, both



blank. “Tear this place apart. If there’s another journal, I want it. I’ll take this and go back to the sheriff’s to start a massive search for Angelina Loring. She’s been gone half a day at most. I’m going to put out a statewide APB for her and her car. If you find anything that might be of interest, call me.”

Two hours later Sam looked up from going through Angelina’s journal for the second time to find Jocelyn entering the office.

Worry furrowed her forehead. “What if Angelina was taken like Leah?”

“Angelina hated Leah. The last entry in her journal reads—” Sam turned to that page “—‘Leah thinks she’ll take Dylan from me. I’m not gonna let that happen. If I have to, I’ll go to Earl and take care of the problem.’” Sam closed the book. “That sounds like someone who could do harm to Leah and maybe Earl if he didn’t do what she wanted.”

“What was the problem she wanted Earl to take care of?”

“Would Leah and Dylan have a thing going that would make Angelina jealous of her?”

“Leah? No way. I don’t know what the problem was, but it wasn’t that.”

“In another entry Angelina ridicules Earl. Apparently Angelina and Earl dated at one time before he married Leah. And there’s an entry right before the one I read to you that talks about how desperate she is to be Dylan’s wife.” Sam pushed the journal toward Jocelyn who sat across from him. “Read for yourself and tell me what you think.”

He studied the different emotions flickering across her features as she perused the journal. Finally pity, mixed with anger, settled on Jocelyn’s face. “She sounds desperate, especially at the end.”

“That’s what I think. Desperate people do desperate things. In this case, I think she fled Loomis and I think she’s the key to Leah’s disappearance.”

“You think Angelina might have killed Leah, as well as Earl?”

“It’s a possibility. A definite one with Angelina’s state of mind toward Leah. All through her journal she focuses on the need for money and status. She’s sure she can use her beauty as means to a better life. Toward the end she thinks Leah is an obstacle to that goal.”

“That’s sad. Growing up on the wrong side of the tracks left its mark on her. I must admit the division between the rich and poor in Loomis is definitely wide. I especially got that impression when I first met Ava’s mother, Charla. Also from what little interaction I’ve had with Lenore, I know she feels the same, and their families have ruled this area for a long time.”

Massaging his nape, Sam rolled his shoulders. “I hadn’t realized how long I’ve been sitting here going through that journal several times, looking for any clues to where Angelina would have gone.”

“I heard an APB has been put out on her. That’s why I came over. Apparently y’all tried to interview her, and she isn’t anywhere to be found.”

“I’m continually amazed at the grapevine in this town.” Sam shook his head several times. “I’m also amazed that the information about Sarah and how she may be a witness to her father’s murder is still being kept quiet.”

“Don’t forget the red hair, which I realize won’t be a secret for long. But occasionally we do know how to keep one.”

“Yeah, because I still don’t know why Angelina is upset with Leah.”

“Y’all have to find her fast. The young women in town are panicking with the disappearance of Leah and Angelina.”

And when Angelina was found, he could leave Loomis, before he left his heart behind here with Jo.

## TEN

The next morning while most of the town still slept, Sam jogged out of the park and turned down the street that led to Jocelyn's. A laugh slipped out as he recognized the path he had subconsciously taken. He couldn't seem to see her enough.

*Okay, Pierce, you need to wean yourself from seeing her every day. Soon you'll be gone from Loomis, and then what are you gonna do? Bury yourself in your work like you've done in the past?*

Sam saw her house, a small cottage painted white with dark green trim. Several large magnolias guarded the front while a row of azaleas bordering the porch welcomed her guests. A refuge in this town, he thought, his feet pounding against the pavement.

*Keep going. It's too early. She'll be asleep.*

But he noticed a light on in the living room, a beacon in the dimness of dawn. He loped up the walk and rang her bell.

After she answered the door, she stepped to the side to let him inside. "Having dinner last night wasn't enough?"

"I thought I'd see if you would go jogging with me. It's Saturday and I figured you wouldn't have any patients today."

"There's a crime spree in this town. Figure again."

He started toward the kitchen, drawn by the scent of coffee spicing the air. "What time is your first appointment?"

"Ten."

He glanced back at her, taking in her jeans and Louisiana State University sweatshirt. "You've got plenty of time, but you'll need to change. There's a nip in the air, but it won't take you long to work up a sweat."

"And this is appealing how?"

"I'll be with you." He winked. "I'll just grab a cup while you change."

She stood in her doorway with her feet planted apart, staring at him, a debate taking place within her.

"I thought you told me you wanted to get into shape. This will be a good beginning."

"You couldn't corrupt me in New Orleans, so what makes you think you can here?"

"You need something physical—" he spread his arms wide "—to take your mind off everything going on in Loomis. Great way to relieve stress."

One of her eyebrows rose. "And you're just the one to take my mind off it when you're the person investigating it."

"Yep." He grinned and sauntered to the counter to pour himself some coffee.

She huffed. "Okay."

While she was gone to change her clothes, he lounged back against the counter and surveyed her kitchen. Warm and inviting were two words he would use to describe it. When he saw the sky-blue and sunshine-yellow color scheme he thought of a clear day on the Gulf, a fishing pole in his hand as he contentedly waited for a bite. He needed to take a long weekend and go deep-sea fishing. He needed a break.

When she reappeared five minutes later, her hair was pulled

up in a ponytail he could imagine swishing back and forth as she ran. The hot pink jogging suit would wake anyone she passed on the street.

“Ready?” He smiled and pushed away from the counter, putting his mug on it.

“I guess.”

“Don’t sound so enthusiastic.”

“Did I ever tell you I don’t want to hear your sarcasm before eight?”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” He pulled the front door open and waited for her to leave first.

On the porch while they limbered up, Sam’s cell rang. “I wish I could ignore this.” He flipped it open. “Pierce.”

“Sam, this is Evelyn. A Loomis College security officer contacted us about Angelina’s car. They found it in the parking lot between the history and English buildings.”

“I can be there in ten minutes. I’m jogging not that far from the campus. Go by Mrs. Loring’s and see if she has a spare key to her daughter’s Toyota. See you there.” He clipped his phone back in place. “Angelina’s car is in a parking lot at the college. Do you know where the history and English buildings are?”

“Yeah, I teach in the history building.”

“It’s in the parking lot between them. Can you show me where it is?”

“Yeah.” Jocelyn set out at a slow jog, peering at Sam. “Angelina wasn’t found with her car, was she?”

“I don’t think so. Evelyn would have told me. I hope the campus police haven’t touched the Toyota. We may get a hint as to where she is.”

Stopping for several vehicles to pass on Merchant Street that ran along the north side of the college, Jocelyn drew in deep breaths. “If her car is here, how did she leave Loomis?”

“In other words, did she leave Loomis?” Sam took off across the street and entered the college campus.

Two minutes later, the parking lot loomed ahead with the sheriff, a deputy, Evelyn and another agent standing by a red Toyota. Only a few other vehicles were around the abandoned one.

“Have you looked inside yet?” Sam asked when he approached.

“We were waiting for you, Special Agent Pierce.” The sheriff rocked back on his heels with his arms crossed over his chest as though he wasn’t going to go near the piece of evidence in a potentially explosive situation.

“I walked around and checked inside. No body.” Evelyn zipped her navy blue FBI jacket as a brisk wind picked up from the north.

“Let see what’s in the trunk. Did Mrs. Loring have a spare key?” Sam stepped up to the car while Evelyn dug into her pocket and withdrew a set.

When he unlocked the trunk, the empty space sent relief coursing through him. That was then; this is now. In that case Bobby Carson was dead, killed only a short time before. He glanced back at Jocelyn, who was well back from the vehicle, and shook his head. She wilted against the sheriff’s car as though the life had been suddenly drained from her. He knew she’d been terrified she’d see another dead body like Bobby’s. If he ever had a say in the matter, she never would again.

*Thank you, Lord.*

Sam snapped on some gloves. “Call in the crime-scene techs, Evelyn. Sheriff, can you get those tracking dogs here ASAP? We need to know if she was ever here. If so, where does her trail go from here? If not, we need to have them check

the surrounding bayou while we comb Loomis for Angelina. If she isn't found, we'll broaden our search."

As everyone began performing his or her duties, Sam strode to Jocelyn, who was still several yards back. "No sign of Angelina or foul play."

"So she's probably alive?"

He shrugged. "I don't like the fact we found the car here. It should be long gone from Loomis."

"Which means?"

"Something more could be going on."

The feel of the wind whipping by Sam chilled him even more than the dampness in the air. The airboat skimmed across the top of the water along the edge of the swamp not far from the back of a massive mansion. Even from this distance he could see the neglected state of the place with part of one of its brick chimneys missing and its color a dirty gray. Shutters hung lopsided on the top floor, the bottom hidden behind tall weeds and brush along the shore.

"Who lives there?" Sam pointed toward the mansion.

"That's Renault Hall. No one lives there anymore." The sheriff stuffed a wad of chewing tobacco into his mouth.

"Where does the family live then?"

Reed spat some brown juice into the nearby murky water. "Miss Charla has a big ole house at the front of the property. Ever since her daddy died, she's had little to do with the hall. No one's allowed on her property without going through her."

From what little he had garnished about the matriarch of the Renault family, Sam could imagine that no one went against Miss Charla's wishes. No wonder the place looked so deserted.

The deputy slowed the airboat, pulling up next to a cypress tree near Bubba and one of his hunting dogs. The balding man



in coveralls and plaid shirt had parked himself on a piece of dry land next to the huge cypress. His tracker lay at Bubba's feet, taking a nap. The man gestured toward where his dog had found a body at the base of the tree submerged in the bayou.

"Ain't a pretty sight, Bradford. I'm thinkin' the fishes have been nibbling on her. At least a gator hadn't found her yet. And she's beginning to bloat."

"Did you touch her?" Sam asked as he made his way to the side closest to the tree to see the body.

"Naw. Don't hafta. She's floatin' near the top. Came loose from the ropes." Bubba knelt next to his dog and scratched him behind the ears.

Below the shallow murky water and tangle of vegetation, a hint of white skin surrounded by brown-and-gold material taunted them. Part of a dress? Sam's gut tightened.

*What if it's Leah? What if the dog followed Angelina's trail to where she got rid of the body? How would I tell Jocelyn, Clint?*

Sam allowed the crime-scene techs to work, unraveling the snarl of ropes used to hold the body against the roots of the cypress. Finally they managed to bring the female body on board. When he viewed the corpse, he was saddened, yet relieved, to confirm the identity of Angelina Loring.

"It looks like your suspect won't be able to answer any questions." Sheriff Reed chewed on some tobacco.

"Yeah." *How convenient.* Sam stared into the dark shadows cast by the trees in the swamp. *What else lurks out there? Where are you, Leah?* More and more, he thought she was probably dead and they might never find her body. If she was hidden in the bayou, a gator had taken care of her probably by now, which meant—like his little brother—there would never be a definite answer for the family.

\* \* \*

Jocelyn entered the Loomis Hotel Monday morning and saw her friends already at a table in the Café Au Lait, off to the side of the lobby. Starting for the restaurant, she caught Sam coming from the elevator. His haggard face spoke of a man who had been putting in long hours trying to wrap up the case. Her heart ached for him. She'd missed seeing him since Saturday morning. Two long days ago, when she'd heard rumors flying around town about what was going on in Loomis. He'd managed to call her not long after they found Angelina to tell her the news, but he couldn't talk long.

He was so focused on a conversation with another agent that Sam didn't see her. She began to call out to him but decided not to. If he needed to talk, he'd come see her. It was better if she kept her distance because he would soon be going back to New Orleans.

Jocelyn headed toward the booth that Shelby Mason and her cousin occupied and slipped in next to Wendy. "Sorry, I'm late. I couldn't seem to get myself going this morning."

"I'm just glad you could make it." Shelby gestured toward the plate of beignets. "Help yourself. If we're indulging, you need to."

"I keep forgetting and here I've worn black again," Jocelyn said with a laugh. "I'm going to have powdered sugar all over me."

"That's half the fun." Wendy motioned to the waitress to bring more coffee.

After the young woman placed a mug in front of Jocelyn and refilled everyone else's, Shelby leaned across the table and said in a low voice, "Tell us what's going on with the investigation."

"You probably know about as much as I do." Jocelyn took a bite of her beignet, savoring the sweet taste. "Angelina's car

was found in one of the college parking lots. Her body was discovered in a shallow part of the bayou, not too far in."

"If she killed Earl and tried to kidnap Sarah and probably killed Leah, then who killed her?" Shelby sat back, sipping her coffee. "And where's Leah? I miss her so much, especially now. She should be sitting with us. These past few weeks..." She blinked her tears away.

"Yeah, these get-togethers just aren't the same without her presence." Jocelyn stared at the empty place where Leah would usually be sitting every Monday morning. "I'm so afraid Angelina killed Leah like Earl and somehow got rid of her body."

Wendy shook her head. "Why?"

"When I talked with Sam late Saturday afternoon, he told me they would be spending the next few days trying to tie everything up."

Scanning the café, Wendy again leaned in. "I heard from one of the deputies it's all connected to Dylan Renault. You know how desperate Angelina was for money and social standing."

"But the only connection I know between Dylan and Leah is that she used to work for him as his secretary before she got the job with the mayor," Shelby said, pushing her plate away.

"Do you think Sarah's safe now?" Wendy snatched up the last beignet.

"Yeah. The evidence connecting Angelina to Sarah's kidnapping is solid. That's the only piece of good news out of all that had happened." Jocelyn finished her sweet and took another swallow of her coffee.

"But not with Earl and Leah?" Shelby asked.

"I think that's what they're working on." Jocelyn rose from the booth. "I have to run. I wish I could stay longer, but I have appointments all day with clients."

"That's a good thing." Shelby smiled. "I remember when

you first came back here you were worried it would take years to build up your practice, if ever. We both know how some of the people in town can be about outsiders.”

“Yeah, I’m glad I have work, but the reason behind this sudden surge in patients is what’s happening in Loomis. Sadly some of my clients are children.”

“Thank you for seeing me, Mr. Renault.” Sam shook the man’s hand before taking a seat in front of Dylan’s desk Wednesday morning. “I’m trying to wrap up some issues with the case we’ve been working on.” Sam removed his pad and pen.

“Do I need my attorney present?” Dylan said with a laugh. “I’ve heard the rumors circulating about me.”

“You can certainly have one if you want, but I’m just trying to make sense of everything. I’m not here to charge you with anything. I really would like your cooperation in clarifying your relationship with Miss Loring.”

“Obviously we weren’t that close. I had no idea she was doing what she was doing.”

“She thought she could ask for a ransom for Sarah Farley. Who do you think she thought would pay it?”

“Beats me. I suppose she thought Clint would, and honestly the people in this town would probably try to help free Sarah. I certainly would help as others would. No one wants to see harm come to one of our children. We take care of our own, and Angelina would know that.” Dylan picked up a fountain pen and began doodling on a piece of paper.

“In your opinion, do you think Angelina was capable of extorting money from the whole town?”

“At one time I would have said no, but honestly the way she was behaving the last month or so, I could see it.”

“Why the change?”

“She turned twenty-five in December and was very upset. She constantly had to be reassured she was beautiful. Maybe she thought time was running out for her.” Dylan relaxed back in his padded chair, steepling his fingers together. “I knew why she was dating me. She wanted my money. She professed she loved me, but I don’t think she loved anything but herself. A few weeks ago I told her I didn’t want to see her again.”

“About the time everything starting happening?”

Dylan tilted his head to the side and thought a moment. “Yeah, come to think of it.” His thin mouth twisted into a frown. “I hate to think that I led her to her crime rampage.”

“Then you think her desperation might have driven her to do it all?” Although Dylan’s features were arranged in an appropriate somber expression, there was something cold in his eyes that alerted Sam.

The man, dressed in a dark business suit, nodded. “She has run around with some—how should I say this—” he peered off into space for a moment “—unsavory people. Just look at the man she got to kidnap Sarah.” Dylan’s jaw hardened, his eyes narrowing slightly. “I know one of my friends mentioned that her car was seen in front of a bar in Covington several times. That was ultimately why I called it quits with her.”

“Where were you Friday morning between eight and ten?”

“Why?” Dylan sat up straight. “You believe those rumors? Why would I kill Angelina? When I break up with women, I don’t kill them. If that were the case, I would have a string of dead bodies all over the place.” Gripping the edge of his desk, he angled forward. “And believe me, I enjoy women too much to do them harm.”

"It's just routine. I'm asking everyone involved where they were."

Dylan relaxed back. "Yeah, I did hear you paid Clint Herald a visit. He'd have more of a motive to kill Angelina than I would."

"So where were you?"

"I was home in bed, sleeping."

"Until ten on a weekday?"

"Yes, I run the company and can do as I wish. Everyone knows I'm a night person and like to sleep in. I often don't arrive at work until eleven. Ask my secretary."

The grin he shot Sam appeared forced. "Can anyone attest to your being home asleep?"

"Do you mean did I have someone with me? Unfortunately, not that morning." Dylan pinned him with a sharp gaze. "You'll just have to take my word for it."

"You mentioned you're a night person. Where were you early Saturday morning—around three?"

"What's that got to do with Angelina's death?"

"That's when we estimate her car was dropped off at the campus parking lot."

Dylan bolted to his feet. "This is ridiculous. I've told you I didn't kill Angelina."

"Then you won't mind answering my question."

Dylan's hands curled into fist. "I was asleep—alone—so I have no one to tell you I'm innocent."

Sam took his time rising to face Dylan. The man definitely didn't like being questioned about his whereabouts. "Thank you for your time. I can show myself out."

"Please do."

The anger in Dylan's voice fueled Sam's curiosity. The whole time he'd been interviewing the man he got the feeling

he was hiding something, something that tied in to what was happening in Loomis. He'd learned a long time ago to listen to his gut and right now it was screaming Dylan Renault's name.

"Your father told me you two used to go fishing in the bayou all the time. Where did you go?" Jocelyn asked Luke in her office Wednesday afternoon.

"Usually the main channel," Luke muttered, his arms still folded across his chest and his mouth set in a frown.

Although during her sessions she was getting information from the boy, it was slow, one bit at a time. According to his father, Luke loved to fish until his mother died unexpectedly. They came home from fishing to find she'd been rushed to the hospital. She was declared dead on arrival. Jocelyn suspected Luke associated fishing with his mother's death.

"Did you ever catch anything interesting?"

"The usual."

"Once when I was fishing in the channel when I lived here as a teenager, I caught a boot."

Luke perked up. "A boot. Was there a dead body like they found Saturday?"

"No, nothing like that, but that was all I got that day. Actually I was never very good at fishing. I hear you are."

"It's all in the bait you use. And there are some places that are just better than others." The preteen unwrapped his arms and relaxed his stiff posture slightly. "My dad found a neat place where we got a whole bunch of catfish. They were the best tasting, all fried up. Mom was the one who wanted us to go back out to that spot and get more. She..." A sheen glazed his eyes, and he looked away.

"Did you?"

Swallowing several times, he nodded. "Yeah, the day she died. We were late coming home. I found an abandoned cabin out there and we explored the area. We talked about fixin' it up as our secret place to come and fish. We shouldn't have stayed so late."

"Why?"

He clamped his jaw shut and crossed his arms over his chest.

"It wouldn't have made a difference, Luke. Your mother died from a blood clot. She got help as quickly as she could whether you and your dad had been there or not. You're not at fault for what happened."

His expression tightened even more.

"Luke—"

"I'm leaving." With tears in his eyes, he leaped to his feet and hurried toward the door.

She rushed after him, but he fled her office.

"What happened?" Mr. Dupree asked as he headed after his son.

"He started talking about his mom and that last day, but then he clammed up. I tried to tell him it wasn't his fault."

"He thinks it's his fault that she died?"

"I think he does."

"Why?"

"His mother was taken away from him. She died and he's angry. He has to focus that anger on someone or something. Right now he's turning it on himself."

Out on the sidewalk Mr. Dupree threw her a concerned look. "Now it makes sense. Last Sunday I was getting the children ready for church and Luke wasn't cooperating. He was still in bed. When I told him to get up and get moving, he yelled at me that he wasn't going to church ever again because God took his mother away."



“What happened?” At the edge of the park Jocelyn paused to scan it for Luke.

“I tried to explain that the Lord wasn’t at fault. That it was just his mother’s time. She was now in heaven with Him.”

“So you think Luke is now blaming himself?” Jocelyn saw the boy passing the gazebo, heading south.

“Yeah. I’ll talk to him. I’m the one who caused this problem.” Mr. Dupree motioned to his son now at the other side of the park. “He’s heading home. Walking the anger off might help him.”

“If you need me, call me. I’ll have my cell. I’ll come anytime. These next few days will be especially difficult because it’s the anniversary of his mother’s death.” Having gone through something similar close to the same age as Luke, she had a pretty good idea what was going through the boy’s mind.

“At least he’s starting to talk about his feelings. Thank you for that. Before, I couldn’t get him to say a word. I realize now, though, I was discounting those feelings when he told me.”

After Mr. Dupree left, drained emotionally after a long day seeing patients, Jocelyn moved to the nearest bench and eased down, relishing the still unseasonably warm weather. Leaning forward, her elbows on her knees, she pressed her palms into her tired eyes.

Luke’s situation brought back all those memories of what she’d done to her father right after her mother’s death. She made his life miserable when he was already suffering. If it hadn’t been for his steadfast love and understanding, no telling where she’d be emotionally today. By the time she’d come to live in Loomis she’d formed a close relationship with her dad, but it hadn’t been an easy road. She was afraid the same might hold true for Luke and his father. The thought pained her heart.

She wanted to help them so much, but she wasn't sure if she was. Was she pushing too hard because she knew what he was going through? Maybe she should counsel the father more than Luke. Doubts and misgivings spun through her mind, mocking her desire to help others.

Since Bobby Carson's case she didn't know if she was helping anyone anymore. Maybe she should look for another profession.

*Lord, what is it You want me to do?*

"Jocelyn, are you okay?"

Sam's voice penetrated her self-doubts. She lifted her head and found him hovering in front of her, worry etched into his features. "It's been a long day."

"Patients?"

"Yes. I just got through with a particularly hard one for me."

Sam sat next to her, way too close for her peace of mind. "Can you talk about it?"

"Not exactly. I can tell you that his problem brought back memories I didn't want to think about."

"About Bobby?"

"Not directly." She released a sigh. "About my own mother's death." She couldn't look at Sam or she might give in to the wealth of emotions bombarding her. She needed to hold herself together. "I made my father's life miserable for a couple of years after she died because I couldn't accept her death."

"And this person hasn't been able to accept his mother's death?"

"No, like me. I still wish I could just call her up and talk to her about a problem I'm having. I can't. And I can't even do that with my dad. We did finally grow close, but the road to that end was a rocky one. Now he's gone, too."

“Some people never achieve a good relationship with a loved one. At least you can say you had one for a time.”

Jocelyn looked at Sam. Something in his voice announced to her there was something personal in that statement. “Are you talking about one of your parents?”

He laughed, but there was nothing humorous in the sound. “We aren’t talking about me.” Taking her hand, he sandwiched it between his. “As you’ve told me on numerous occasions, often it takes time.”

“I may not have the time.”

He chuckled. “Welcome to my world. Time is my enemy. But I know you’re the best one to reach this person.”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

Surprise flickered into his eyes. “You didn’t used to doubt your abilities. What’s changed?”

“Bobby Carson and others I haven’t been able to reach—even with time.” Her gaze pierced him.

“Do all counselors have a one hundred percent cure rate?”

“I don’t know. We’re not talking about others.”

“Quit being so hard on yourself. You’re human. You aren’t perfect. No one is.”

“I know, but—”

He stilled her words with one finger over her lips. They tingled where he touched her. “Didn’t you hear me? Quit being so hard on yourself.”

She lifted her chin. “I will when you do the same.”

“I’m not hard on you.” He winked at her.

“Funny.” She rose. “I’m beginning to think you and I are too much alike.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

She ignored his teasing comment and started back toward her office. Sam fell into step next to her.

Pausing at her door, she peered at him. "Is there something else?"

"I'm wounded." He slapped his hand over his heart.

"Do you have everything wrapped up?"

"No."

"I know you when you're working a case. You're driven."

"Okay, I could use your help viewing the tape from the campus parking lot."

She entered her reception area and strode toward her office. "Why?"

"I'm getting pressure from the mayor, who's putting pressure on people higher up to help the sheriff straighten everything out before I leave, although my part seems to have come to an end."

"In other words it's politics at its best."

"Yep, something like that." Sam ran his hand along his nape, rubbing it. "I sent most of my team back to New Orleans except for Evelyn. I've been requested to stay."

"In case you haven't figured it out, the mayor is aligned with the Renaults and the sheriff is with the Pershings. That can make things sticky at times."

"Ah, that explains why the sheriff thinks the shadowy figure in the tape is Dylan getting rid of Angelina's car. Obviously the sheriff has his reasons for doing things a certain way that may not always be pure. I need an impartial person looking at it and telling me what she thinks. I trust you, Jo. I'm not sure who to trust in this town otherwise."

His compliment melted any reservations she had over continuing to work closely with him. She simply couldn't fight her feelings any longer. She loved him, no matter how much she tried not to. Which would make his leaving doubly hard.

"What about Leah's case? Are you closing it?" Jocelyn snagged her purse from her locked file cabinet.

"It'll remain open, and we'll continue to work on it from New Orleans. But I feel she's dead and we may never find the body. With the swamp there are so many places to get rid of a body forever. By the time the gators get through with it, there would be little to identify her if we even found some remains." Sam reached around Jocelyn and opened her front door.

Slowly she exited her office, his words still ringing in her ears. She'd known that was what he was thinking for a while, but to hear the words uttered out loud caused her heart to ache for her friend and her family. She had at least had her mother until she was eleven. Sarah wouldn't have that luxury.

"I wish I had better news, but I won't lie to you. My team and I have discussed this. This parish has been searched from top to bottom. Bulletins have been on the news. Nothing. She hasn't used her credit card. She had no money that we know of other than maybe a few hundred dollars at most. If she's alive, where is she? Why hasn't she contacted Clint, especially now that we're looking at Angelina as Earl's killer?"

Each question constricted her stomach tighter. The logic was that Leah had been killed, probably by Angelina in her warped scheme to get money and Dylan. Why she targeted the Farleys was still up in the air and might remain a mystery forever. Had Dylan then been the one to turn around and kill Angelina? Being Ava's friend, she didn't want to believe that.

"I'll view the tape and see what I can."

Sam grabbed her hand and hurried his pace toward the sheriff's office. The warmth conveyed by their link seemed so natural, but there would come a time she'd have to learn to live again without it. Before, in the park, he'd shut her down yet again when she had probed about his past with his parents. During his time in Loomis, he opened the door on his emo-

tions, giving her a brief glimpse into who Sam was, but he'd always managed to slam it shut before revealing too much.

Inside the room where Sam and his team worked, Sam switched on the television and recorder to run the tape. Jocelyn centered her total attention on what transpired on the screen.

Angelina's car with dark tinted windows was driven into the near-empty parking lot in the far corner where a large live oak blocked some of the view of the camera and threw shadows over the area. "Do you think the person knew where the security cameras were?"

"I was thinking that. And what happens next seems to confirm that."

The tape showed the lower half of what appeared to be a man in black trousers. The only time the figure emerged fully for the camera, it was clear he wore a dark hoodie pulled over most of his face. Quickly the person vanished into the shadows.

"He's about the same height as Dylan and built like him, but that could apply to many men in Loomis." Jocelyn punched the rewind button and played the tape again, pausing it right before the killer disappeared. "His gait is full of confidence as if he doesn't think he'll be caught. I would say Dylan Renault is confident, but I couldn't say it was him by what little is here." She pointed at something on the sweatshirt. "What's that?"

"We blew it up. Have a look." He gave her a photo.

"That looks like Renault Corporation's logo."

"Yeah, so the sheriff has informed me. We just got this back from the lab in New Orleans this afternoon. It wasn't easy enhancing it enough to even get this fuzzy picture."

"Dylan isn't the only one with a sweatshirt like that. They gave it out to all their employees—more than one hundred last fall. Possibly even others."

“Which could make it possible for someone to steal one and wear it purposely to frame Dylan. Or at least to make it look like he could be the person.”

“Or he didn’t think anyone would be able to tell and didn’t think about it. You have to admit the hoodie is a perfect cover and wouldn’t seem out of place if someone came by.”

“In lieu of a ski mask?” Sam asked with a laugh.

“Yeah, that would be kinda out of place in Louisiana even in winter. But you can’t discount that the person tried to hide who he was, so if someone was framing Dylan, why not be more blatant?”

“Exactly, so the person wasn’t counting on us picking up on the logo.” Sam flipped off the machines. “Dylan’s the one with the motive.”

“That you know of.”

“I found out from his secretary that Angelina had been calling him. She could have been harassing him. She may have even been blackmailing him. What if she found out something he didn’t want others to know?”

“Does he have an alibi for the time of the murder?”

“No, nor for when the car was disposed of.” Sam lounged back against the table.

“Then he seems the mostly likely candidate, but that doesn’t mean he did it. Are you going to bring him in?”

“I’ve already interviewed him once today. I’ll bring him into the station tomorrow, but before that, Evelyn and I will make sure we have all our ducks in a row. Apparently you can’t arrest a Renault without an airtight case. I want that. I’ll put the pressure on him tomorrow and see what happens.”

“Even if he did it, he wouldn’t confess. That’s not Dylan.”

“But maybe he’ll slip up and reveal something to cinch the case.”

Listening to Sam made Jocelyn's head pound with tension. The situation in Loomis was complex with many aspects that had to be taken into consideration, especially with a prominent family involved. Poor Ava. She would have to deal with all this. She would make sure her friend knew she was there for her.

Sam tossed the photo onto a stack of folders. "Are you ready to get out of here?"

The lines about his eyes and mouth emphasized how tired he was. She wanted to smooth her hand over them and erase his exhaustion. If it were only that simple. "Yeah. Let's blow this joint."

"Dinner is my treat tonight."

"Sam, I'd rather not go out to eat after the long day I've had. But you're welcome to come back to my house."

"Then I'll take care of dinner at your house."

"But you don't cook."

"I cook when I have to. I don't like to eat out all the time. A single guy has to if he wants to survive." Again he took her hand and headed toward the exit. "Don't you worry about a thing."

"This is your idea of cooking? Ordering in?" Jocelyn opened the pizza box. The aroma of spices, tomato and sausage saturated the kitchen.

"Yep. I know how to punch in a number as well as the next guy."

"Here I'd gone and thought you changed and actually learned how to make something."

He bent toward her. "I have a confession. I love pizza and probably have it at least once a week."

"Tell me something I don't know. Remember, we dated last year. I think I put on five pounds during that time."



“Hey, go jogging with me and it won’t be a problem.”

“I prefer limiting my pizza intake instead.”

“You didn’t do so bad the other day.” Sam took a bite, a smile of satisfaction on his face as he savored his dinner.

“You slowed down so much for me that you could have pulled out a book and read it while you were running.” Jocelyn plopped a slice onto her plate, secretly enjoying the smells wafting up to her. Anticipation caused her to slow her movement so she could relish every second of the piece.

“That’s what friends do, make sacrifices for the other.”

“Ah, so that’s what we are, friends.” Halfway through the first slice, another was tempting her with its delicious flavor.

Sam’s gaze snared hers. “Always. These past few weeks have reminded me how well we work together.”

“All good things evidently come to an end.”

“Yeah.” Sam concentrated on his second helping and fell silent.

That left Jocelyn to her thoughts—ones she didn’t want to have but couldn’t ignore any longer. She loved him and that wasn’t going to change but soon he’d be gone. Granted New Orleans wasn’t that far away, but Sam’s busy schedule would make it difficult for them to see each other much. If she was honest with herself, she’d loved him for a long time. But should she say anything?

“Through, Jo?”

His question anchored her in the here and now although she still didn’t have an answer to her dilemma. “Yes, my mouth is screaming more, but my common sense will prevail.”

“Then I’ll take your plate and clean up.”

Five minutes later all evidence of their dinner was gone, and Sam drew her toward her living room. Sitting on her couch, he tugged her down next to him.

“Now, it’s time to relax, forget for a while what’s going on outside these four walls,” Sam said.

“How about scintillating conversation?”

“That would require the ability to string together sentences that make sense. I’m not sure I’m up for that.”

“You just did.”

“How about this then?”

He captured her face between his large hands and pulled her to him, slanting his mouth across hers. When he leaned back, their lips parting, he still kept her head caged within his embrace. His forehead touched hers. The rise and fall of his breathing increased its tempo, mirroring her racing pulse.

“Not a bad way to pass the time,” he murmured, the whisper of his words tingling her mouth.

She inched away. “I could get quite used to your kisses. Probably not a wise thing at the moment.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re leaving Loomis soon, aren’t you?”

“New Orleans is only forty-five minutes away according to you and that little coupe of yours.”

She increased the distance between them. “Sam, we can’t keep doing this. I want to care about you, but I don’t even know the real you. Every time I get close, you change the subject—or you kiss me. Well, your kisses are great, but they just aren’t enough. I need to know the real you.”

## ELEVEN

“I wish you didn’t.” Sam surged to his feet and put the width of the room between them.

Those words destroyed any ray of hope she’d had that the past few weeks had forged a stronger bond than when they had lived in New Orleans. For just a moment as he’d talked about seeing her when he went back to the city, she’d allowed herself to dream of a future with him.

“I’m no good for you or anyone long-term.”

She dug her hands into the couch cushion. “But I’m all right for a short-term relationship?”

“I...” Pivoting away from her, he faced the dining room, his arms rigid at his sides. Finally he turned back to her, his expression neutral. “What do you want from me?”

She slowly rose. “I want you to trust me with what’s going on inside. I can’t continue this—I’m not even sure what we should call what’s between us. I want a relationship that will be forever. I want one like my parents had before my mother died. They shared everything. You keep everything bottled up inside. Once I got through my own grief over my mom’s death, I discovered how torn up my dad was. They were halves that fit together to form a whole. I won’t settle for anything less than that.”

"And you deserve all that. I care enough to want only the best for you."

"But not enough to be that other half."

"I'm damaged goods. There isn't enough left of me after my workday to form a half."

"Then why do you keep working for the FBI?"

"Someone's got to look for the missing people. Someone has to care enough not to give up until..." He dropped his head and pressed his fingers to his eyes.

"Someone is found alive."

Looking straight at her, he murmured, "Or dead." Pain with a hint of anger flooded his face.

"What happened? This isn't just about the horrors you've seen on the job. There's more, and you've kept it locked inside you. Why?" She closed the gap between them. "What is driving you? I care about you. I want to help you."

"Can you honestly say we spent a lot of time together when we were dating?"

"I understood the demands of your job."

"But when I wasn't working a crime 24/7, I was working on a cold case. That didn't leave much time for us. I knew I wasn't there for you like you deserved."

"What cold case?" She touched his arm, wanting to wipe the hurt from his expression.

"My little brother was kidnapped when he was five. He was never found. He could be alive today. I could pass him on the street and not know it was him."

His pain became hers. She stepped nearer and tried to take him into her arms. He wrenched away.

"Don't, Jo. You want to know what drives me? It's finding my brother—" he swallowed several times "—or his body."

Anything to put him truly to rest for my family—for me.” The last two words were a raw whisper.

“Not knowing one way or the other can be worse than knowing a person is dead for sure, but you need to let it go. You need to turn your pain over to the Lord. That’s what you taught me.” A few weeks ago she would never have said that to him. But now she understood the power of God’s peace—the peace that passes all understanding. “God is there to shelter us and support us through the hard times. Let Him.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

“You think it is. Up until recently I had grave doubts about my faith. It was you who brought me back to the Lord, and yet you really don’t see how He can be there for you?” She needed him to see he wasn’t following his own advice to her. “I understand you want closure—”

He stormed toward her foyer. “You don’t understand at all.” Pausing at the door, he thrust it open, then said, “I’m the reason my brother was kidnapped, and I have to live with that fact the rest of my life.”

Shock held her immobile for a few seconds. By the time she hurried out onto the porch, Sam was driving away.

Nearly to the Loomis Hotel, Sam had to pull over to the curb before he did something foolish and caused a wreck. He wasn’t even aware how he got to Main and Church streets. All he could see was the surprise that had descended on Jocelyn’s face when he had told her that he was the one responsible for his brother’s kidnapping.

He’d been tempted for weeks to tell her why he couldn’t commit to anyone. She deserved to know, but he’d never been able to find the right time and now he knew why. He

didn't share himself because he was lousy at doing it. That day his brother was taken was the last day of his boyhood. He'd grown up fast after that. Even though his father had tried to temper his mother's accusations, he'd learned to lock the pain inside, deep where no one could get at it and use it against him.

*Lord, I'm lost. Help me to find my way back, to live again. How do I even start?*

"Where have you been?" Evelyn asked Sam Thursday morning as he entered the FBI's temporary office at the sheriff's station. "I got a call from one of our agents in New Orleans. Leah's car was found."

"Found? Where?" His eyes stung from the lack of sleep, which at this point in his career he should be used to. But no matter what he tried to do, he couldn't forget Jocelyn and the last time he saw her the night before.

"In a secluded field. But some hunters found it and reported it to the local police. It's been burned, but they could tell it was the car you were looking for although the tag is gone. Our team in New Orleans is going to check it out."

"Which reinforces our theory that harm came to Leah."

"I hope we'll find out more after they process the car. I've got something else." Evelyn shuffled some papers until she found what she wanted and handed the sheet to Sam. "This is the report back from the lab on the complete tape of the parking lot. Other than the fuzzy Renault logo, there's nothing else to point to who the man is."

Sam settled into a chair and perused the report as though that would change the words he didn't want to read. Nothing to cinch the arrest of Dylan Renault for Angelina's murder.

"Sam." Evelyn half sat, half leaned against the table near

the computer. "Are you all right? You don't look like you got any sleep. We've almost got everything wrapped up here."

Sam wanted to shout: *How about Leah? She's still missing. Yes, the chances are she's dead, but still the family should know for sure. No one should go through what I've gone through for twenty-five years.*

Instead, he pushed to his feet and moved toward the door. "Is Dylan here with his attorney yet?" He needed a ton of coffee to keep himself alert.

"He's in the first interview room with his lawyer, Mr. Fayard. He's been there about fifteen minutes. I expect he's not very happy to be waiting. He informed me he had a meeting out at Renault Hall and he didn't want to be late."

"He'll have to wait a few more minutes. I'm getting some coffee. Do you want any?"

"No."

In the hallway Sam strode toward the main room, poured some of the strong brew then made his way back to play word games with Dylan Renault, most probably Angelina's killer.

With Evelyn entering first, Sam came in and stalked to the table, sitting down across from the smug man and his attorney.

Dylan looked up from brushing nonexistent lint from his suit. "I've got ten minutes, Special Agent Pierce, then unless you are arresting me for something, I'm walking out of here. Contrary to some, I'm not late for appointments."

Sam unclenched his jaw to mutter, "I'm so glad you could come this early since you're rarely up before ten—at least according to you."

"Look, if you don't have anything new to talk to me about," Dylan began to rise, "then I'm leaving."

"Sit, Mr. Renault." Sam fixed his unwavering gaze on the man's flushed face as he tried to rein in his temper. "I do have

something new to show you.” He pointed toward the television sitting at the end of the table. “I want to show you a little tape you might find interesting.”

“Unless it’s only—” Dylan checked his gold watch “—five minutes long, I’ll have to pass.”

Sam ground his teeth, determined not to get upset by the man’s arrogance. Punching the play button, Sam sat back and observed Dylan’s expression as he watched the videotape. The only reaction the man exhibited was a slight flaring of his eyes that almost instantly disappeared.

“Do you want to see it again?” Sam asked as he punched the stop button.

“Why should I? What’s that—” Dylan flicked his hand toward the now dark TV screen “—got to do with me.”

“Don’t you recognize Angelina’s car?”

“Yes, but—”

“Don’t you recognize yourself walking away from the car?”

Dylan shoved to his feet, the chair falling back, its sound vibrating through the small room. “That was not me! You can’t say it was.”

Dylan’s fists rested on the tabletop, his body leaning toward Sam while his lawyer tried to calm his client down. Fully relaxing for the first time that day, Sam lounged back and smiled. Finally the attorney managed to get Dylan to have a seat again.

After a whispered exchanged between Dylan and his lawyer, Sam said, “I see you recognized something in the tape. What was it? The fact the Renault logo on the sweatshirt was visible enough to be recognized? Is that it?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Dylan pulled down the cuffs of his shirt under his suit coat.

Sam slid the enhanced picture of the logo on the sweatshirt toward the men. “See for yourself what my tech guys found.”



Dylan barely glanced at the photo. “There are tons of those hoodies in Loomis. If you want, I’ll have my secretary draw up a detailed list of who I gave them to.” Dylan turned to his attorney. “Why, Mr. Fayard, I believe you have one, don’t you?”

The lawyer nodded.

“Now if that’s all, I’m leaving.” Dylan stood and stormed from the room.

“Very interesting reaction on Mr. Renault’s part.” Sam stared at the door that the man had slammed on his way out. “Evelyn, our prime suspect is definitely hiding something.”

Sam left town hall, frustration churning his stomach. He hadn’t been successful in obtaining a search warrant for Dylan’s house and place of business, and worse, he was afraid short of a confession he wasn’t going to—unless he could find a judge not beholden to the Renault family.

After crossing Church Street, Sam strode along Main in front of the park. He abruptly halted halfway to Jocelyn’s office, realizing he’d automatically headed there to see her and discover which of the remaining judges would possibly go against the Renault family. He couldn’t depend on her insight. He would have to ask the sheriff, as well as keep digging for evidence against Dylan.

Making an about-face, Sam jogged across Main and strode back toward the station. But when he neared the building, he glanced down the street and saw Loomis Christian Church. With its steeple jutting up into the sky, the place beckoned him.

Minutes later, he entered the sanctuary, its simple, clean lines drawing him toward the front. He dropped to his knees before the altar and bowed his head. He couldn’t remember needing the Lord more. With his life in shambles, he didn’t know what to do.

*Jocelyn needs a whole man to love. I'm fractured, Lord. How can I give her love and support when I can't even do it for myself?*

A memory of his mother's cries pierced him anew as though she stood in front of him. Her accusations bombarded him. But the worst part was knowing he was dead to her. The day the kidnappers came into their yard and took his brother, they might as well have taken him, too—as far as his mother was concerned. In her mind that day she lost both of her sons and she never let him forget it.

*Haven't I atoned for my mistake? When will I be able to let the past go? Show me the way. Please, Father.*

Sam let the silence surround him, the quiet a comfort in the madness that was so often a part of his life. Everything but the power of His love faded as he spent time with the Lord.

When his cell rang minutes later, the sound jerked him back to the real world. He quickly moved toward the exit as though answering the call in the sanctuary was an intrusion into its peacefulness.

In the church foyer, he saw Evelyn's name on his screen and flipped his cell open. "Yes."

"Sam, a call came into the station from an anonymous male reporting a shooting at Renault Hall."

Sam hurried from the building. "Did he say who was shot?"

"Dylan Renault."

"Pick me up on the way. I'm in front of the Loomis Christian Church."

"On the way."

Not two minutes later she pulled to the curb and he jumped into the sedan. "Did the caller say if Dylan was dead?"

"No, but the sheriff's calling the paramedics then coming himself."

Evelyn drove through the Renault estate, passing the snowy white mansion with four towering columns that the family lived in now. When the old hall came into view, its run-down facade fit into its wild, overgrown surroundings as though the house was being allowed to deteriorate and the area swallowed up as nature took over.

*Why?* Sam asked himself as Evelyn screeched to a stop in front of the languishing house. In the midst of a strong aroma of rotting vegetation, Sam scanned the area and found the front door boarded up.

“It doesn’t look like he’s in the house unless there’s another way in. Let’s circle it and meet in the back.” Drawing his gun, he headed in one direction while Evelyn went in the opposite one.

Tall weeds had invaded the garden and overtaken what had once been a showcase for Loomis. Rosebushes grew tangled together as if one. A pond held water turned bright green from too much algae. When he rounded the back of the mansion, he checked the area close to the house before moving out into an overgrown formal garden with a fountain in the center, filled with green, dirty water. On the ledge of the octagonal-shaped fountain perched a stone pelican with its wings spread as though it had just landed.

Where was Dylan Renault?

Amidst the swampy scent, a faint odor of gunpowder hung in the air. “Dylan.”

A moan answered his shout. He hurried in the direction of the sound. Sam saw him among the azalea bushes, lying on his stomach, not moving.

Blood oozed from Dylan’s back, pooling on the ground around him. Sam knelt by him and felt for a pulse.

Dylan’s eyes popped open and looked straight at Sam.

The man tried to turn over. "Sarah's—" his eyelids slid closed "—father." He went limp.

*Move on.* At her office window overlooking Main Street, Jocelyn couldn't even get up the enthusiasm to do her work. She must have gone to the phone ten times this morning and started to call Sam as she had the day before. Then she'd hang up before she punched in the last number. What could she say to him?

He was hurting and he wouldn't, couldn't, let her help him. To her, that was an effective rejection like the one in New Orleans. But she loved him and those feelings weren't going to go away. She'd tried to banish them.

Maybe she should just pick up and move again. Some place far from Loomis, from Louisiana. She still had an inheritance from her father. She could go back to college and find another career. A complete fresh start where maybe she could discover a new way to help others.

The whole night before, she'd prayed for some kind of sign from the Lord. Some direction she should go with her life. If she stayed in Loomis, she would always be reminded of her failure with Sam, with Bobby Carson and for that matter with Luke Dupree. The boy now refused to talk to her or anyone else. The burden pressed in from all sides.

She needed to get out of the office. Heading for the door, she practically ran into Mr. Dupree, his face ravished with pain. "What's wrong?"

"Luke's run away and I can't find him anywhere. I've been looking all morning in the usual places. None of his friends have seen him. I thought maybe he'd come here. That maybe he finally wanted to talk."

"No." Trying to remain as calm as possible for Mr. Dupree, Jocelyn let the man into her reception area and closed the door.

“You know what today is?”

“The anniversary of your wife’s death. Did you see your son this morning?”

“No, he was gone. In fact, he might have left sometime in the middle of the night. I checked on him about one when I went to bed. He was in his bed. I thought he was asleep.”

“Have you called the sheriff’s office?”

“Yeah, but most of them are out. The deputy took the information, but it was the same one who brought Luke back a couple of weeks ago when he skipped school. All he told me was that Luke would come home when he got hungry.” Mr. Dupree shoved his hands through his tousled hair. “I got the impression the man was only half listening to me. His attention was focused somewhere else.”

“I’ll help you look for him. We’ll stop by the station and make someone understand what’s going on with your son.” Her concern mushroomed as she thought about the fragile state of mind the child had been in the past few days. His agitation and anger might turn inward. Although he hadn’t said anything about harming himself, she was always aware of the possibility.

As she crossed Main Street with Mr. Dupree and made her way toward the sheriff’s office, she punched Sam’s number into her cell. Even though she didn’t want to see him, he was the best person to help look for Luke. Her hand shook as she held the phone to her ear.

“Jo, this isn’t a good time. Can I call you back? I’m at a crime scene.”

Before he disconnected, she said, “Wait. I need your help. Luke has run away. His father can’t find him anywhere. He hasn’t been seen since one in the morning. He’s the boy I told you I was worried about.”

"I'm in the middle of—" a long pause, then "—I'll be at the sheriff's in ten minutes."

Relief flooded Jocelyn as she pocketed her phone and entered the station with Mr. Dupree. She charged up to the counter and confronted the deputy behind it. "This is the anniversary of Luke Dupree's mother's death; Luke's missing and I'm afraid he could harm himself. What are you going to do?" The firmness in her voice brooked no argument.

The man gaped, his eyes wide.

"Well?" She put her fist on her waist, projecting the image of a she-bear protecting her cub.

"I-I'll call the sheriff. He's at a crime scene, but I'll let him know."

"Fine." Her gaze drilled into the deputy until he shuffled back a few feet then scurried toward the radio and contacted Bradford Reed.

When the young man came back, he looked sheepish, his gaze never quite meeting hers. "He said that Special Agent Pierce was on his way along with two deputies."

"We'll wait outside then."

Waiting on the sidewalk by the station, Jocelyn fortified herself with a calming breath and said, "We'll find him, Mr. Dupree."

Distraught, Luke's father held his head. "I can't think of any other place my son would go. What if he started hitchhiking out of Loomis? Lately he's been telling me how much he hates this town." He stared off in the direction of the highway toward Covington. "Do you really think he might harm himself?"

She wished she could deny the truth behind what she'd said to the deputy to get him to take Luke's disappearance seriously, but she couldn't. "We have to consider every possibility.

Luke is very vulnerable right now. He's hurting, and he doesn't think the pain will go away." Behind her she glimpsed two deputies' cars barreling down Church Street toward them. "Have you checked the cemetery?"

"That's the first place I looked, but he wasn't there."

"We'll try again. Maybe he hid from you."

Anguish carved deep lines into the man's face. "That's possible. I didn't search the whole place."

Sam jumped from the car the second it came to a stop at the curb. "What's going on? Fill me in." He peered from Jocelyn to Mr. Dupree.

After Luke's father told Sam where he'd looked for his son, Jocelyn added, "I'm worried about him. He's angry with everyone, including himself. I think we should look at the cemetery again. Lately he's talked about it to me. Also, maybe the other deputy can drive to Covington. Luke has been talking about hating this town. He might have left."

"We'll find him," Sam said to Mr. Dupree. "Do you have a recent picture of your son we can make copies of and use?"

Mr. Dupree lowered his head for a moment, then dug into his back pocket of his jeans and withdrew his wallet. "Here. This is his school picture this year."

"Great. I'll have the deputy go into the station and make copies, then head out to the highway to Covington. He can use some to show the police there." Sam took the photo and went to the driver's side of the second squad car.

"I should have thought of bringing more pictures of Luke. I still have a whole sheet of those." Mr. Dupree shifted from one foot to the other, hardly able to stay still.

Jocelyn laid her hand on the man's arm. "It's hard to think of everything in a time of crisis."

After Sam finished talking with the second deputy, he ap-

proached Jocelyn and Mr. Dupree. "Have you called Luke's friends to see if they know anything?"

"Yes. They didn't."

"Did Luke take any money with him?" Sam asked.

Again Mr. Dupree dropped his head and thought for a moment, kneading his nape. "I'm not sure. I don't think his backpack was in his room. He usually keeps it by his bed."

"I want you to check his bedroom. See what's missing. That might help us figure out where he might have gone. C'mon. On the way to your house, call Luke's friends again. Make sure they have your cell and impress upon them how important it is to let you know if they see him."

"How about the cemetery?" Jocelyn asked Sam.

"We'll go after we go to the house. If he didn't take anything, then he's planning to come home. If he took his belongings, he's running away."

Sam slipped into the back with Jocelyn while Mr. Dupree climbed into the front passenger seat, retrieved his cell and began making the calls Sam requested.

Jocelyn studied Sam's haggard face. She fisted her hands to keep from touching him, the impulse strong.

"I was at Renault Hall," he whispered, and leaned close. "Dylan is dead. He died at the scene before the ambulance even arrived."

"How?" His familiar aftershave nibbled at her defenses. She needed to be strong and not give in to the hurt his rejection had caused.

"Someone shot him in the back."

"Murdered!" The word said in a normal tone echoed through the car.

Mr. Dupree glanced back at them, his phone to his ear. Worry slashed across his features.



"It's nothing, Mr. Dupree." Jocelyn waved his concern away and lowered her voice. "Sorry about that, Sam. I'm just surprised."

"You and me both." Sam exited the squad car as soon as the deputy pulled into the Dupree driveway. Over the hood he said to the officer, "Check with the neighbors. Find out if they saw Luke anytime after one last night."

The young man loped toward the nearest house while Jocelyn entered the Dupree home with Luke's father and Sam. The place was in dire need of a woman's touch, with a pile of laundry on the couch in the living room, toys scattered across the floor and unwashed dishes on the coffee table.

"Luke's room is in the back. This way."

"Where are your two girls?" Jocelyn asked as she followed the men down the hallway.

"I took them to school then went looking for Luke. I didn't want them to be worried about their big brother so they don't know anything about what's going on."

"Would he have said anything to them?" Sam asked, opening the door to the room Mr. Dupree indicated.

"He stopped talking to them months ago unless he's yelling at one of them."

Luke's anger reminded Jocelyn of hers when her mother died. She could remember the intense emotions churning inside her, needing to get out any way they could. She hadn't had a sibling to take her confusion and bitterness out on, so her father bore it all.

"Okay. Mr. Dupree, I want you to go through all the drawers, closet, what's on the floor and see if anything is missing. Especially check out his favorite things and his clothes."

Sam prowled the room with an occasional glance finding its way to her. Amidst the chaos all about, Jocelyn wondered

how Mr. Dupree would be able to tell if Luke took anything. Had the child's rage caused this? It looked as though someone had taken the contents of the chest of drawers and dumped them on the floor until she wasn't sure what color the carpet was.

Painstakingly Mr. Dupree picked his way through the mess, picking up clothes and checking under them. As the man searched, Sam made his way back to Jocelyn.

"How could the boy live like this?" Sam asked, facing the scene that looked like the kind of destruction Katrina had wrecked on the area.

"A lot of kids have messy rooms."

"I never did."

Jocelyn stared at him. "Never?"

He shook his head. "I didn't give my mother any reason to get mad at me."

Jocelyn's heart slowed its beat. Another glimpse into Sam's past. Normally she would pursue what he had said, but this wasn't the right time and now she didn't want to know any more about him. It was too late. It would just make walking away more difficult.

Mr. Dupree yanked back his son's bed cover, then looked up at them. "His backpack is gone with some clothes, the money he's been saving, and his handheld electronic game he spends hours playing."

"Then it sounds like Luke plans to be gone for a while," Sam said.

## TWELVE

“I didn’t put those flowers on my wife’s grave.” Mr. Dupree frowned and scanned the cemetery. “I think he stole them from other gravesites. There are some empty vases all around.”

Jocelyn stared down at the patch of ground, littered with various kinds of flowers, some plastic, some real. Their sweet fragrance drifted to her. Her worry intensified. They needed to get to Luke before he did something to himself or someone else.

“Let’s check the grounds. Make sure he isn’t still here,” Sam said, rotating in a full circle.

A six-foot, black wrought iron fence encircled the cemetery. With one entrance into the place, Sam hoped that if Luke were still around, they would find him.

“We’ll fan out from here. Mr. Dupree, you cover that area, while Jocelyn, you check over there and I’ll take the rest. Deputy, guard the gate in case he tries to get out.”

Wandering among the gravesites sent chills up Jocelyn’s arms although the temperature had climbed into the lower sixties. Even the sun didn’t warm her as she searched her section. She’d spent too much time in a cemetery, visiting her mother and father.

Twenty minutes later she returned to Luke’s mother’s grave

and only had to wait a few moments before Mr. Dupree, his face reflecting his failure to find his son, and Sam approached. As she watched Luke's father striding toward her, a thought popped into her mind of that last conversation she'd had with the boy.

"Mr. Dupree, have you checked the fishing hole you and Luke used?"

He frowned. "No, but he hasn't been wanting to go fishing. Not since his mother..." The man's eyes widened. "You think he went there?"

"It's a possibility. He told me how much he loved going there. He even talked about the cabin y'all found that last time."

"Then let's go there." Sam stopped next to Jocelyn. "Where's your boat?"

"At the pier at the end of Bayou Road. It's not much, but it can hold up to four people."

"Good. I'll have the deputy drop us off, and then he can go back to the station and start working on coordinating a search of Loomis and the surrounding countryside. He can get the word out to the townspeople, too."

"What if the boat is gone?" Mr. Dupree started for the squad car.

"I'm hoping it is. That'll mean we're on the right track. If that's the case, we'll use the sheriff's department's airboat."

Not fifteen minutes later Jocelyn stood on the old pier and stared at the unoccupied space where the Dupree skiff should have been. Hope blossomed in her, and she could see in Mr. Dupree's expression the same feeling taking root in him.

After retrieving the keys from the station and giving them to Sam, the deputy left with instructions from Sam on what to do if they didn't find Luke at the fishing hole. A massive search of the bayou would have to be launched. While they would fan out from the fishing hole, others would need to ex-

plore the rest of the swamp near Loomis. The tracking dogs could be brought in by that time.

The damp wind played with loose strands from her ponytail as Jocelyn sat in one of the plastic chairs in front while the airboat skimmed atop the brackish water. She yanked the pieces of her sweater across her front and hugged them to her. The deeper into the bayou they went the more potent the scent of rotten vegetation accosted Jocelyn. Although she'd lived in Louisiana a good part of her life, the swamp never held a fascination for her. Even as a teenager when others would go investigating parts of it, she always stayed back, only venturing one time into the main channel, which had been more than enough for her.

As Mr. Dupree guided the boat from the deep channel into one little used by others, the sense of stepping back into a primeval time inundated her. A canopy of trees wrapped her in a surreal atmosphere of dark shadows with bright shafts of sunbeams occasionally breaking through to highlight something below.

Coming out of the gloomy enclosure, Mr. Dupree slowed the boat and cut the engine. Jocelyn rose. A birdcall sliced through the sudden quiet. Then another. The place came alive with nature's sound. A raw beauty abounded in all areas she looked.

But there was no Luke. No skiff.

"This is where my son and I would fish." Disappointment laced each of Mr. Dupree's words.

Jocelyn whirled toward him. "How about the cabin? He said he was intrigued by the old place. Where is it?" She glanced around and didn't see anything that looked like one.

"Around that bend." Mr. Dupree pointed toward a wall of trees that didn't appear to lead to anything. "It dead-ends and the land is a bit higher. There are places you can walk through the brush without getting wet."

“Let’s go there.” Sam touched her hand on the back of her chair. “We’ll find him.”

“I hope so,” she whispered close to Sam’s ear. “I’m really worried about Luke.”

He ran the pad of his thumb under her eye. “I can tell. This boy reminds you of what you went through.”

Jocelyn nodded. “I can reach him. I know I can, with time. I’ve walked in his shoes.”

Sam squeezed her hand, his gaze trained forward. The airboat crept around the bend, the green swallowing them into a world of shadows, Spanish moss dangling from branches as though reaching out to them. Jocelyn shuddered.

Sam shot to his feet, gesturing toward the far end. “I see a skiff.”

Mr. Dupree increased the speed until he pulled up behind his boat. A rope latched on to a post held it in place. He scrambled toward the pier jutting out into the water in front of an old cabin with its two windows broken out and pieces of its roof missing.

Jocelyn stopped him. “Let me talk with Luke first.”

“But—but—he’s my...” Mr. Dupree stammered to a halt.

“Please. I can help him. I’ll let you know he’s okay.”

A crashing sound came from the cabin, then Luke’s face popped up in one of the windows. “I’m not coming home. Go away.”

Mr. Dupree, tears in his eyes, nodded.

With Sam’s aid, Jocelyn climbed up onto the pier and carefully made her way toward the cabin, having to step over missing and rotten boards. Glancing down at the dark water below, she gulped.

*Lord, I’ve had my doubts lately, but I know you want me to help Luke. You sent him to me because of what happened*

*to me as a child. Please give me the right words to get through to him finally.*

Jocelyn reached out and gripped the handle to the planked door. It creaked as she opened it. Inside Luke threw a chair against the back wall. The rest of the place looked as if he had been destroying it bit by bit for a while. Little remained recognizable.

“Luke.”

He reeled around, glowering at her. “Go away! I told you yesterday I have nuthin’ to say.”

“The only way I’m leaving is if you leave with me.”

He stared past her toward the open door behind her. “I hate him. He doesn’t care she’s gone.”

Jocelyn inched forward. “Why do you say that?”

“There were no flowers on her grave. None! Everyone else had some. He doesn’t have the time to put flowers on her grave. He doesn’t...” Luke cleared his throat. “He’s all the time wanting to go fishing with me. I hate this place. I have to destroy it.”

“Why do you want to destroy the cabin?”

Luke clenched his hands into tight fists, his knuckles white. “I wish we’d never found it that day.”

“The day your mother died?”

Tears sprang to his eyes. He dropped his head.

“Do you think if you’d been home when she had the aneurysm she would still be alive?”

“We were gone when she died. We should have been there.”

“I know what you’re going through.” Another step closer.

“No, you don’t,” Luke shouted, swiping at his cheeks as his tears rolled down his face.

“My mother died when I was eleven. I wasn’t there when she died and I was so angry with my father. He’d insisted I

go to school. I wanted to stay home and be with Mom. She had cancer. He said she was doing better. She'd be there when I came home. Both of my parents valued a good education, and I'd already missed so much school because of my mother's illness, so I went." The memory of her racing home and into her mother's bedroom to find it empty still lingered in her thoughts. "Dad had to rush her to the hospital where she died before our neighbor could get me there. I was so angry at my father."

"Are you still?"

"No, my dad died four years ago and I regret that time I made his life miserable. I wish I had it back to do over, but we don't get that chance. We make mistakes." She peered into the child's eyes. "Everyone, Luke. We have to live with them and learn from them. When I finally really listened to what my father had to say to me, he wept when he told me how sorry he was that he'd sent me to school that day. I'd never seen him cry before that." Her own tears jammed her throat.

"What happened after that?" He sank back against the wall behind him.

"I continued going to a therapist, and my dad and I began a ritual we followed every year after that. We planted a tree on the anniversary of her birth. She loved the outdoors, spending her spare time out in our yard tending her gardens. I still plant a tree on her birthday wherever I'm living. Then I can look out at it and remember her. If I need to talk to her, I sit under it and tell her what's on my mind."

"A tree?" Luke unclenched his hands and scrubbed them across his face. "My mom loved spending time outside, too. A couple of times she came with Dad and I fishing."

"Talk with your father. Maybe y'all could come up with a



special ritual you could do to honor your mother.” Jocelyn closed the space between them.

His anger drained from him, Luke looked at the door. “He’s probably mad at me for running away.”

“He’s worried, not upset. He loves you very much and wants to help you. C’mon, let’s go let him know you’re all right.”

With the child next to her, Jocelyn picked her way through the clutter. When she stepped out of the cabin first, a growling bellow reverberated through the air. She froze. A few feet to the side of the cabin hidden among the brush was an alligator.

Hearing the bellow, Sam bolted to his feet. Jocelyn’s face reflected fear, her arm coming out to stop Luke behind her. Nearest the pier, Mr. Dupree leaped off the boat, racing toward his son. A rotten plank gave way. Suddenly the man fell, plunging toward the water. He grabbed at the dock and caught himself before he went completely through.

“Dad!”

Another roar pierced the sudden quiet.

Sam scrambled to the pier and, as quickly and carefully as he could, hurried toward cabin. “Are you all right?” he asked Mr. Dupree.

“Go. I’ve been in worse jams.”

Sam kept going, scanning the brush where the sound came from. When he saw the gator, he drew his gun. He didn’t want to kill it, but if he had to, he would to save Jocelyn and the boy. “Walk slowly toward me.”

Jocelyn presented herself between the child and the alligator, waving the boy toward Sam. “Go now, Luke.”

“But—” the twelve-year-old squeaked.

“Now, Luke.” Sam stood rigid, levering his weapon at the

gator, realizing one was capable of short lunges, as well as quick surges of speed. "I've got you covered."

"Do as he said, son."

The growl that the gator emitted sounded almost like the roar of a lion as though it was staking his claim to its territory. It moved several feet forward. Sam squeezed his trigger.

Luke ran toward Sam with Jocelyn lurching after him as the bullet hit the ground by the gator's snout, mud flying up and striking the beast. A loud protest erupted from the alligator as it slithered back under the brush.

Jocelyn flew into Sam's embrace. He hugged her, never taking his eyes off the place where the beast had disappeared.

"Are you all right, Jo?"

She quaked against him. "Now I am." She drew back, her face ashen. "He was only a few yards away!"

"I know." He cupped her head and looked deep into her eyes. "I wasn't gonna let anything happen to you. Let's get out of here." Slipping his arm around Jocelyn, he nestled her against his side, needing to feel her close.

*I could have lost her today. Thank you, Lord.*

Luke assisted his father out of the broken pier and hugged him. "I'm sorry, Dad. I'm sorry."

"I love you, son. We'll work things out."

Jocelyn collapsed into her padded chair behind her desk at her office. Images of the gator with its dark eyes focused on her, its prey, trembled through her. She held her shaking hands up then slowly balled them to keep them from quivering. Folding her arms on her desktop, she laid her head on them, squeezing her eyes shut as if that would stop the pictures from flashing across her mind.

*I am with you always to the very end of the age.*

The verse from Matthew pushed all the images from her thoughts. As it had when she'd been facing down the alligator in the bayou. She hadn't been afraid then. A peace calmed her enough to remain still and in front of Luke. At all costs she'd needed to protect the child.

*That really is it, Lord. You are with us through the bad and good. I just need to remember that when I feel life overwhelming me. Thank you for the reminder.*

Luke would be all right. He'd latched on to his father and hadn't let go the whole way back to the boat. He'd still need counseling and understanding to work through his grief, but he'd turned the corner.

Now she realized she couldn't leave Loomis, that her place was here. She wasn't sure what she could do for the children still traumatized by the attempted kidnapping, but she would try her best. That was all she could do. She'd learned that this past year. She'd done what she could for Bobby Carson.

That didn't mean she wouldn't get burned out again. Counseling was a difficult job emotionally, but it was what she'd always wanted to do. She just needed to remember the Lord was with her always and when things got tough, to turn to Him for solace and guidance.

"Jocelyn, are you all right?"

Startled by the sound of Sam's voice, she gasped and shot straight up. "Where did you come from?"

He grinned and gestured toward the reception area behind him. "The front door. It wasn't locked so I came in."

"Oh, I meant to lock it. I came here to put a few notes in Luke's file before going home."

"I'm glad you didn't lock it *this* time. Any other times you work at night alone, lock the door." He sauntered into the office.

“Why are you here?” Her heart doubled its beating. He looked as exhausted as she felt.

“I saw your light on and came to check. I’d been on my way to your house.” He moved closer.

She rose. “Why?”

“I needed to talk to you.”

“I thought—”

“Shh. No thinking. Just listen.” Drawing her toward the couch, he sat her down then settled next to her. “I thought I might lose you today in the bayou. That was one huge gator.”

“One that looked real happy to see me and Luke.”

“I’d been asking the Lord for a sign what to do, but that wasn’t the one I envisioned.”

“Sign?”

“The last time we really talked, I left you with a bombshell about my brother. I thought the best thing I could do for you was to leave you alone.” One corner of his mouth lifted in a mocking smile. “I didn’t count on my feelings getting in the way. Leaving you alone isn’t good for me one bit. I’ve discovered I want it all—you, a family—and I can’t have that without letting you know the kind of man I am.”

This time she stopped his words with her hand. “Hold it right there. I know what kind of man you are. You are a man of God, a man full of integrity. You care about people so much your job eats at you.”

“Like yours does?”

“Yes, but we can learn to deal with that together with the Lord’s help.”

“But you were right about how I’ve learned to shut off part of me from anyone getting too close. In a relationship between a man and woman, if it’s going to work, you can’t do that. And I want it to work.”

Through all the weariness, hope grew. Jocelyn took his hand but remained silent. His expression reflected the importance of the moment.

"I was responsible for watching my little brother when I got home from school. One day I wanted to see if my friend next door could come out and play. I was tired of always having to play with Aaron."

"Your parents both worked?"

"No, my mother didn't, but she liked to watch her shows without Aaron whining to go outside. I usually didn't mind, but that day I was mad at him. He broke my favorite toy." Sam sat back, staring straight ahead. "I was only gone five minutes, but when I came back to the front yard, Aaron was gone. Later it was discovered he was taken by a man and woman, but the police never found them."

"So there's been no closure with Aaron."

Sam shook his head. "I've spent years running down any lead I can come up with. But it's as though he vanished into thin air. There were a couple of similar cases, a few solved, but nothing that led to Aaron."

"How old were you?"

"Eight. Aaron was five."

"It's not your fault. An eight-year-old should never be held responsible for babysitting."

He touched his head. "I know that in here. But in my heart I haven't been able to quite convince myself it isn't my fault. Maybe I could have done something, maybe not. I'll never be given the chance to know that."

"Instead of one child missing, there could have been two."

"My mother didn't seem to care. After that, she never let a day go by without telling me how she felt about me. She blamed me. In many ways I died that day, at least in her eyes."

“What about your father?” The constriction in her throat made her words come out in a whisper.

“I thank the Lord every day he never felt that way. He was the only reason I stayed around until I graduated from high school. I tried not to make waves with my mom because when my father stood up for me they would get into a terrible fight, which only added to my guilt. I learned to keep everything inside. I stopped telling Dad what Mom did, especially because there’ll always be a place in my heart that believes she’s right.”

Anger festered in Jocelyn, threatening to overwhelm her. How could a mother do that to her child? But the second she asked herself that question she knew the answer. She had counseled children before who had been traumatized by a parent.

She stood and stepped in front of him, tugging him to his feet. A distant look fell over his features as if he were living the pain all over again. She wouldn’t allow it. “Listen to me.” She waited until his gaze touched hers. “You are not at fault for what happened. It was the people who kidnapped your brother. And if they aren’t enough people for you to blame, then add your mother to the list. She is the parent, the guardian who is supposed to watch over her children. Not an eight-year-old. She was watching television. She should have been watching y’all. Do you hear me?”

“I know that now. I’ve seen what guilt did to you and Luke. I’m not going to let it destroy the rest of my life. My little brother is gone and I have to accept that. He’s with the Lord and one day we’ll be reunited. My misery won’t change any of those facts.”

“I love you, Sam Pierce. All of you, even the part that you keep locked away.”

“I can’t promise I’ll be an open book from now on, but I

love you. If you're willing to marry me, I do promise to try to share my feelings with you, even the bad ones."

She held his head, looking deeply into his eyes. "I'm not leaving Loomis. The town needs me right now with all that's going on."

"I don't want you to leave. Aren't you the one who says I can make New Orleans in forty-five minutes?"

"Yeah," she whispered against his lips before kissing him.

The sensation of being in his arms blanketed her with the feeling of coming home finally. She savored the bond forged that evening between them.

When he pulled back a few inches, he said, "I love you, Jo. I don't want to wait long to get married."

"We don't have to wait." In the middle of all that was happening in Loomis, a wedding would be perfect to remind people of the goodness in life.

"In the meantime, I hate to say it, but I've got to get back to the office and try to line up the evidence and find Dylan's killer."

"There are still a lot of unanswered questions, aren't there?" Jo looked into Sam's eyes.

"Yes, but with the Lord's help, we'll someday find answers."

"And you'll stay in Loomis until then, even though it's definitely creepy?"

"I'll stay for you, my love, even in creepy Loomis."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dear Reader,

In *What Sarah Saw*, I had the privilege of beginning a new continuity series for Love Inspired Suspense called **WITHOUT A TRACE**. What was so much fun about writing this book was working with the other authors, who were great and so easy to work with. This is a complicated mystery that takes place over six books. I love writing romantic-suspense stories because of the challenge and because I really love reading them. Reading a suspense or mystery is like putting a complex puzzle together. I hope you enjoyed this puzzle.

I love hearing from readers. You can contact me at [margaretdaley@gmail.com](mailto:margaretdaley@gmail.com) or at P.O. Box 2074, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74101. I have a quarterly newsletter that you can sign up for on my Web site, or you can enter my monthly draws by signing my guest book on the Web site at [www.margaretdaley.com](http://www.margaretdaley.com).

Best wishes,

*Margaret Daley*



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever had to confront a child (like Sarah) who has lost someone close to her? How did you do it?
2. Who is your favorite character, and why?
3. Sam learned as a child to keep his emotions hidden. Is it good to keep things bottled up inside you? How can you help someone who doesn't know how to express his feelings?
4. Guilt can do a lot of harm to a person. How can guilt be displayed in a person? As a friend, what can you do to help that person overcome his guilt?
5. Someone tried to kidnap Sarah. Parents had to deal with their children's fears about the situation. What are some things a parent can do to make a child feel safe?
6. What is your favorite scene, and why?
7. Sam couldn't forgive himself for what had happened to his brother. Have you ever dealt with having difficulty forgiving yourself for something you did? Have you finally been able to? If so, what helped you through it?
8. Who do you think killed Dylan Renault? Why?
9. Angelina took extreme measures to alter her life. Have

you ever done that? Did it work out for you, or did it backfire on you? What did you do to make it better?

10. Sam's past hung over his head, making it impossible for him to move forward in his life. Has that ever happened to you? How did you overcome the problem and begin to live again?
11. Have you ever needed a fresh start in life, as Jocelyn did? Did it help you? If so, how? If not, what did you do next to make your life better?
12. Sam has a difficult job as an FBI agent searching for missing people. What has sustained him through his job is his faith in the Lord. How have you depended on Christ to help you cope with your life problems?



Steeple  
Hill®

STEEPLE HILL BOOKS

ISBN: 978-1-4268-2706-8

WHAT SARAH SAW

Copyright © 2009 by Harlequin Books S.A.

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the editorial office, Steeple Hill Books, 233 Broadway, New York, NY 10279 U.S.A.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

This edition published by arrangement with Steeple Hill Books.

® and TM are trademarks of Steeple Hill Books, used under license. Trademarks indicated with ® are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office, the Canadian Trade Marks Office and in other countries.

[www.SteepleHill.com](http://www.SteepleHill.com)