



HARLEQUIN

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October

# INTRIGUE®

## THE HIDDEN YEARS

SUSAN KEARNEY



HIDE  
AND SEEK

# Susan Kearney

## The Hidden Years

### Аннотация

HE'D OPENED HIS HEART TO HER Jake Cochran was eighteen when Cassidy Atkins walked out of his life. Now he had no intention of letting the beautiful attorney get close to him. When Cassidy discovered her father had withheld documents Jake needed to uncover the secrets of his past, she wanted to help him in his search. Except her well-meant efforts put them both in mortal danger. Forced to work together to elude their deadly pursuers, they couldn't ignore the attraction that shimmered between them. But when passion turned to love, Cassidy risked everything to convince Jake that this time he could trust her with his heart.

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What would it be like to make love to a man like Jake?

Even as an eighteen-year-old, Jake Cochran would have been gentle.

A loud bang startled Cassidy and interrupted her thoughts. She sat up with a gasp, the blanket falling to the floor, her heart pumping wildly.

Had someone banged on the door? Had someone found them? Had she seen the doorknob turn?

Rushing to the window, she peered through the darkness toward the lake. She had just about convinced herself she'd dreamed the noise when the face of a man appeared, wild-eyed, two inches from the windowpane.

Cassidy screamed and ran out into the hall. And encountered Jake.

A very wet, very naked Jake.

Dear Harlequin Intrigue Reader,

We have another great selection of exciting Harlequin Intrigue titles for you this month, kicking off with the second book in Rebecca York's 43 LIGHT STREET trilogy *MINE TO KEEP*. *Never Alone* is a very special story about the power of love and the lengths to which a man and woman will go to find each other—no matter the obstacles.

One down—three to go! Our MONTANA CONFIDENTIAL series continues with *Special Assignment: Baby* by Debra Webb. A covert operation and a cuddly baby are just a day's work for this sexy cowboy agent. And Caroline Burnes scorches the sheets

in Midnight Burning, a story about one man's curse and his quest for redemption.

Finally, come play HIDE AND SEEK with Susan Kearney as she launches her new three-book miniseries with The Hidden Years.

So pick up all four for a dynamic reading experience.

Sincerely,

Denise O'Sullivan

Associate Senior Editor

Harlequin Intrigue

The Hidden Years

Susan Kearney



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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Kearney used to set herself on fire four times a day; now she does something really hot—she writes romantic suspense. While she no longer performs her signature fire dive, (she's taken up figure skating), she never runs out of ideas for characters and plots. A business graduate from the University of Michigan, Susan writes full-time. She resides in a small town outside Tampa, Florida, with her husband and children and a spoiled Boston terrier. Visit her Web site at [www.SusanKearney.com](http://www.SusanKearney.com).

Books by Susan Kearney

HARLEQUIN INTRIGUE

340—TARA'S CHILD

378—A BABY TO LOVE

410—LULLABY DECEPTION

428—SWEET DECEPTION

456—DECEIVING DADDY

478—PRIORITY MALE

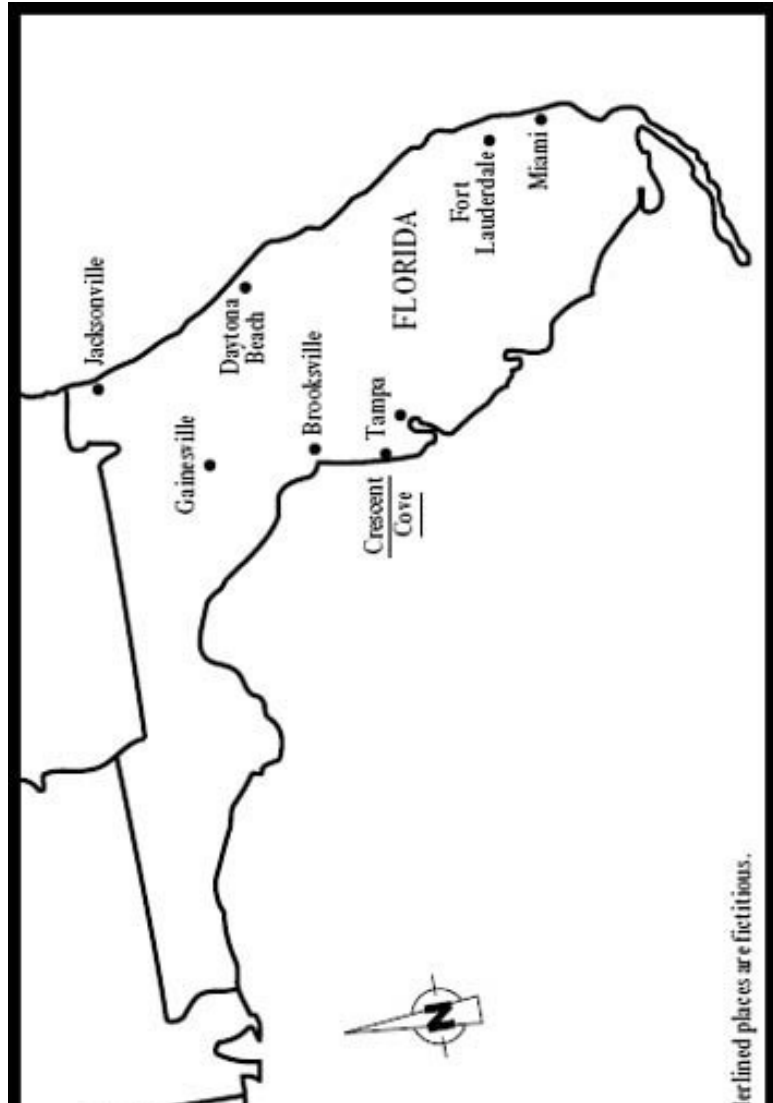
552—A NIGHT WITHOUT END

586—CRADLE WILL ROCK\*

590—LITTLE BOYS BLUE\*

594—LULLABY AND GOODNIGHT\*

636—THE HIDDEN YEARS†



Underlined places are fictitious.



# CAST OF CHARACTERS

Jake Cochran—As a child Jake made a promise to his father to keep the family together. But the state separated the children. Now nothing and no one can stop him from bringing the family together—not even Cassidy Atkins.

Cassidy Atkins—A lawyer who likes to live day-to-day. But Jake has other plans for her future.

Frazier Atkins—Cassidy's deceased father, who left behind secrets that can destroy his daughter.

Harrison Gordon—Jake's number-one employee and a crackerjack P.I.

Donna Rodale—Friend or foe? She's the mystery woman who can fill in the missing pieces of the puzzle. But first Jake and Cassidy must find her.

Burak Sansal—A spy. A double agent. Can he be trusted?

Ari Ben Goldstein—A former Israeli Mossad agent. He knew Jake's parents, but is he part of the problem or the solution?

For Gayle and Steve Brooks,  
my favorite Brooksville relatives.

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# Chapter One

What the hell was she doing in Half Moon Bay? In his driveway?

Jake Cochran stared at the monitor that exhibited his front gate, a convertible driving through, a woman behind the wheel.

Cassidy Atkins.

It might have been ten years since he'd seen her last, but he hadn't forgotten that tawny skin or the lion's mane of multicolored gold that framed her face. It might have been more than a decade, but a warm glow of happiness started in his gut and radiated outward before he bottled it up. Ten years hadn't quite banished memories of the pain she'd caused.

Jake was no longer that vulnerable kid, but he could no more resist staring at Cassidy now than he could a decade ago. As she parked her red convertible, he hit a camera switch to zoom in on her. Cassidy smoothed her shoulder-length hair into a ponytail, freshened her lipstick and reached for her compact. Then, with an impatient gesture, she tucked the unused compact back into her purse.

Interesting. So he rated lipstick but not blush. A visit but no warning phone call. Apparently Cassidy's impulsive and spontaneous nature hadn't changed over the years.

Cassidy gracefully exited the car, reached into the back seat and removed a box. Hip-hugging jeans encased her long legs and

rounded hips. A crop top showed a smudge or two of dust as if she'd been working and impulsively decided to stop and pay him a visit. The girl he remembered might be unpredictable, but she usually had good reasons for her actions. And Jake guessed she hadn't phoned first because she was afraid he might refuse to see her.

Was she in some kind of trouble and in need of his help?

He frowned in puzzlement as Cassidy carried the carton toward his front door. It didn't take his detective skills to figure out that the reason behind her visit might be somehow connected to the box's contents. However, she couldn't be returning something he'd left behind, since ten years ago he hadn't owned enough possessions to fill that box. Back then, just out of high school and a state orphanage, he'd barely had a change of clothes. Yet his limited circumstances hadn't stopped him from foolishly dreaming of a future with Cassidy.

Jake had found out soon enough that Cassidy's father, Frazier Atkins, had bigger plans for his daughter than a relationship with Jake Cochran. Frazier's high expectations for his daughter included college, law school and eventually a husband from the same upper middle-class background as her own. And according to her father's plan, she was now well on her way to success. With only twenty miles between their respective homes on Florida's Gulf coast, Jake occasionally caught news of Cassidy and knew she'd earned her law degree and set up practice with her father in Crescent Cove.

Jake angled the camera lens onto her left hand. Ha! No wedding ring. Another zing of pleasure sneaked over him before he flicked off the camera and headed downstairs to meet the girl he'd never been able to forget.

Before she rang the bell, he opened the door and caught the breathless look of surprise in widened eyes still as blue as Tampa's sky. But not quite as joyous and exuberant as he remembered. These blue eyes couldn't quite hold his gaze and reflected a bit of indecision, along with a sophistication that quickly covered the flash of uncertainty he'd first glimpsed.

Nevertheless he enjoyed drinking in the sight of her upturned face, which glowed with a healthy tan. He lingered over the straight nose, the delicately arched brows, the heart-shaped cheeks that she'd always wished were high and sharp like a model's, instead of impishly round, matching her personality.

"Hi, Sunshine." He used his old pet name for her without thinking, his voice slightly huskier than he would have liked.

Cassidy's full lips turned up in a crooked smile, but uncertainty again flickered in her eyes. "Jake."

He opened the door, feeling a measure of both pleasure and wariness at seeing her again but mostly wondering what caused the shadows in her eyes. "Come in."

She took in the trappings of his success—the soaring ceiling of his foyer, the marble floors and designer wallpaper—without the least bit of surprise. Almost as if she'd expected his prosperity. Had she kept track of him? Jake thought not. Why

would she?

Obviously worried, she clutched that box so hard her fingernails dug into the cardboard and left tiny crescent indentations. Over the years Jake had become good at reading strangers who came to his detective agency seeking his help. His experience as a detective told him she had something unpleasant to tell him. His experience as a man told him this was a nervous woman.

Yet Jake wasn't just operating with his powers of observation or by instinct alone. Cassidy was no stranger. Impulsive, spontaneous, giving, she liked to go with the flow, live day to day. She kept her long-term goals in sight, but her free-spirited nature ruled her most of the time. This wasn't one of those times. Today she was serious. She had a way of angling her chin whenever she was uncertain. She had it tipped at that angle now as she glanced at him.

He led her past his office into the room that overlooked Tampa Bay. Perhaps the soft cries of gulls and the salty breeze would soothe her nerves. Gingerly she placed the box on the glass table as if fearing it would break, then dusted off her hands.

"Can I get you something to drink?" he offered as he gestured to a chair for her to have a seat. "Iced tea? Water? A cola?"

"No, thanks."

Jake waited. He'd learned to be patient, learned that when someone wanted to tell him something, it was usually best to let them come to it in their own way.

Cassidy took in a deep breath of air, then let it out slowly and rolled her shoulders. Slowly she raised those sea-blue eyes to his. “My father died last year.”

“I heard. And I’m sorry. For your sake.”

He folded his arms over his chest, refusing to be hypocritical. He’d never liked Frazier Atkins. Ten years ago Jake had known the man disapproved of him, a boy with no family. No past. And probably not much of a future. But Jake had succeeded, throwing his efforts into his detective agency with a determination that had left no room for failure.

While Jake might have found security, he suspected mere financial success wouldn’t have been enough for Frazier Atkins. The prominent attorney had wanted a better match for his only daughter than a kid from the wrong side of town. While Jake had acquired a veneer of sophistication along the way to success, he lacked the Old World charm that took several generations to acquire. Quite simply, in Frazier’s eyes, Jake could never have been good enough to even wipe the dirt off Cassidy’s sneakers. And he’d coolly made his point to his daughter—not by arguing, but by fighting a battle Jake couldn’t win. Frazier had sent her out West to college. He’d put a distance between them that a boy with barely enough funds to feed himself couldn’t overcome.

He’d always hoped Cassidy would call, visit him during spring break, but it hadn’t happened. She’d accepted her father’s wishes and hadn’t looked back.

And through his scheming, Frazier had remained polite, cool

and secretive toward Jake. But Jake had always suspected that Cassidy's father had known more about Jake's past than he'd been willing to admit. Yet Jake had no more been able to prove that the wily attorney had been holding out on him than he had been able to prove to Cassidy that her father had sent her away to separate her from the wrong kind of boy.

Cassidy pushed the box toward Jake. "I took over Dad's law practice and found this."

"What is it?" Jake made no move to open the box. Instead, he sat and watched Cassidy swallow hard, wet her top lip and try to hold his eyes.

Opening the box with shaking fingers, she looked from the papers inside back to him, her eyes dark and mysterious. "You ever find your sisters?"

Her question rocked him to the core. He'd unconsciously figured that Cassidy had come here seeking his help. He hadn't expected the conversation to revolve around him. Or his sisters.

His sisters.

Jake shook his head at the failure that still haunted his nightmares. Nightmares of a five-year-old child promising his father that he'd help look after the family. That he'd watch over his sisters. Keep the family together. His mother had died overseas, and a week later his father had brought the family back to the U.S., where he'd been killed in a car accident. Awake, Jake couldn't recall exactly what had happened to his sisters. In the darkest of dreams, shadowy creatures with no faces pulled the

kicking and screaming girls from his arms. Every few months Jake still awoke in a sweat, heart pounding, choking on tears.

He glanced at the box, curiosity welling up. “I always thought your father was keeping back information on my sisters’ locations. Was he?”

Her expression grim, Cassidy nodded. “He knew more than he revealed.”

“They’re alive?”

Again Cassidy nodded.

Son of a bitch! Jake stood so fast that his chair crashed to the floor. If Frazier Atkins had stood before him now, it would have taken all of Jake’s considerable control not to strike him.

Jake paced, fuming. “Your old man could have saved me ten years of searching. Ten years of not knowing whether my sisters had lived or died. Ten years of waking up every morning and going to sleep every night wondering if I had any family left or if I was all alone in the world.”

“I’m sorry, Jake. My father never told me the truth, either.”

Although Jake had never found his sisters, he’d never given up searching. Would never give up. But he had no more to go on now than he’d had ten years ago, when the day after he’d graduated from high school, he’d looked up Frazier Atkins. Jake had hoped the attorney who’d handled his custody arrangements could help find his sisters. But Cassidy’s father had stubbornly refused to tell him anything.

Jake paced, needing an outlet for his anger. Frazier had

deliberately kept him apart from his sisters. How dare he separate a family? Jake wanted to strike out and hit something to relieve his frustration. But long ago he'd learned to master his anger, and within moments, he'd replaced burning rage with simmering control. Reaching down, he lifted the chair and replaced it exactly where it had been.

Cassidy's voice pleaded with him. "You have to understand. A lawyer's first obligation is to his client."

"And just who was the client?" Jake asked, folding his arms over his chest and watching Cassidy closely.

"I'm not...sure."

"Let me get this straight. Frazier Atkins couldn't tell me how to find my sisters because..."

"Because the custody matters were sealed. Ditto for the adoption records, unless both parties ask for the records."

"You're saying my sisters were adopted?"

"Yes."

"They're together?"

As she heard the concern he couldn't mask, Cassidy shook her head, regret in her gaze. "I don't believe so." A tremor of distress tinged her voice. "The records indicate that all three of you were split up."

Jake frowned hard. He knew that the state generally tried to keep siblings together. Maybe he'd been an ornery little boy that no one wanted—too old to interest a family, too old for parents to love, and so he'd never been adopted. Couples came to the

orphanage seeking toddlers and babies. But his sisters had been young.

“Surely it wouldn’t have been that difficult to keep two little girls together.”

Cassidy seemed to gather her wits and spoke with authority. “The entire adoption proceedings were very unusual. Names were changed. The girls were sent to different parts of the state before families were found for them.”

“Why?”

Cassidy shrugged and this time a hint of darkness clouded her eyes. “I don’t know. I haven’t gone through the box’s contents that carefully. As soon as I saw that—”

“Your father’s silence has kept a family apart.”

“—you would be interested, I just drove over.”

So coming here had been an impulsive act. He’d been right that her spontaneous nature hadn’t changed, but it gave him no satisfaction. Too many memories spun through his mind. Frazier Atkins and his damn secrets. Cassidy and what she’d once meant to Jake. All the memories in murky shadows, except his one bright hope that someday he could fulfill his childhood promise to his father. Find his sisters. Bring them together again. Only then would he be free to start a family of his own.

“I thought I could help you track down your sisters from these old addresses,” Cassidy said as she turned to the box and began to open it.

“Why?” Jake snapped the question as hard and fast as the

crack of a whip.

At his tone, Cassidy jumped as if he'd slapped her hand away from the box. Her eyes flashed with guilt and heat. "I feel bad that my father never gave you..." Her hand fluttered over the box.

He stared at her, fascinated by the changing hue in her eyes, by the tightening of her lips and the questioning arch of her brows. And fury filled his soul, fury that she thought she could just prance back into his life, insert herself into his thoughts. Invade his privacy. Witness his pain and failure.

"I don't need your help," he told her without bothering to keep the bitterness from his voice.

"You're angry?"

Anger wasn't the right word for what he felt right now. Rage, white-hot rage, cascaded through him, rage at not just Frazier Atkins, but at the injustice done to a child who still carried a man-size guilt.

He'd failed to find his sisters. He'd promised his father. And failed.

Frazier Atkins's silence had kept him at a dead end for ten years. But he'd never stopped searching. He'd wasted hours, days, months, years. All because of Frazier Atkins.

As rage rose up to mock him, Jake knew he was close to losing control. And he didn't want Cassidy to know how badly her father had hurt him. Didn't want her to know how much she could still disturb him by being here and witnessing his pain.

He kept his voice cool and clipped. "I think you'd better go."

Her eyes shimmered with sadness and determination. “But I want to help.”

“Your family has helped me enough,” he sneered, and watched her face go pale.

Raising her chin, she squared her shoulders and met his gaze with a level one of her own. “You’re not being fair.”

“Like your father was fair to me? By hiding my sisters’ location from their only brother?”

Exasperation tinged her tone. “I already explained. A lawyer’s first obligation is to his client.”

“Yeah, right. A nonexistent client.”

She nodded coolly, as if giving him a point in a debate. “I can’t find the record of who hired him. He was paid in cash.”

“How convenient.”

Jake ached to clench his fists. He didn’t, fearing if he did he might follow through and punch the wall. Instead, he forced his tone to remain crisp and precise. “And maybe, just like your father, you’re keeping the truth from me now. Maybe you know exactly who hired your father to split up my family.”

She flinched. If he hadn’t been a sizzling mass of emotions and so eager for her to go before she could witness his pain, he’d have admired the gumption it took for her to look him in the eye. But right now, all her courage did was feed the flames of his rage and resentment.

Cassidy locked gazes with him, as if she expected him to read her sincerity. “I’d like to make up for what my father did.”

Her concern only stoked his anger. He didn't want her help, her pity or her compassion. He couldn't bear for her to know how much her father's silence had hurt him. And he was too proud to tell her how hurt he'd been when she'd left for college and never once called him. Or how just her presence flayed open old scars and brought the hurting back.

Jake needed to be alone, needed time to lick his wounds. "This isn't your concern."

"I was concerned enough to bring you the box."

"So you salved your conscience, Sunshine."

"Don't call me that."

Ah. The nickname had memories for her, too. Had he struck a nerve?

Long ago Jake had learned to fight the world with the tools he'd been given—a quick mind and a ruthlessness that was revealed whenever he felt under attack, his back to the wall. He needed time to think, time to recover from the raw emotions churning his gut, and he sure as hell didn't need Cassidy here.

He allowed an edge of rage to penetrate his tone. "Go back to your safe little lawyer's world. The world your daddy picked for you. He's probably rolling over in his grave right now." Jake scowled at her. "We both know Frazier wouldn't have wanted you here with me."

At his hurtful words, she raised her chin and softened her tone, but steel braced her spine. "What do you want?"

He couldn't let those eyes see into his heart, see the scars he'd

have sworn had healed until she walked through the door. He didn't want the memories that sliced through him. He didn't want to remember what it was like to want her.

Never again would he let her fool him into believing she cared about him. He was no longer an innocent boy just out of a state home, but a grown man who'd seen enough betrayal and deceit to know the world could be ugly.

When she didn't budge, he made his voice glacial. "I don't want your help. I don't want you in my home. I don't want you. Is that clear enough? Blunt enough?"

Cassidy's pale face turned whiter, leaving blotchy red patches of anger and humiliation on her cheeks. Her lips narrowed, their fullness pulled into a taut line of distress. As she stood, she didn't say a word. With surprising strength, she lifted the box, turned it upside down and dumped the contents onto the floor at his feet.

Papers, a diary and photographs spilled into a messy pile. Jake ignored the papers and watched Cassidy, finally realizing he'd gone too far. But he couldn't find the words to say so. Too many conflicting emotions made his mouth dry, and words of apology stuck in his throat.

With her head high, her shoulders back, her chin up, her spine ramrod straight, Cassidy strode from the room with the empty carton. And although Jake had gotten exactly what he'd intended, he felt no triumph. She'd left him with an empty house and an empty heart.

CASSIDY WOULD NOT SOB. Not here where he might see

her. So she held her breath all the way out of Jake's house and down the walk. She didn't dare inhale until she reached her car. Finally as tears tightened the back of her throat, she took air into her starving lungs in one big rush.

She would not cry for the boy she'd once called a friend. She would not spill tears over the harsh man who'd replaced him. She would not think about the reasons that caused the confident young friend she recalled to turn into the cynical man she'd seen today.

She would not cry.

No, you'll just run away, her conscience needled her.

He told me to leave so he could brood in private.

He was your best friend. A good friend. How could you leave such an intriguing hunk alone when there are so many other possibilities?

He was like a big brother.

Didn't you ever think of consoling him? All that wonderful anger could be put to good use.

Sure. I'll just sprinkle fairy dust over him and he'll turn from an old friend into the perfect lover.

I see you prefer crying.

I'm not crying.

Cassidy tossed the box into the car and angrily wiped away the solitary tear running from the corner of her eye.

That Jake had grown into such a handsome man hadn't surprised her. She'd always admired his whiskey-colored eyes,

olive skin and black hair. But during the past ten years, he'd grown another few inches, towering over her five foot eight, and his features had sharpened. The hollows under his cheekbones had grown deeper. His eyes glittered with an intensity that almost made her shiver. The changes in his eyes bothered her the most. Eyes that she recalled as warm and friendly as a puppy's now burned with amber fire. Even outside in the breezy Gulf air, she could still recall their blazing heat.

However, she would not think about the pain of betrayal she'd seen in his eyes when she'd told him that her father had had the answers that he'd so desperately sought. If only her father were still alive so he could explain his actions. Despite what Jake thought, she knew her father had been a good man. He must have had an honorable reason for his seemingly inexplicable actions.

Cassidy had never told Jake that her father had insisted that she follow her dream of college and law school and had discouraged her from considering Jake as anything more than a friend. Jake would have assumed that his poor background and lack of family and education were the reason Frazier had insisted that his daughter attend college as she'd always planned. And Cassidy couldn't hurt Jake with something he'd had no control over.

Even at eighteen she'd understood why her father wanted her to follow her dream of becoming a lawyer and not give up like Cassidy's mother had. Her parents had married during law school. After her mother had become pregnant, she'd dropped out of school, and while she'd always intended to return, she

never had. Her mother had put her dream on hold—and then she'd died. And her father insisted that Cassidy put her education first.

So she hadn't let herself become involved with Jake for the sake of a dream. Cassidy's goal was to practice law. Jake's dream was to have a family. To him family meant everything—especially since he'd never had one. And he never ever took relationships casually, because he'd had so few people who'd cared about him. Because Cassidy didn't trust herself with Jake, because she couldn't let their friendship change, she'd deliberately chosen to stop any further feelings from developing between them.

She'd always looked at Jake as a brother, and they'd kept that platonic friendship until she'd left for college.

When a slip of paper that hadn't fallen from the box earlier wafted into the air on a gust, Cassidy snatched the paper by instinct and crushed it. She didn't care if that paper had the names, addresses and social-security numbers of both of Jake's sisters. No way would she return to that house. She couldn't face another of Jake's rebuffs.

He'd made it very clear that she wasn't wanted, and Cassidy wouldn't stay and help now if he came out on his knees and begged. That image brought a slight upward quirk to her lips. The thought of Jake Cochran begging anyone was a ludicrous image.

A bit calmer, Cassidy slipped behind the steering wheel, the paper still crumpled in her fingers. She backed out of the drive,

letting the wheels squeal as she turned a sharp corner, eager to leave behind the disturbing image of an angry Jake. But she couldn't relax the tension in her shoulders even after she passed out of sight of Jake's house.

What had happened to him? She mourned the loss of the young man she'd known, recalling their short time together with a fondness that couldn't have been totally one-sided. They'd been good friends, sharing their dreams and hopes for the future. She'd told Jake how she wanted to follow in her father's footsteps and become a lawyer. He'd spoken of finding his family and joining Special Forces. They'd rarely argued, and she recalled a unique closeness. She'd thought of him as the older brother she'd always wanted and never had. Or were her memories skewed? She'd always believed Jake had liked her. But maybe he'd just used her friendship in an attempt to get to her father. If that had been his plan, he'd failed. To her knowledge, her father had never spoken to anyone about the adoptions. Not even to her.

Remembering she needed to pick up a few things, Cassidy stopped for gas and bought fresh milk at the convenience store. She ran the car through the wash and checked the tires for air before slipping back behind the wheel. She headed for home, determined to ignore Jake and his problems.

Cassidy stopped at a red light and started to toss the crumpled paper she'd left on the seat into the trash. But she noticed writing on the paper and looked more carefully. Numbers. A ten-digit phone number.

Curious, Cassidy punched the numbers into her car phone. As the light turned green, a bored-sounding female voice answered. "Password, please."

Password?

Behind Cassidy, a car honked. "Hold on a sec."

She pulled off the road and parked, then stared at the yellowed slip of paper while the bored voice requested again, "Password, please."

Cassidy flipped over the paper and read the scrawled script aloud, "Blow back?"

She heard several clicks and then a different voice said, "One moment."

Pleased with herself, Cassidy waited, wondering who would answer the other end of the line. She waited at least a minute or two and was about to hang up when a harried male voice finally responded. "Who are you working for? How did you get this number?"

Suddenly nervous as the voice demanded answers, Cassidy speculated about whom she was talking with and why he was acting as if she'd done something illegal. "I'm sorry, I must have the wrong number."

Quickly she hung up the phone and then tossed the paper into her purse. She wouldn't return to give it to Jake, but maybe she'd mail it. Then she remembered how he'd treated her. Maybe she wouldn't bother.

Cassidy drove into Crescent Cove along sunny palm-lined

streets, and slowly the tension left her shoulders. Her grip on the steering wheel eased. Her hometown usually had a relaxing effect on her. In Crescent Cove, the neighbors still knew one another and waved as Cassidy drove by. The kid next door mowed the lawn and children played in the yards and laughed on swing sets. If the state hadn't been undergoing a drought and the county hadn't been under water restrictions, the kids would be running under sprinklers. Instead, they made do with bikes and inline skates.

Her own lawn was turning brown, but tomorrow was her morning to water. Cassidy used the automatic opener and pulled in to her two-car garage, then closed the door behind her. Glad to be home in the house she'd inherited from her father, along with his small-town law practice, Cassidy opened the door that led into the kitchen she loved. The oak table she'd found at the flea market last month still needed another coat of varnish, but she was pleased by the effect it made under the curtains decorated with daisies.

A trash can lay on its side.

Cassidy straightened the can with a frown. Had another duck flown down the chimney? Cautiously she headed into the den and set her purse on the table. The morning sun usually shone brightly through the window, but she must have forgotten to open the curtains.

After her father died, she'd redecorated, painting the plastered walls a yellow that complemented the gleaming parquet floors.

She'd bought colorful seascapes by local artists and added a homey touch to the couch with hand-embroidered pillows. Cassidy spoiled herself by buying fresh flowers every week. She'd picked sprigs of orange blossoms off her citrus tree out back, and the scents mingled in a flowery bouquet. She sniffed appreciatively and caught a whiff of smoke. With the drought conditions, everyone feared fires.

But this smelled like cigarette smoke.

The hair on the back of Cassidy's neck stirred. Had someone been in the house? The next thought felt like a punch to her stomach. Suppose she wasn't alone.

Cassidy didn't hesitate. She whirled on her heel to head back toward the kitchen.

The curtain in the den moved. Was someone behind it? Or had a breeze caught it, flickering ominous shadows across the wood floor?

Cassidy changed direction. Heard a footstep that wasn't hers. A thud.

Heart pumping, she raced down the hall toward the front door. Lost time twisting the dead bolt. Flung open the door.

A hand clamped down on her shoulder.

## Chapter Two

Cassidy screamed.

Before she could turn around, she glimpsed a gloved hand as the intruder slid an arm around her neck, yanked her back to his chest, placed a knife to her throat, slammed the front door. The blade bit skin, and the sting convinced Cassidy the man meant business. She held perfectly still, so frightened she could barely make her knees stiffen enough to hold her upright.

“There’s two hundred dollars—”

“Silence.”

The intruder put a black cap on Cassidy’s head and pulled it down over her eyes, blinding her.

Oh, God. If he didn’t want her money, what did he want? Cassidy knew the statistics. One in three women would be raped during their lifetime, but she’d never expected it to happen to her. In her own house. Without a chance to fight back.

Her brain kicked into overdrive. She shouldn’t fight. The fact that he’d bothered to blindfold her was so she couldn’t identify him. He probably intended to let her go.

Eventually.

She considered screaming again. But her neighbors wouldn’t hear her through the thick plaster walls or over the lawn mower still roaring next door.

She was on her own.

Cassidy trembled, her mouth dry as sandpaper, her stomach full of bile. She told herself not to fight, but the moment the knife left her throat, her instinct for self-preservation took over. She was no martyr. She had to try to save herself.

She swung her hips and shoulder to one side. Simultaneously she stomped on his foot and got lucky, digging her heel into his toes.

The man cursed. But blocked the front door.

She had only seconds and lunged to the right as she lifted the cap from her eyes. Picking up a vase as she ran, she threw it over her shoulder and heard the pane of glass beside the front door shatter.

Sliding across the front hallway, she knocked a chair into his path, raced through the dining room and back through the kitchen. If she could just make it to the porch door.

A gun's chamber clicked. "Take another step and I'll shoot."

Cassidy dived toward the doorknob. She heard the hiss of a bullet, which lodged in the door in front of her. Cassidy skidded to a halt.

"Turn around and you're a dead woman."

Cassidy froze. She still hadn't seen the man's face, just a gloved hand. She didn't dare turn around as the footsteps approached. The cap came down over her head again, blinding her. The man gripped her arm, shoved her into a chair, tied her hands behind her back.

This couldn't be happening. She would wake up from the

nightmare at any moment. Blind, helpless, Cassidy fought back, fear howling through her. “What do you want?”

“Who do you work for?”

The question arrowed another shot of terror through her. That familiar question wasn't what she'd expected, but she was too frightened to recall just where she'd heard it before. “I don't work for anyone.”

The sudden slap of a palm against her face made her ears ring and her eyes tear. The man spoke as casually as if inviting her to breakfast. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way. It doesn't matter much to me.”

Cassidy twisted her wrists in their bonds, but she couldn't even hope to get free. There was no slack in the ties. Her wrists were already going numb. “I'll tell you whatever you want to know. Please don't hurt me.”

“Who do you work for?” the man asked again.

The man's tone was cold as death. She knew better than to give the same answer as she had before; that would only earn her another brutal slap.

“My father died last year. I inherited his law practice.”

Another brutal slap on the other cheek slammed her head sideways. Cassidy tasted blood in her mouth.

“I don't care about your daddy. Who do you work for?”

“You mean my clients?”

Cassidy practiced family law. She didn't defend murderers or drug smugglers. She couldn't imagine which one of her clients

this man was interested in. Could barely think with her head ringing, her cheeks on fire. But the sickening fear in her stomach was the worst.

Her tormentor's voice was too cold, too professional to give her any hope of getting out of this alive. At first she'd thought the blindfold was to prevent her from identifying him but now she suspected he just wanted her terrified so she'd talk. His tactics were working. She felt icy cold and burning hot at the same time.

She had the horrible feeling that as soon as she told him what he wanted to know, he'd put a bullet in her brain.

He could spend the entire day beating her.

She lived alone.

Didn't expect company.

And she had no idea what he wanted.

Again he asked the dreaded question. "Who do you work for?"

And again she had no answer.

**AFTER PERUSING THE PAPERS** Cassidy had dumped at his feet, Jake packed them up and heaved them into the trunk of his car, his anger slowly cooling. She'd offered to help him, and like it or not, he really needed that help, not just her legal expertise, but her common sense. Even if she had every right to be furious with him, he hoped after he apologized, she'd forgive him.

He made the thirty-minute drive from Half Moon Bay to Crescent Cove in less than twenty minutes. While he knew Cassidy would probably rather see the abominable snowman

than him showing up at her house uninvited, Jake owed her an apology. She'd done him a favor, and in return, he'd blamed her for her father's actions and implied that she was a liar. Inexcusable behavior under any circumstances. And he had no excuse. Except that she'd pushed all his buttons, reminding him of his failures, reminding him of one of the worst nights of his life.

That extraordinary summer he'd never even kissed Cassidy, but that hadn't stopped him from dreaming about sex and love the way most eighteen-year-old boys do. But unlike most boys who'd grown up with the love of family around them, Jake had never had anyone tell him that they'd loved him—not since he'd been five and his father had died. No one had ever told him he'd done a good job. No one had ruffled his hair with affection or hugged him. If anyone touched him at all, it had been a fist to the chin, an elbow to the gut.

So he'd craved affection. Maybe he'd read more into her emotions than had been there. He'd been so hungry for love that when she'd called him that long-ago afternoon to tell him she had special news and a special evening planned, he'd hoped and dreamed that they might make love.

He'd bought a few candles to hide the dingy walls of his room, changed the sheets and spent his last few dollars to borrow a radio from another boarder. Freshly showered after a ten-hour day slinging hamburgers, he'd met Cassidy at his door. She'd taken his hand and dragged him down to the park where they

could watch the stars in the balmy Floridian moonlight.

After blowing out the candles, he'd followed willingly enough. She'd brought a blanket and a picnic dinner, but he'd been too excited to fill his ever-hungry stomach. He'd hoped she wanted a little romance before they went back to his room. He could still recall her aroma, wildflowers and honey, her lips scented of strawberry lipstick. But most of all he'd craved her golden heat. Cassidy's skin was always warm to his touch, and he could never seem to resist holding her hand or running his fingers through her silky hair. Under a crescent moon he'd leaned over to kiss her, as ready as a volcano to burst with wanting her. And she'd pulled away.

When he'd suggested going back to his room, she'd turned over and told him she was heading to UCLA in California in two weeks. And his world crashed. Hard. Without Cassidy to brighten his dreary nights, the two jobs he worked each week to make ends meet seemed unbearable. California might as well have been Mars. Four years and three thousand miles would effectively separate them and end their relationship just as her father had intended, since Jake couldn't afford to follow her to California. Even after he joined Special Forces, he hadn't been able to put her out of his mind.

Cassidy had been the first person to show him affection or friendship for thirteen years, and losing her had devastated him. He'd coped with the emptiness by working harder. In what little spare time he had after his honorable discharge from the military,

Jake had searched for his sisters and developed the skills to open his own detective agency. But no matter how many hours he'd worked, he'd never forgotten that bright summer when anything and everything had seemed possible. And he'd never forgotten what it felt like to wake up in the morning and look forward to Cassidy's smile brightening his day.

Jake drove up to Cassidy's house and saw a broken windowpane next to the front door. His instinct for trouble immediately kicked in. Maybe a kid had thrown a baseball through the pane. But why was the glass still glinting on the front stoop?

There could be a dozen reasons. The likeliest was that Cassidy wasn't home.

Still, Jake had learned to take precautions. He drove past the house and parked down the street. Picking up his cell phone, he called his friend and number-one employee, Harrison Gordon, and quickly gave him his location.

"If you don't hear from me within four minutes, send the cops."

Ever cautious, the former police officer from Dade County asked, "Want backup?"

"Cassidy may be in trouble. Phone's in my pocket. I'll leave the line open."

"Be careful."

Jake clipped the phone to his belt, eased his gun from his ankle holster and slipped it into his pocket. He didn't want to chance

scaring Cassidy if it wasn't necessary. And a bullet could shoot through fabric as easily as air.

Moving quickly and silently, Jake approached the ranch-style house from the side, slipping easily behind the shrubbery and ducking beneath the windows. Normally he would have scouted the perimeter and waited for backup, but he had a bad feeling in his gut.

When he approached the broken glass by the front door, he heard the sickening sound of a slap against flesh and a woman's yelp of pain.

Sweat popped out on his brow. Every cell in his body yearned to burst through the door. But he wouldn't do Cassidy an ounce of good if he got himself or her shot before he could rescue her.

Jake took a moment to reach for his phone. "I'm going in, Harrison. Get me backup. Fast."

"Wait—"

Jake didn't listen to the rest of Harrison's warning. He eased through the door, gun first. Glass crunched under his shoes. Jake silently swore. He'd just given up the element of surprise.

At least the sickening sounds of the assault had stopped. But Jake couldn't wait for the cops to arrive. It only took a nanosecond to end a life. Cassidy's future might hinge on his next decision. Jake didn't hesitate. He just wished he knew how many opponents he was up against and if they were armed.

Ducking through a doorway, Jake stepped lightly into the dining room. He quickly scanned the thick draperies. Saw no sign

of feet peeking out beneath the bottom.

Keeping low, he dodged down a hallway and rolled into the kitchen. A bullet hissed past his ear. But he had heard no gunshot. Obviously the intruder used a silencer—unusual for a street thug.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jake glimpsed Cassidy blindfolded by a cap, tied to a kitchen chair. Her shoulders slumped. He had no way of knowing if she was still breathing, and his heart missed a beat.

Think. Cassidy needed him to be professional.

Estimating that the gunfire had come from the direction of the refrigerator, Jake scrambled to the position least likely to put Cassidy in the line of fire.

In the distance, police sirens sounded. Two more bullets kept Jake behind the counter. He heard footsteps retreating. The back door squeaked open and then more footsteps pounded across the patio, indicating the intruder had run away.

Normally Jake would have pursued the culprit. But no way could he leave Cassidy blindfolded and tied to that chair, wondering if she was going to live or die. Not even for another minute.

Jake hurried to her and yanked the cap from her head. “Sunshine, talk to me. Are you all right?”

Dazed blue eyes looked at him with fear. Blood trickled from her mouth. “Jake?”

She was alive! Pleasure shot through him, but as much as he yearned to gather her into his arms, touch that golden skin, inhale

her feminine scent and reassure himself that she was all right, he hesitated. He had no desire to renew the old feelings, sensations and emotions that touching her had once caused.

“Someone hit me.”

“He won’t anymore. Not ever again. I’m here now, Sunshine.”

He ached to pull her into his arms and hold her tenderly, but he shoved aside his needs, his urge to comfort her by touch and satisfy himself she was unharmed. Instead, he knelt and untied her hands and used his voice to give reassurance. “You’re safe. Whoever hit you went out the back door. I assume there was just one?”

Cassidy rubbed her wrists slowly but didn’t attempt to rise from the chair, reminding him of a wild bird caged too long and afraid to fly free. Banishing his own fears at what touching her might do to his turbulent emotions, Jake reached for her, but she twisted away, terror darkening her eyes and arrowing straight to his core.

Jake ignored her automatic rejection and how much his insides churned. She needed time to recover, time to collect herself. While she watched him with suspicion, he gave up trying to touch her again.

Jake took his phone off the belt clip. “Harrison, you still there?”

“Yes, boss.”

“Inform the cops that the suspect fled the area on foot. We’re okay in here.”

Distrust still clouding her eyes, Cassidy looked from the gun in Jake's hand to the phone in the other. Her voice came out like a croak. "What are you doing here?"

"Explanations can wait. An ambulance is on the way. But let me see to that cut on your lip." Jake took a clean dish towel, ran water over it, rinsed it out, then wrapped ice in it. He handed it to her. "Place this where it hurts."

"Everything hurts." Eyes narrowed, Cassidy stared at his gun as if she feared he'd shoot her any second.

Jake put on the safety, then handed her his weapon, butt first. "Smell my gun. It hasn't been fired. Someone else attacked you, Sunshine. I would never hurt you."

She sniffed the gun, and just the fact that she couldn't take his word squeezed Jake's emotions all over again. But he felt better when some of the fear left her eyes. He also realized how innocent she was. If he had been the intruder, he could have had two weapons.

Cassidy didn't seem to have the strength to hold the ice to her swollen lip. Slowly he knelt beside her. "Here, let me do that."

This time she allowed him to touch her. Jake gently eased the ice pack from her lip to her cheeks where bruises were already darkening beneath her golden skin. What kind of bastard struck a helpless woman across the face?

His expression must have shown his anger, because Cassidy, eyes bleak, jerked away from him.

"You're going to be okay," he murmured. "We're going to

install an alarm system in your house so this can never happen again. And one at your office, too.”

“He was going to kill me,” Cassidy muttered.

Jake wanted to question her, but recognized her dilated pupils as a sign of shock. He suspected that she barely knew what she was saying. So he just let her talk.

“He kept asking me who I worked for.” Cassidy started to shake. “I’m so cold.”

Jake swept her up into his arms and carried her into the den, her scent enveloping him, just as he’d feared, in old hungers, old needs. Ruthlessly he tried to ignore the softness of her breasts crushed against his chest, the silk of her hair against his neck.

Cassidy needed him, and he could no more ignore her pain than he could ignore a crying baby back in the orphanage. He sat on the sofa and wrapped an afghan around her. Cradling her head on his chest, he tried to warm her with his body heat, and the entire time he wondered how many sleepless nights this would cost him. Still, he’d gladly pay the price of turning and tossing for a year, if that was what it took to give her back her sense of safety.

“No more.” She shivered, and when he kept the ice pressed to her face, she pushed it away.

“Ice will keep the swelling down. You don’t want to mar that perfect complexion. Just bear the cold a little longer. You’re strong. You can do that, Sunshine. Just a little longer, okay?”

He spoke soothingly, but she never relaxed, and her trembling

frightened him. Maybe he shouldn't have moved her. She might be injured more badly than he'd thought.

Where the hell was that ambulance?

THE COPS SHOWED UP entirely too soon for Cassidy. She would have been content just to stay on Jake's lap, rest her head against his chest and let the security of his strong arms banish the horror of her ordeal.

Never before had she suffered pain that intense. Never before had she suffered such fear. Never before had she faced her mortality on such intimate terms.

She'd thought she was going to die, not in some indeterminable time in the future, but today. Although she'd never resigned herself to dying, she'd had no hope. She hadn't thought just of the past, of opportunities lost and old regrets, but of all the things she'd never experience. She'd hoped to fall in love. Have children. Grandchildren. And her future could have been taken from her, and she had no idea why.

Then, somehow, Jake had rescued her, and now she wanted to enjoy each priceless moment. Each breath seemed a gift, each caress of his fingers through her hair precious. And the future was once again filled with wondrous possibilities.

"Thank you for saving my life."

"I was happy to do it, Sunshine. I just wish I'd caught the bastard."

Thanking Jake wasn't enough. He'd given her the invaluable gift of time, and she wanted him to understand. She could hear

the police coming down her street, but she wanted Jake to know how she felt before they arrived.

“Have you ever been sick?”

“Not often,” Jake admitted, “but a few times.”

Pleased that he didn't seem disturbed by her strange choice of topic, she continued, “Remember all the things you missed? How food didn't taste good? How you didn't feel up to a walk on the beach or making a momentous decision?” She tilted her head back and gazed into his warm amber eyes. “Remember how good it felt to get well again? To move with energy and determination, to laugh?”

As if he couldn't forget what had almost happened to her, Jake looked down at her without smiling. “The newness and wonder of feeling healthy again never lasts. We soon forget and go on as before.”

“Exactly.”

Jake had always been quick to catch on to the threads of her thoughts and weave them together into meaningful ideas.

“I don't ever want to forget how precious life is,” she said. “I don't want to waste another minute.”

Jake cocked an arrogant eyebrow and his sexy mouth curved upward in amusement. “You always did live for today, Sunshine.”

“There have been lost opportunities.”

“Is that so?” he murmured, his voice purring like a cat in her ear.

“Things I did and things I didn't.”

“Like what?”

“I’ve always wanted to travel and I never had the time.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“Tahiti, Europe, the Far East.”

“What else?”

“I want children. I want to leave this world knowing I changed it somehow.”

“You still have time for kids.”

“Thanks to you.” But she’d never found the right time and the right man to have those kids with. She hesitated to say more, but then decided to tell him the rest. She wasn’t sure why she wanted to tell him, but after almost dying, the world seemed bright and clean, and she wanted to start over with a fresh slate. And maybe, just maybe, she was testing him, to see his reaction.

“And I regret that we didn’t keep in touch. I’ve missed you.” She said the words in an impulsive burst of emotion before she could change her mind. As Jake’s tender expression turned to stone, his eyes shadowed with thoughts she couldn’t read, she shrugged away the hurt she felt when he didn’t say, I missed you, too.

Knowing Jake had trouble voicing sentimental feelings, she made peace with his silence, placed her cheek against his chest, took comfort in the strong beat of his heart. But she couldn’t regret her boldness. She felt a rapport with Jake that hadn’t diminished over time. Telling Jake her thoughts and feelings had always been easy. That she’d returned to Florida without

bothering to renew their friendship had been a mistake. A mistake she intended to rectify if Jake would let her. She was no longer an innocent eighteen-year-old who needed to follow her childhood dream, but a grown woman who'd achieved her goals and could now make her own choices.

Yet, with her outspoken revelation, the closeness between them ended. The air of intimacy vanished.

Jake had withdrawn from her. He might still be holding her on his lap, but his fingers no longer combed through her hair. He no longer curled his arms protectively around her. A stillness surrounded him, practically encasing him in ice.

But it was the emotional distance that had grown as vast as the Gulf of Mexico. Jake had a way of closing off the world, closing off his emotions, from others, from her, maybe even from himself.

“This is Officer Silvero. Everyone okay in there?” a man called out.

Jake's gestures were gentle, yet more efficient than tender, as he lifted her off his lap and placed her beside him on the sofa. Then, back straight, shoulders squared, he stood to greet the cop. “We're in the den and all right.”

By the time the police officer entered the room, Jake had his detective identification out of his pocket. Cassidy watched him shake hands with a young earnest-looking officer who couldn't be much older than twenty, and she heard Jake murmur, “Go easy on her.” Then Jake leaned forward and whispered something she

couldn't hear in the cop's ear.

"I may be in shock, but I can answer your questions, Officer," Cassidy said. She knew Jake was probably trying to protect her, but she preferred knowing the facts, no matter how bad a picture those facts painted. She'd never believed in hiding from the truth or letting others take on her problems, and was slightly annoyed with Jake for attempting to do so, even if she did understand his motives.

"I'm Silvero. My partner, Jonesy, is looking around out back. Would you prefer to speak with a female officer, ma'am?"

Cassidy shook her head and regretted it as her skull throbbed. "I wasn't raped. But I won't be able to help much, since I can't identify the man who..."

She stopped and realized this was going to be harder to retell than she'd anticipated. As she'd spoken, images rose to haunt her. Helplessness at being tied. Fear that she had no idea what the man wanted from her. Horror that she would most likely die after a short period of intense suffering. The telling would make her relive the incident—one she badly wanted to forget.

Always sensitive, Jake seemed to understand her difficulty. He leaned close, but didn't touch her. Instead, he used the soothing tone that had calmed her before. "There's no rush, Sunshine. You can wait until tomorrow."

Silvero took out a pad of paper. "Now would be better, sir. She may forget something important by tomorrow."

"I won't forget," Cassidy said, and then looked at Jake, who

clearly stood ready to protect her. “And I’d like to get this over with.”

But the ambulance had finally arrived. Cassidy insisted she didn’t need to go to the hospital, and after checking her pulse and her pupils, the medic agreed. “Don’t drink any alcohol for twenty-four hours. If you feel dizzy, have someone take you to the hospital or call 911.

After the medics left, Cassidy quickly told the officer her story, but this time she was detached, pushing her emotions aside. A trick she’d learned when she’d been in law school and had dealt with some unpleasant cases.

She summed up the horrifying incident by sticking to the facts and squashing her emotions in the back of her mind. The effort sapped her energy, and she’d never felt so tired, as though all her muscles had gone to sleep, but she continued through to the end.

“You never saw the intruder?” Silvero asked again when she’d finished.

Cassidy knew better than to shake her head, since every time she did, the pain flared. “Either I was running and my back was to him, or my eyes were covered by the hat.”

“You’re positive it was a man?”

“Yes. He had a guttural voice. And he sounded educated.”

The cop stopped writing and looked up. “What makes you say that?”

Cassidy paused, trying to remember. “His grammar was good.”

Silvero started writing again. "Did he have an accent?"

"No."

The cop frowned and looked from Cassidy to Jake. "You sure it wasn't him that hit you?"

"Jake would never strike a woman," Cassidy said.

Jake sighed as if he'd expected the question. "I'm carrying a weapon in my ankle holster. I never fired it and I gave it to Cassidy to reassure her. Would you like to inspect my weapon, Officer?"

Silvero nodded. "Move slowly, sir."

Jake bent and handed the cop the weapon just as he'd done Cassidy. Suddenly she felt ashamed that the cop had questioned his honor. He'd saved her life. He didn't deserve to be questioned. "Jake's voice is different, deeper, than that of the man who hit me."

Jake gave him harder evidence than she could supply. "Once you dig the slugs from her wall, you'll see they don't match my gun."

The officer took Jake's weapon and sniffed. Finally he handed it back to Jake. "How did you happen to come along when you did?"

"I needed to finish an earlier discussion between Cassidy and me."

Their earlier discussion had been over! Jake had practically thrown her out of his house. Why had he come to her home uninvited, showing up at exactly the right time? Cassidy had

seen movies where one man did the dirty work and the other befriended a mark to set up a sting. Although Jake had been furious with her earlier, he had no reason to do that to her.

Jake had once told her how the orphanage unfairly punished children. How he'd often taken onto his shoulders blame that wasn't his. He couldn't have changed that much. Besides, after the way he'd gently tended to her, she knew he'd never ever condone violence. Although Jake could be evasive, he was never sneaky or underhanded.

Jake answered the cop, speaking stiffly, shoulders thrown back and defiant. Cassidy sensed how much he disliked this inquisition and how useless he felt it to be. But he remained polite, if aloof.

Cassidy lost track of the interrogation and was jerked back to the present when the cop cleared his throat. "Ma'am?"

"I'm sorry. What was the question?"

"Can you think of anyone who could have done this to you? An ex-husband or former lover? A client?"

"I'm a small-town lawyer. Mostly I draw up wills and trusts, handle real-estate transactions, that sort of thing. I've never done criminal work or been married. And my last relationship ended amicably several years ago."

Cassidy had mixed feelings about the cops going through her home, and once again she was glad Jake was with her. While she appreciated the extra police protection, it seemed an invasion of her privacy to have strangers roaming through her home and

asking about her private life. She wanted to close this episode and put it behind her.

Jake folded his arms over his chest and spoke to Officer Silvero. “Enough. She’s tired. Let her rest, and if she thinks of anything else, she’ll call. You have a business card?”

The officer reluctantly closed his notepad. Cassidy sensed that if not for Jake’s intervention, the cop would have questioned her all day.

The officer handed her his card and looked around. “Don’t touch the slugs. I’ll have the crime team dig them out later. No point dusting for prints since the man wore gloves, right?” Cassidy nodded and he continued, “Perhaps you could call a friend over to spend the night?”

Jake shook his head. “She won’t be staying here.”

Cassidy almost objected aloud to his high-handed tactics, then decided to remain quiet. She’d rather discuss her living arrangements with Jake after the cop left. Maybe by then she’d recover some strength. Besides, she wasn’t eager to stay here alone. Not unless the police caught the intruder, and that seemed less likely by the minute.

After Officer Silvero and his partner left, Jake straddled a chair across from her. “I’m going to have a security system installed tomorrow. Until then, you can stay with me.”

“The security system sounds fine, and I appreciate your offer.” Cassidy hesitated, then blurted, “Jake, there’s something I didn’t tell the police.”

## Chapter Three

“You forgot to tell the cops that you’re into kinky sex?” Jake’s teasing comment came out of nowhere. He was just hoping to ease her tension.

She humored him with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “Nothing so scandalous.”

“You made an illegal U-turn on the way home?”

He didn’t like the paleness of her skin beneath the tan and wanted to see the glow come back. Even more, he wanted to return their friendship to an even keel and forget her words about how she’d wished they’d kept in touch. At night for months after she’d gone off to college, he’d thought of little more than what it would have been like to touch her and have her touch him in return.

He didn’t want those fantasies in his head. Besides, Cassidy had been frightened. Hurt. In shock. And while he didn’t believe that her remarks reflected anything beyond a desire for a platonic friendship, he suspected that her words would haunt his dreams for weeks.

“Jake, stop teasing me.” She rested her head back on the sofa and her golden hair spilled over her shoulders. “When I left your place, I was angry with you.”

“That’s why I came here. To apologize for my bad behavior. Even if your father refused to talk to me, I had no right to blame

you for his actions. To practically call you a liar was going way too far. I'm sorry.”

“Apology accepted. I'd say you've more than made up for your rudeness by saving my life.” Cassidy shuddered, then raised her chin, and her eyes darkened with determination. “I thought I'd dumped the box's entire contents at your feet—”

He chuckled. “A highly dramatic gesture that helped me come to my senses.”

“—but one of the papers stayed in the box. A paper with a phone number.”

“You called that number?” he guessed, neither the least bit surprised by her impulsiveness nor bothered that she hadn't returned to give it to him—not in the dark mood he'd been in. But he'd set those old painful memories aside. He'd moved on with his life. And part of moving on meant realizing that Cassidy had never felt about him the way he'd once felt about her. She'd considered him a friend and had never wanted more. He'd been the one who'd once wanted more, but he hadn't been willing to show her how he'd really felt and risk losing her friendship. But that was all a long time ago.

He was different now, not so afraid to risk what he had to get what he wanted. But had Cassidy changed? Was she still the same person he remembered? Did she see him as the friend he'd once been? Or did she see him as a man with wants and needs and desires?

Cassidy's sweet voice drew him from his thoughts. “The

woman who answered my call asked for a password. I had no idea what she was talking about, so I just read the words off the slip of paper.”

A password? He shoved aside thoughts about the past and concentrated on the present. Cassidy had his full attention. “What password?”

“I can’t remember. The paper’s in my purse in the kitchen, I think.”

Jake retrieved her purse and watched her dig through it. She was starting to recover from her ordeal. Slowly her voice was regaining some strength, her shoulders were slumping less. And he could only admire her courage.

Cassidy had grown up in a secure home with loving parents who’d given her every advantage in life. Yet she wasn’t spoiled. She’d had to live with setbacks and a few hard knocks. After her mother’s death from cancer, she’d shown a resilience that was a testament to Frazier Atkins’s fathering skills. And if the man had become overprotective of his daughter, Jake wouldn’t have blamed him—except that overprotectiveness had sliced Cassidy from Jake’s life.

While Cassidy might be facing her own mortality for the first time, she wasn’t just coping. She was thinking with all eight cylinders. And just like ten years ago, her primary thoughts weren’t revolving around him.

At least she seemed willing and able to keep her thoughts trained on business. Right now, Jake couldn’t afford the

distraction of brooding over the past, not when Cassidy's life might be at stake.

"Here it is!" She handed him the paper. "'Blow back.' That's what I said, and the woman connected me. There was a long wait. Finally a man answered and asked who I worked for." Cassidy's eyes suddenly grew wide, her words rushed out with a burst of excitement. "That's what I couldn't remember. The man who broke in asked the same exact question as the person at this number. Both wanted to know who I worked for."

But Cassidy didn't work for anybody. What the hell was going on?

It could have been a coincidence, but Jake didn't believe it. He'd spent too long as a detective, too long investigating the seamier side of life on behalf of his clients not to recognize a tenuous connection. Something in that box, someone Cassidy had called, had placed her life in danger.

She'd almost died because she'd done him a favor. "If you hadn't tried to help me, you wouldn't be in danger."

She warily looked at the windows, then squared her shoulders. "The intruder is gone. Who says I'm still in danger?"

"I think your phone call triggered the intruder's showing up on your doorstep, but he didn't get what he wanted."

Cassidy's forehead wrinkled in a frown. "But I don't work for anyone. I didn't know what he wanted."

"But if he thinks you have the answers he wants, he may come back." Jake dragged a hand through his hair, weighing

possibilities and options.

“Maybe we need to tell the police,” Cassidy suggested.

“We have nothing solid. Even if they believed us, the Crescent Cove police department doesn’t have the manpower to pursue an investigation.” Jake scowled at the thought of law enforcement, of policemen grilling Cassidy and himself about his past, asking questions they couldn’t answer. Jake dialed his cell phone, the paper Cassidy had given him still in his hand. “Harrison, you still have that friend at the phone company?”

Harrison groaned. “It’ll cost me a dinner and dancing.”

“You can use the exercise,” Jake quipped. “I want you to trace this call.” Jake gave Harrison the number. “I’ll pay for the dinner.”

“But how’re you going to pay for my aching feet?”

After Jake hung up, Cassidy looked up at him, her eyes thoughtful. “I think we should go through the box’s contents carefully. Maybe there will be clues that can tell us what’s going on. I know you didn’t want my help, I know you blame my father for not giving you the box ten years ago, but we have to go on. My life may be at stake. I feel as if I’m entitled to see this through. Don’t make me wait alone while you search for answers. Please, Jake?”

He could ignore neither her fear nor her sincerity. And still he hesitated. “You might be in more danger if you help me.”

She countered with direct simplicity. “I feel safer with you than without you.”

Her words brought back that warm glow in his gut, but he suspected she would have said the same to any man who'd saved her. She wasn't speaking on a personal level of emotion, but out of concern for her physical safety. "You aren't a qualified detective, Sunshine."

"I won't get in your way."

Negotiations began. And she'd sidestepped the issue of her lack of qualifications. A lawyer tactic. But they weren't in court. They were out in the real world, a world where the players often had their own set of rules. Rules she wouldn't fathom. Rules that could get them killed.

While he sensed her determination, he could be just as determined. While he'd offered to let her stay with him for one night, he didn't want her underfoot, a constant reminder of the hurt she'd caused him in the past, during an investigation that could take days or weeks. "But you won't take orders, either, Sunshine. You always do what you think is best."

"Doesn't everyone?" She didn't bother to deny his words, and his admiration for her rose another notch.

Jake shook his head, glanced out the window at the palms swaying in the breeze, then back at her. "A client would let me lead the way, since I do have over ten years of experience."

She fingered the snap on her purse. Her fingers shook slightly and then she balled them into a fist. "You aren't going to leave me alone. I'm scared like I've never been before. That maniac might come back. And this time I might not be lucky enough to

be rescued. I don't want to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder. I want to help you find that man and put him in jail where he belongs.”

She cradled her trembling fist in her other hand, trying to prevent it from shaking, and his heart went out to her. First her mother had died, then her father, leaving her alone in the world. Better than anyone, Jake could empathize with Cassidy. He knew what it was like to be alone, without family. He responded to the fear in her voice by offering another solution, one that would keep her safe, yet at a distance from him. “We could hire a bodyguard. Get you round-the-clock protection.”

Cassidy stood and faced him, her hands on her hips. “That’s not good enough. I don’t want to live like that. So here’s the deal, Jake. Either you let me help you, or...”

“Or what?”

“I’ll hire another private investigator and follow the clues on my own.”

He had no doubt she would do just as she promised. Still, he tested her resolve, made his voice deliberately harsh. “I don’t respond to ultimatums.”

“And I don’t respond to death threats.” Her eyes flashed with anger. “Do we have a deal?”

“MAYBE WE’LL BOTH think better on a full stomach. How about dinner?” Jake asked, his tone polite, his manner reserved.

As he drove her to a local bar and grill, Cassidy tried to think of ways to convince him to let her tag along while he searched for

his sisters and for clues as to why she'd been attacked. She knew he'd respond to her fear more than her arguments. Jake had a soft spot for the underdog that she'd exploited with a mercilessness that surprised her. She'd taken advantage of her knowledge of Jake's past, deliberately allowing her fear to show. Jake had once told her that in the orphanage, he'd helped comfort those kids who needed it, protected them from bullies, always hoping that someone else was protecting his sisters as he protected those close to him. In her fear, she'd shamelessly exploited Jake's vulnerability, but Cassidy didn't regret her actions. She hadn't faked her fear. She could hide her terror if necessary, but she wouldn't rest easy until the man who'd attacked her was behind bars.

On the way to dinner, she countered Jake's every argument. She told him she could put her law practice on hold and take several weeks off. She hated to leave her pro bono work at the women's clinic, but they'd have to manage without her. If she stayed with Jake, her routine would be less predictable.

Entering the restaurant, a place where locals hung out and tourists rarely found, they delayed their discussion while Jimmy Buffet's music serenaded them with promises of Margaritaville. A waitress seated them next to a window overlooking the parking lot and a two-lane road that wound along the coast. She told them that due to the drought, water was available only upon request. Cassidy took a seat and consulted the menu. She ordered shrimp and—wishing for a glass of wine, but recalling the medic's

instructions not to drink alcohol—a club soda with a lime wedge.

The hot food came promptly. The view might not be great, but the atmosphere and fresh seafood were wonderful.

Cassidy finished off her last spicy shrimp. “Before you came over to my house, did you look through the stuff I brought?”

Jake washed his blackened-grouper sandwich down with sweet tea, then pushed back from the table. “I haven’t read the three diaries my mother left yet. There are several photographs that don’t mean anything to me, but the copies of my sisters’ birth certificates and my parents’ marriage license will provide my chief investigator with a good place to start looking for information.”

Just as Cassidy finished her coffee, Jake’s cell phone rang. He checked the caller identification, then answered. “What have you got, Harrison?”

Cassidy couldn’t hear the other man’s reply, but Jake’s face lit up. “You do? That’s terrific. Hold on.” Jake whipped a pen from his pocket and furiously wrote names and addresses on a napkin. “Has the lady at the telephone company come through? Okay, keep working on it.”

Jake hung up, his face flushed with success, the color high on his sharp cheekbones. “After you left my house, I faxed Harrison copies of my sisters’ birth certificates. He’s traced the adoption records.”

“But they’re sealed.”

“Harrison knows people everywhere. It’s his job to dig out

information not readily accessible.”

“So tell me,” she prodded, not in the least surprised by his assistant’s ingenuity. She was sure that Jake ran a sharp operation. That he’d become so successful after starting from nothing made her feel a great deal of pride. And Jake had a gift for friendship. Look how easily she’d accepted his help, just as the orphans had so long ago.

Jake was a natural leader, but he also held himself apart. Sharing had always been difficult for him.

“I have my sisters’ current addresses.” Jake’s voice was infused with happiness and excitement and wonder. “I never expected my search to end so soon.”

“Are you going to call them?” Cassidy asked, enjoying his pleasure and the sparkle of amber light in his eyes, emitting a warmth that wrapped her like a soft blanket. Jake’s sharing anything with her after all these years and showing her his pleasure were a gift. A gift of part of himself.

Jake sighed and threaded a hand through his hair. “I think a letter would be best.”

Such extraordinary patience. That he would be willing to wait to introduce himself to his sisters surprised her. “Why write when you can call?”

“News that my sisters have siblings may come as a shock. A letter will let them adjust gradually to the idea before speaking with me.”

He sounded as if he’d thought through every potentiality.

For Jake's sake, she hoped his sisters responded positively and soon. In his place, she didn't know if she would be so patient or thoughtful or understanding.

"I'll leave it up to them if and when to contact me."

He'd waited so long. She couldn't believe he didn't intend to pick up the phone and just call, even if only to hear their voices. Jake also had extraordinary composure. In his place, she would have dialed, too excited to consider the consequences. While Jake had never forgotten his boyhood promise to his father, hadn't given up his search all these years, he was methodical, careful. But she just couldn't comprehend how he could bear to wait until they contacted him now that he'd found them. However, Cassidy realized this decision had to be his. She had no right to try to change his mind.

Jake's eyes narrowed, and he suddenly stood and tossed money on the table. "Let's go."

Alarmed by his sudden reversal of tone and demeanor, Cassidy looked past Jake toward the parking lot. Her stomach tightened.

Two men had just pulled up in a four-door sedan. She watched them exit the vehicle. Each man sported a suit and tie.

Jake grabbed Cassidy's hand. "The bulges beneath their armpits indicate they're carrying."

"Carrying?"

"Guns."

Jake shouldered his way past customers eating with

enjoyment, waitresses carrying plates of lobster tails, crab claws and grouper sandwiches, and headed for the rear of the restaurant. Without hesitation she followed, allowing him to pull her into the kitchen.

They hurried past gleaming stainless-steel countertops, a stove with a huge cauldron of soup and a kid sweeping the floor. Jake swiped a bottle of wine off a wire rack and tossed the chef a twenty-dollar bill. The surprised cook shook his head at their crazy antics.

Fear lodged in her throat, Cassidy hurried to keep up with Jake's long strides. She took a moment to look over her shoulder for their pursuers and slammed into Jake's broad back. "Sorry."

He'd halted to open the back door. "Hurry."

She scooted through the door, realizing now was not the time to ask questions. But Jake had parked his vehicle out front. They'd have to go around the building to reach it, and they'd likely be seen by the men in suits. Cassidy wondered if they were FBI, the mob, hired guns or if one of them was the same man who had tied her to her kitchen chair. She didn't want to stick around long enough to find out.

She slipped behind the restaurant, next to a Dumpster, and the scent of rotting fish slapped her in the face. The empty lot behind the restaurant provided extra parking for weekend overflow, but she saw no place to hide. Before she could turn and ask Jake where to head next, he'd whacked the neck off the wine bottle, stuffed a handkerchief into the now-open neck and down into the

red wine, then urged her around the corner.

“Be ready to run to my car on my signal.” He spoke as calmly as he’d previously ordered their dinner.

How could he remain so calm when her pulse was beating so hard that she had trouble hearing him? Breathless, she inhaled deeply and frowned. “What signal?”

“I’ll tell you. Just be ready.”

When the men in suits reached the back door, Jake lit the handkerchief with a lighter and tossed it toward the Dumpster.

“Now! Go.”

Cassidy raced along the side of the restaurant toward the parking lot and Jake’s car.

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