

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired

Safe in His Arms
Dana Corbit



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«HarperCollins»

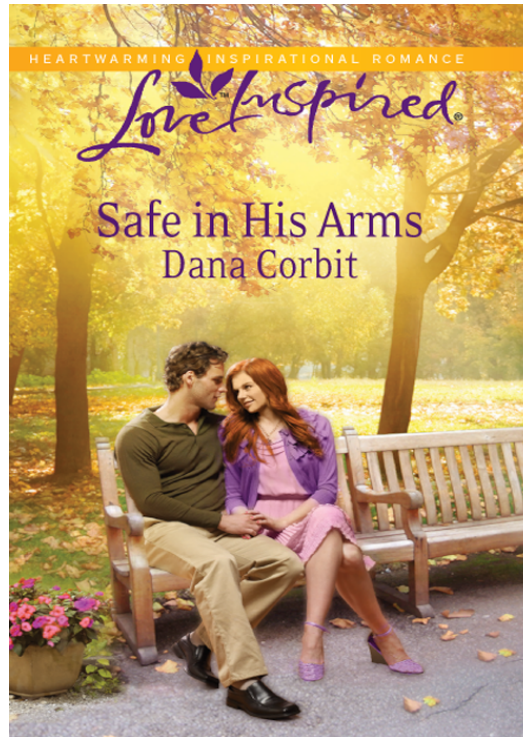
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Safe in His Arms / D. Corbit — «HarperCollins»,

She Wants To Remember. He Wishes He Could Forget. Lindsay Collins can't remember the accident that injured her and took her sister's life six months ago—but someone can. Trooper Joe Rossetti can't seem to get the images of that night out of his head. Plagued with guilt for not being able to do more to save Lindsay's sister, Joe doesn't want to get close to Lindsay. But when he sees her struggle to relate to the orphaned niece she's now raising, he can't walk away. Lindsay and Joe will have to face their pain and doubts together in order to make a new family bloom.

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When Lindsay Collins cleared her throat, Joe Rossetti straightened. What was he doing, losing his focus like that?

“Here, let me buzz you back,” Clara, the department’s secretary, said. “You can have a private conversation at one of the desks in the squad room. I’m sure Trooper Rossetti will help you in any way he can.” Clara’s lips twitched as she reached for a button to the side of her desk to let Lindsay in. Always the matchmaker.

Joe took a deep breath. Couldn’t the people around this post mind their own business just once? He wasn’t used to failure, either, and Lindsay Collins represented the biggest failure of his career so far. She stepped through the door to the left of the counter with the aid of a tortoiseshell cane.

Like it or not, he had to face her. And she would want answers that he wasn’t prepared to give.
Dear Reader,

If you’re like me, sometimes you look in the mirror and see imperfections. I find myself thinking, “If only this were a little smaller or smoother.” Even away from the mirror, I sometimes wish that I had better math or timemanagement skills. I have to be reminded that I am a child of God, created in His image, and that as a Christian I should love all of His creations. Myself included.

I explored this idea in *Safe in His Arms*. Lindsay Collins has no trouble putting her trust in God, but she has a much more difficult time loving herself. Before she can find a lifetime love, she must learn that she is precious to God and worthy of love. I like the words in the beginning of Genesis 1:31a: “And God saw everything that he had made and behold it was very good.” If God sees such value in His creations, then shouldn’t we learn to appreciate ourselves, imperfections included?

I love hearing from readers and may be contacted through my website, www.danacorbit.com, or through regular mail at P.O. Box 2251, Farmington Hills, MI 48333-2251 or friend me on Facebook.

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www.millsandboon.co.uk

To my very own hero, Randy ... my partner, my best friend. Thank you for cooking more than your share of family dinners, being a great tag-team carpool dad and pretending to understand my roller coaster ride of a creative process as I tell my stories. Thanks to my friends, Cindy Thomas, who helped me finish this book by offering your cottage as a writing cave, and Dr. Celia D'Errico, D.O., who helped make the medical portion of this story believable.

Also, a special thank you to Michigan State Police Trooper Christopher Grace for opening his world and providing inspiration for the character of Joe Rossetti. Any mistakes in the story are my own.

He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

—*Isaiah* 40:11

Chapter One

Hot afternoons and hot heads made for some blistering combinations on the roadways, as far as Joe Rossetti was concerned. So, with the steamiest July day so far in the forecast, his anxiety was already building, and he wasn't out on patrol yet.

"Hey, Trooper Rossetti."

Joe stopped just as he pushed open the heavy steel door at the Michigan State Police, Brighton Post, and a wall of humidity reached out to steal his breath.

He glanced back over his shoulder. "Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Someone's out there to see you." Lieutenant Matt Dawson paused on the path to his office and looked at Joe over the top of the glasses he probably only wore to make him look older. He indicated the radio room with a tilt of his head.

Joe groaned under his breath, but he nodded and let the door close again. "Be right there."

Patting along his black duty belt and brushing a hand over his holstered weapon to make sure everything was in place, he straightened his shoulders and headed to the radio room that separated the visitor area from the squad room.

A little excitement to start his day. Strange, how he used to secretly hope for diversions to break up a shift's monotony. Nowadays he preferred to pull eight uneventful hours patrolling the highways of Detroit's western suburbs. To him, *excitement* had come to mean having to tell another set of parents that their kid was never coming home.

"Are you Trooper Rossetti?"

The pretty redhead peering at him from across the counter didn't strike him as familiar, but that didn't surprise him. He came across a lot of people every day, more out in the community than he'd ever cuffed and put in his patrol car.

"That's me. May I help you?"

She settled something beneath the ledge and leaned against it, gripping her hands together on the countertop. "You won't remember me..."

Strange, but as soon as she'd said it, Joe had the unsettling sense that he *did* remember her. Through his work, he'd learned to trust his instincts, so he took a good look at her. Something did look familiar, but he couldn't pinpoint it. Was it her mass of red hair, with all of the colors of fire in it, her almost translucent skin, or the dusting of freckles across her nose? When she looked up at him again, though, he realized that it was none of those things that tickled at the fringes of his memory.

It was her eyes. The same pale blue eyes that had filled his nightmares for the last six months. The eyes that had begged him for the kind of help he couldn't give. At once a memory of the accident and the fire covered his thoughts like a shower of metal fragments and charred upholstery, as his failed attempt to complete a one-officer rescue burned through his memory. A bungled job of protecting and serving.

Joe blinked but couldn't look away from her. He felt trapped by the intensity of her stare, convicted by the accusation in it. Recognition had to be written all over his face, but she must have missed it, because she cleared her throat and tried again.

"I'm sorry. I'm really nervous. My name is Lindsay Collins, and I ..."

It was all he could do to avoid saying "I know who you are." He could even fill in the details. Age twenty-eight. A Wixom address. She was the woman he'd hovered over for hours as she'd lay in that hospital bed, drifting in and out of consciousness. Staying with a victim too long to avoid becoming personally involved in the tragedy was a mistake but far from the only one he'd made that night. All of the mistakes demonstrated how he'd forfeited his professional distance and his edge as a police officer—all on one stormy night.

Had he consciously chosen which of the victims would survive when he'd pulled the driver out of the car, even as she'd begged him to help her unconscious sister first? Had he really believed that he had time to assist both victims before the car burst into flames, or had his oversized ego made him think he could pull off some superhuman feat? Was he to blame for a woman's death?

The poem. He swallowed, remembering yet another mistake he'd made the night of the accident. It was just a poem about God that a friend had included inside his birthday card last February. Joe didn't even know why he'd started carrying it around inside his trooper's hat. If someone had told him that one day he would pass it along to someone in crisis, he would have laughed out loud. He wasn't even one of those *God* people.

And then that night he'd done it. Lindsay Collins had looked so alone, lying in that hospital bed. Even her parents were down the hall on their cell phones, notifying relatives and preparing for a funeral. Joe had felt so helpless, watching her, that before he'd thought better of it he'd pulled the piece of paper out of his hat and tucked it in her hands. As if some poem that told her she was a child of God could make up for all she'd lost that night. As if anything could.

When Lindsay cleared her throat, Joe straightened. What was he doing, losing his focus like that?

"Here, let me buzz you back," Clara Morrison, the secretary, said. "You can have a private conversation at one of the desks in the squad room."

Clara, the youngest sixty-year-old Joe knew, and the go-to gal for Brighton Post gossip, pretended to miss it when Joe shook his head. She turned back to the redhead.

"I'm sure Trooper Rossetti will help you in any way he can." Clara's lips twitched as she reached for a button at the side of her desk.

Joe took a deep breath. Couldn't the people around this post mind their own business just once? Nothing usually ruffled him, but he was more than unsettled lately. He wasn't used to failure either, and Lindsay Collins represented the biggest failure of his career so far.

"Thank you."

Lindsay bent to retrieve the item she'd rested below the counter and shifted when she heard the buzz. She stepped through the door with the aid of a tortoiseshell cane.

"Right this way," he said, covering his surprise.

He started toward one of the open desks in the squad room, but had to slow himself to her pace. He didn't realize he was staring at her cane until she waved it off the floor.

"Oh, this? The doctors said I won't always need it, but I'm still healing. Broken pelvis and broken right femur. I crushed my whole hip socket joint. It's taken a while to recover."

"Sometimes it does take a while."

He already knew about the two months she'd spent at Meadows Rehabilitation Center, thanks to updates from his nurse friends. He could only imagine how tough her recovery had been, given the extent of her injuries. She'd had so much internal bleeding from the pelvis fracture, that the doctors said she was lucky to have survived.

Just as they reached the desk, the door to the locker room swung wide and Trooper Angela Vincent emerged in uniform, still adjusting the knot on her light blue tie. Trooper Garrett Taylor pushed through the opposite door, brushing his fingers across his silver badge, as if to make sure it was straight. Neither bothered hiding their curiosity about the woman who maneuvered herself into a chair and propped her cane next to it.

So much for life in a fishbowl. Joe almost wished he'd led her into the interview room instead, but then his coworkers would have been watching them through the one-way glass window.

As he sat in the seat opposite hers, Joe studied the woman he'd only seen one time before, on what had to be the worst day of her life. Her hair was tied back, not flowing past her shoulders the way it had been the night of the accident. Not matted with blood. He couldn't help but notice the

small pink scars just beneath her jawline, and another that peeked out from the ruffled edge of her white, sleeveless blouse.

Even with those tiny imperfections, Lindsay Collins was one of the prettiest women he'd ever seen. And one of the saddest. Those blue eyes had an empty quality to them, like a tranquil swimming pool where no one swam anymore.

"Now, how may I help you?"

She pressed her full red lips together and then spoke. "I saw your name on the report for the auto accident I was involved in six months ago."

Joe cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. I do a lot of accident reports."

He hated pretending he couldn't remember, but he doubted it would be helpful to tell her that, though many accident reports blurred together, he could still see hers in bold print.

"This one involved a fire and two fatalities, a man and a woman."

Joe could only nod. He might have told her that he'd investigated half a dozen fatalities in the past year—victims related only by the stretch of highway where their lives met with tragic ends—but she set a copy of the police report on the desk in front of him. Staring down at it for several seconds, he finally picked it up.

"I remember."

"You do?"

The strange sound of her voice had him watching her more carefully. Maybe she couldn't picture that awful scene as clearly as he could.

"I was the first responder."

She turned her head to the side, blinking a few times. When she looked back at him, her lashes were damp.

"I can't remember anything about the accident," she admitted. She glanced down at the report, dragging her front teeth over her bottom lip. "The woman who died ... Delia Banks ... was my sister."

He already knew that, too, but he didn't tell her so, as the raw sound of her voice cut through the detachment he was trying so hard to maintain. But then he'd failed at keeping a personal distance in this case from the moment he'd arrived on the scene.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

He hated to offer her platitudes, but he refused to tell her he was sorry she couldn't remember the accident. He wouldn't wish pictures like that to be painted on anyone's memory, in a gruesome palette of blood and twisted metal. Her subconscious had taken pity on her, allowing her to forget things that would be too hard to bear.

"Were you the only officer on the scene?"

"No, just the first. Why do you ask?" He tried to look calm, resting his forearms on the edge of the desk, but his thoughts were spinning. Was she putting together information for a lawsuit? Sure, he'd failed to get both women out of the vehicle before it burst into flames, but had he given anyone grounds to sue?

"My sister ... she was my best friend."

Lindsay brushed her index finger reflexively along the line of a jagged, pink scar on the back of her left hand. Probably from the glass. She didn't seem to be speaking to him, so Joe didn't try to answer. What would he say? He'd already told her he was sorry for her loss. He just hadn't said how much.

"We were having the best day," she continued. "We just didn't realize it would be our last one together."

"I really am sorry."

The words sounded empty to him. Impotent. As incapable of providing comfort as those that had been spoken on that day so long ago, when he'd worn his first grown-up suit, with a tie that strangled his tiny neck. Joe wiped a sweaty hand on his blue uniform trousers, leaving a mark.

He refused to allow his thoughts to travel that far back through history, especially when he was beginning to wonder just what Lindsay Collins wanted from her visit. Complaints were easier to handle. He would try tactful discussion first, and if that didn't work, he had his sergeant for backup. But what was he supposed to do now? He'd never been good with women when they cried. If Lindsay started, he might say anything to get her to stop.

"I wish there was something I could do," he began, not knowing what else to say.

"There is something." She looked up from the desk, an intensity that had been missing before now filling her eyes. "You could answer a few questions for me about that day. Fill in some of the blanks."

"Are you sure you want to know?"

Her gaze narrowed at him. "Of course I am."

Was it reflex or just plain cowardice that made him look at his watch then? So much for the Rossetti legacy of bravery on the force. Still, he had a job to do, and he already should have been out on patrol, discouraging drivers from turning Interstate 96 into the Autobahn.

"I'm late right now, but we could set up an appointment ... " He let his words trail away as he gestured toward the radio room.

"That's fine." With jerky movements, she stood and grabbed her cane for balance. "But if it wouldn't be too much trouble, could I ask just one question now?"

"Okay."

Technically, she was already asking one, and another would make it two. Joe didn't point that out, but he didn't sit again, either. Instead, he reached out a hand to her, signaling that their meeting was ending.

Lindsay traded the cane to her left hand and leaned on it for balance as they shook hands. *Small. Fragile.* She pulled her hand away quickly, as if she refused to let him see her vulnerability, and she trapped him in her steady gaze. At a willowy five-foot-nine, she barely had to tilt her head up to look him in the eye.

He cleared his throat. "Your question?"

Her bravado must have faltered, because she stared at her hands before looking up at him again.

"Why did you save me instead of her?"

Lindsay stared out the window at the patrol car that scattered gravel as it raced from the parking lot, its red light spinning and its siren blaring. From the look on Trooper Rossetti's face when she'd asked the question, she wondered if he would have run from the squad room if his radio hadn't beeped right then, giving him an excuse to go.

"Sorry about that," the front-desk lady who'd buzzed her in earlier said now that Lindsay was out front again. "You never know when a call is going to come in."

"Oh, no problem."

She glanced out the window to the parking lot again. Maybe it hadn't been the best question to ask first—she should have warmed up to it—but Trooper Rossetti had looked as shocked as he might have if she'd pulled a gun on him. The reaction was extreme. Was there something about the night of the accident that he didn't want to tell her?

"I'm Clara Morrison. I can help you." The woman glanced down at her desktop computer and started clicking through several screens. "Now, Miss Collins, Trooper Rossetti said you wanted to set up an appointment to speak with him further. When would be best for you?"

"Later today?"

Clara grinned, obviously getting the wrong idea about why Lindsay might want an appointment with the young police officer. She wanted to clear that up right away.

"I'm only here about a traffic accident he investigated."

"Of course." As Clara turned back to the screen, the side of her mouth lifted.

Lindsay couldn't blame the woman for not buying her story. Even as focused as she'd been on getting him to answer her questions, she'd still had her eyes open when she'd met Trooper Rossetti. No woman with her eyes open could have failed to notice his shiny, dark brown eyes and heavy fringe of even darker lashes. And that perfectly formed mouth and straight white teeth would have been hard to miss.

Guys like him were hired to play cops on TV, not to strap on the holster and dodge bullets for real. Delia would have called him "a hunk," and Lindsay would have been too awkward around him to even speak, if this had been a social situation. It wasn't.

"My sister died in that accident."

Immediately, Lindsay was sorry for being so blunt, and she felt even guiltier when the woman glanced over at her with a compassionate look on her face.

"I'm so sorry."

"I'm sorry, too. I shouldn't have said it that way." She shook her head. "I just can't recall much about that day, and I'd hoped that Trooper Rossetti could fill in some of the details."

"I'm sure he'll try." Clara turned back to the computer, scanning down through an appointment schedule. "How about at thirteen hundred—one o'clock—tomorrow?"

Not the best time, but Lindsay would try to work with it. "So I'll meet him here?"

Clara nodded and then turned back to her screen. "I'll get a message out to him."

"Thanks." Lindsay tucked the papers she'd brought with her back into her purse and settled it on her shoulder. Then, retrieving her cane, she started toward the door.

"Miss Collins," Clara called after her and waited until she looked back at her. "Have you ever considered that you might be better off *not* remembering every detail of your accident? That knowing might only cause more pain?"

"Yes, I've thought about that. I've been thinking about that for the past six months." Lindsay chewed the side of her lower lip and then straightened and nodded. She could do this; she owed it to Delia. She would get this right for her sake. "And I still want to know."

Chapter Two

Joe leaned against the counter in the radio room, crossing his arms and his ankles and putting on his best frown. He didn't know why he bothered trying to look annoyed when Clara was so obviously ignoring him as she tapped away on her keyboard.

"Why did you set this up on my day off, anyway?" Her shoulder lifted and dropped, but she didn't turn back to him. "What else did you have to do this afternoon?"

"I'm sure I could have found something." Joe glanced down at his khaki shorts and striped polo shirt as he stepped out into the visitor area. He felt out of place without his uniform and the air of authority that came with it. The idea of meeting with Lindsay Collins today didn't sit well with him, but he had no one to blame but himself for agreeing to it. He had to admit, though, that he would have agreed to anything yesterday to avoid the question Lindsay had asked him. Even to delay it. "Pretty, isn't she?" "I hadn't noticed." Or tried not to. And failed.

"You noticed, all right. It's about time you started noticing again. At thirty-four, you—"

"If you're about to mention my biological clock, you can stop right there. Wrong gender."

"You said it. I didn't."

The door opened before he could tell Clara to stay out of his personal life. Lindsay started inside, her hair pulled back into a long ponytail, her eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses. Effortless beauty. Julianne Moore with all that red hair and none of the paparazzi.

Joe cleared his throat and squashed those thoughts at the same time. If those musings weren't signals that he should cancel this meeting, then he didn't know what was. He needed to establish a professional distance with this woman, where he'd failed the night of the accident. He would tell her that everything he knew was already in the police report and send her on her way. Simple, right? Right.

Lindsay was leaning heavily on her cane and appeared to be struggling with the door, so he stepped over and pushed it wide for her. The source of her struggle was attached to her other hand: a preschool-age girl who stared up at him with eyes as pale blue as Lindsay's.

"Hi, Trooper Rossetti." Pulling off her sunglasses, Lindsay gestured with a tilt of her head to the child beside her. "This is Emma."

Joe looked back and forth between them, searching for other similar traits. From the police report, he'd figured Lindsay was single. He didn't recall anything about her having a daughter and couldn't remember having seen a child-safety seat in the back of the crushed car. And yet, while the girl's dark, curly ponytails couldn't have been more opposite from Lindsay's fiery mane, those eyes connected the two of them.

He crouched in front of the child. "Hello, Emma. My name is Trooper Rossetti."

"Hi." Emma dipped her head, staring out at him from beneath her bangs.

"How old are you?"

She grinned bashfully and held up three fingers.

"Well, then you're a big girl."

Joe grinned first at the woman and then at the child. So much for his tough-cop image. Little girls like his own niece had always been able to turn him to mush. Sending Lindsay and her tough questions away would be hard enough. Adding a cute kid to the equation just wasn't fair.

Lindsay cleared her throat. "I almost didn't recognize you out of uniform."

"It's my day off," he told her as he came to his feet.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize." Lindsay's gaze darted to the woman who'd scheduled the appointment and then back to him. "If you want to do this another day ..."

She was giving him an out, and he was tempted to take it. "Maybe you and your daughter—"

"Niece." She lowered her voice. "She is Delia's daughter. Her name is Emma Banks."

“Oh.” Joe swallowed. He hadn’t seen that one coming. And the fact that he hadn’t considered it was another sign that he wasn’t at the top of his game.

“Delia made me Emma’s guardian.”

That sad, empty look entered her eyes again. Pressing her lips together, as if to settle her emotions, she smiled at the child. Emma had released her hand and was scrambling into a waiting-area chair.

“Emma, be careful. You’re going to get hurt.”

The child barely glanced back at her aunt before righting her backside in the chair and reaching for a brochure on the table next to her. She pretended to read the document on Michigan’s concealed-weapon permit laws, but she held it upside down.

“Honey, why don’t you put that back?”

“No.” Emma clutched the brochure to her chest.

“She can have that one,” Joe said.

Lindsay smiled, appearing relieved to skip the battle. “She’s a great kid ... usually.”

“You’re lucky to have each other,” he said, when nothing else better came to mind.

He couldn’t help glancing again at Emma. The girl had lost her mother, a reality that no child should have to experience, and a horror that he knew firsthand. At least he could remember a few things about his own mother. Her sweet spirit. Her soft hair. Emma wouldn’t remember her mother at all, except through pictures and through the stories relatives like Lindsay would tell her.

A lump formed in his throat as he looked back to Lindsay, who was watching her niece, as well. Lindsay’s eyes were moist.

Joe knew he’d lost. Whether or not he was at fault for the accident, he couldn’t help feeling partially responsible for Emma losing her mother and for Lindsay being saddled with the responsibility of a child. The least he could do was to answer a few uncomfortable questions for them.

“How about we get out of here? There’s a park in New Hudson where Emma can play while I answer your questions.”

“Park?” Emma’s eyes lit up, and she was already climbing down from the chair.

“It’s settled then,” he said.

Lindsay looked back to him and smiled. Her smile was so potent, so mesmerizing, that Joe had to turn away to keep from gawking at her.

That he happened to turn toward Clara, who was watching him instead of her computer screen, was downright unfortunate. She gave him a knowing smile. He frowned. Clara had no idea what situation she was messing with.

“See you tomorrow, Clara,” Joe called out, as he opened the door for Lindsay and Emma.

“Park! Park!” the child called out.

With Lindsay balancing on her cane and holding Emma’s hand, it was slow going, but they finally reached the white four-door in one of the visitor spaces.

“Do you mean the park built on the old landfill?” she asked, as she opened the left rear door.

“That’s the one. James Atchison Memorial Park.”

He waited until she’d buckled the child in her car seat and climbed into her car before he jogged around the building to the lot where troopers parked their personal vehicles. He climbed into his quad-cab pickup, relieved to be inside, even if the interior was smoldering.

“You owe them this much,” he whispered to the inside walls of the truck cab.

Why did you save me instead of her? Her question reverberated through his thoughts again, as dread made his limbs feel heavy. How was he supposed to answer that? But he would answer it and her other questions, telling her as much of the truth as he could.

Only after he’d answered Lindsay’s questions and put her and her niece out of his life would he be able to tuck away his own questions about his instincts on the job and finally get his edge back. He had to reclaim it somehow—soon—before he lost his job or got himself or someone else killed.

“Push me again, Trooper Joe.”

“Okay, but only one last time, Miss Emma,” he said. “Then we need to take a break.”

His muscled arms flexing against the fabric of his polo shirt, Joe pushed the swing. This time Emma went so high that the swing jerked for a weightless moment at the top before gliding back down again. Instead of crying like Lindsay thought she might, Emma laughed with that delighted sound that only children can make.

“Do it again. Do it again,” Emma called out.

“Okay, but just one ... more ... time.”

The two of them had been playing like this for half an hour, and Lindsay didn’t see them stopping anytime soon. So much for the trooper answering questions. She shouldn’t have been surprised he was avoiding it, when he had appeared ready to cancel their meeting entirely until he’d learned that Emma was Delia’s daughter.

He’d only changed his mind because of Emma. Was it that obvious, even to a stranger, that Lindsay wouldn’t be a good guardian? She already had enough uncertainties herself, without having others question her. Why did Emma take to Joe so easily, even giving him a nickname after knowing him for ten minutes, when everything had been a struggle for Lindsay? She could barely get her niece to eat her vegetables or brush her teeth. Lindsay was the woman here. Where was the maternal instinct that was supposed to kick in when she needed it?

At least they were having fun, Lindsay decided, as she sat on a blanket, watching from beneath one of the park’s few shade trees. And she couldn’t have kept up with Emma’s running, anyway. Running was a part of a whole other life for Lindsay ... the one before the accident.

Joe finally jogged up to the blanket, carrying Emma piggyback. “I think we’re both ready for a nap.”

“You must be,” Lindsay agreed, shifting, so her stiff leg would be in a more comfortable position.

But Emma shook her head. “I don’t want a nap.”

Joe lowered Emma to the ground and then he dropped on his knees on the blanket. When he was seated, with his legs stretched out and crossing his ankles, Emma settled next to him, sitting in the same position.

“Whew, it’s hot out here.” Joe brushed his hand back through his light brown hair that he wore trimmed close on the sides, but slightly longer on top. On his day off, he’d put a little gel in it.

“Whew.” Emma copied his move, brushing back her bangs.

“You’ve got a little mimic there.”

Joe only smiled. The last thing Lindsay would have expected was for a tough police officer to be good with kids. But then, Trooper Rossetti was nothing if not a contradiction, with his towering linebacker build and a face that could have landed him on the cover of *GQ*.

“Here. I brought these.” Lindsay reached into her bag and handed them juice boxes. She was pleased with herself that she’d remembered those and some animal crackers. At least she had the snack-preparedness part of being a guardian down.

“Thanks.” He helped Emma pop her straw through the hole in her box and started on his own.

By the time that both boxes were empty, Emma was already snuggling down on the blanket, her lids heavy.

“Somebody needs a nap after all,” Joe whispered.

For a few minutes, Joe sat brushing Emma’s sweaty bangs back from her face with his fingertips in a tender move that again didn’t fit with the image of a tough police officer. Lindsay couldn’t help but watch as his fingers continued their mesmerizing, gentle brushing.

She wasn’t really imagining what it would feel like if he were brushing her hair like that, was she? Lindsay pushed away the thought as ridiculous.

“Is she asleep?”

At Joe's whispered words, she started, her face feeling warm. Joe gestured toward Emma.

"Well, is she?"

She nodded. "You're really good with kids."

"I have a niece, too. Kelsey's thirteen now, and completely spoiled. Mostly by me." He smiled down at Emma, as if remembering his niece at that age. "I used to baby-sit while my brother and sister-in-law took night classes."

He probably thought Lindsay hadn't baby-sat enough before being named Emma's guardian, but he didn't say so.

Finally, Joe looked up again. "Well, you wanted to ask me some questions."

He straightened, as if preparing himself for an onslaught. Lindsay couldn't blame him. She'd hit him with the toughest question yesterday.

She shifted again because her leg was already getting stiff. "It's just that it's killing me, having this blank spot in my memory. And don't tell me I'm better off not knowing. Everyone says that."

"Okay. I won't." He took a deep breath and began. "It was a rainy January instead of a snowy one, and it was pouring that night. The traffic was moving too fast and—"

She kept nodding her head until he paused, cocking his head to the side. Then she broke in.

"Those are the things you put in the police report. I want to know the things you didn't put in it."

He watched her in a measuring gaze, as if trying to decide if she could handle the truth. Could she? What if he told her that the accident was her fault? She'd suspected it, but that was different than hearing it spoken aloud.

"Okay. The scene was a mess. It was raining so hard that I was nearly on top of it before I saw it. Twisted, smoking metal was everywhere. Your car rolled and came to rest backward in the ditch."

He paused, perhaps hoping she would tell him it was enough, but she only nodded for him to continue. She tried to picture the scene as he described it, but the images refused to come together in her thoughts.

"The semi driver made a mistake passing. A fatal one." He traced a finger along the hemmed edge of the blanket as he spoke. "I called for backup and then rushed to the truck. After I determined the driver was a K— Uh, sorry, that means 'killed.' Well, after that, I went to the car."

"Delia was still alive, right?"

He cleared his throat. "There was a pulse."

"You know what I want to know, then. Why me?" She hated that her voice cracked when she asked, that her need to know had knotted her insides.

Joe brushed his palms on the legs of his cargo shorts. "From initial examination, I determined that the passenger's injuries were more serious than the driver's. The passenger was also unconscious. Since I was expecting backup, and I didn't want to cause the victim further injury if I could avoid it, I assisted the driver first. I was hoping for a quick response from the EMTs."

Lindsay wondered if he realized how strange his voice sounded, as if he was testifying in court instead of just filling her in on what happened the night of the accident. As a police officer, he had to know how to read body language to determine whether suspects might be lying. She might not have his level of training, but even she had to question the pointed way he was avoiding meeting her gaze. What wasn't he telling her?

"But it didn't turn out as you'd hoped, did it?" she asked him, when he didn't say more.

"No, it didn't." He didn't look up as he said it. "After assisting the first victim to safety near the underpass, I started back for the second victim."

"You were too late." She'd known this all along, so why did it create so much of an ache inside her now?

"I was too late."

His softly spoken words carried the finality of a judge handing down a death sentence. Wasn't that what he'd given her sister when he'd chosen not to pull her from the car first? No. Of course not.

She wasn't being fair, but she couldn't help it. Whether she'd had serious injuries or not, he hadn't even given Delia a *chance* to survive. No matter how rational his reasons, he had chosen between Lindsay's life and her sister's. She couldn't help but wonder if he'd made the wrong choice.

"The car burst into flames," Joe continued. "I sprinted back to it, but I couldn't get past the heat."

Lindsay nodded to let him know she'd heard him, even though his words made her feel as raw as she had right after the accident, when she wore her wounds on the outside as well as the inside.

Joe sat in a stiff pose, as if bracing himself for more questions. She wanted to ask him some, too. Like why he hadn't realized that the car would burst into flames and why he hadn't at least given Delia a chance by pulling her out first. But the points were moot, the consequences devastating. Still, Joe had put himself in danger, at least attempting to save them both, and he deserved her gratitude, even if she didn't understand his decisions.

"Thank you—" she paused as each word caused a fresh pinprick to her heart, but she finally forced out "—for saving me." She brushed thumbs along her lash lines, catching tears before they could fall.

"You're welcome." Color stained his cheeks, and he watched the child next to him, instead of looking at Lindsay. "I was just doing my job."

"Well, thanks for doing your job," she said. "Come to think of it, with the extent of *my* injuries, how were you able to walk me to safety?"

"I didn't help you walk." He drew his brows together and watched her, seeming surprised she hadn't figured out that answer herself. "I carried you."

Lindsay stared at him, her jaw slack. Maybe she couldn't remember the accident, but she should have realized she never could have walked away from that car, even with help. But she was having trouble digesting that the handsome police officer had carried her.

"I really shouldn't have moved you," he said with a shrug. "It could have made your injuries worse. I thought your leg might be broken, but I didn't know about the pelvis break."

"My parents told me that I was in critical condition that first day or so."

He nodded and glanced down again at the child, who had shifted and was using his leg as a pillow.

"So," he began, when he looked up again, "how are you adapting to instant motherhood?"

Lindsay blinked. As much as she didn't want to talk about her injuries anymore, she hadn't expected him to ask about that. "Oh. We're okay. It's a transition ... for both of us, but we're learning together."

She wished she could stop there. Should have. But she heard herself droning on anyway. "We're going to be great. I just know it. I fixed up the second bedroom in my condo for her, and ..."

At his smile, she finally let her words trail away.

"It's got to be tough."

"I never expected to struggle this much."

"Parents struggle, even those who have their kids from birth."

"Emma doesn't even live with me full-time yet."

He lifted a brow. "What do you mean?"

"After the accident, Mom and Dad took care of Emma while I was in the hospital and then at the rehab center," she said. "Now that I've started back to work part-time—I work at a doctor's office—I've been keeping Emma with me about half the time."

"Things might get better after the transition."

"I don't know." She glanced down at her wringing hands and lay them in her lap. "My parents are worried that I'm not up to the job of being Emma's guardian."

She didn't expect a guy she'd just met to come to her defense, but his silence made her wonder if he agreed with her parents.

“Sounds like you’re up against a lot.”

Lindsay told herself that those were just more well-meaning words, like so many she’d heard the last six months, but Joe’s comment was so well-timed that it almost helped. Suddenly, she was reminded of another time that he’d helped, probably more than he realized.

“Thank you for giving me the poem at the hospital.” His strange expression made her pause. “You are ‘Joe’ from ‘to Joe’ written at the top, aren’t you?”

A guilty smile pulled at his lips. Instead of answering, he turned to watch two boys climbing a curly slide. Maybe it was good that she hadn’t mentioned how her nurses had told her about the young police officer who spent several hours with her at the hospital.

Finally, Joe turned back to her. “It was an impulse. The poem, I mean. My friend, Cindy, gave it to me a long time ago. I don’t know why I gave it to you.” He shrugged. “I thought it might help.”

“You were right. It did.”

That Joe seemed surprised only puzzled Lindsay. If he hadn’t really believed it would help, then why had he given it to her?

“You know how it says, ‘Don’t be afraid. You are a child of God. You are precious—’”

“I know what it says.”

His short remark surprised her even more, so she watched him for several seconds and then tried again.

“I mean the poem really reminded me to trust in God. I was devastated after the accident. After everything. During those first, dark weeks, I really needed to be reminded to rely on Him.”

She shook her head, breathing out a slow sigh. “Without my faith, I wouldn’t have survived. You know, like in the beginning of Psalm 46, ‘God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.’”

For a long time, Joe stared at her as if she’d just announced that the Earth was an asteroid or something. What was wrong with him? Was she not supposed to bring up the poem? Hadn’t he expected her to figure out that he’d been the one to give it to her? Why was he so uncomfortable about it? She’d thought about telling him that she’d been carrying the poem in her purse for months, but she thought it would bother him even more.

Then he shook his head. “I don’t get it.”

“Get what?”

“How, after everything you’ve been through, can you possibly still believe?”

Chapter Three

How could I not?

Lindsay's words rang in Joe's ears as he carried her blanket to the car. He could think of a dozen reasons why anyone who'd been through all she'd been through wouldn't believe in God, and *she* couldn't think of any? One would be the preschooler Lindsay was pulling toward the parking lot as she struggled along with her cane.

Yet, with all that had happened, Lindsay Collins still believed. She even quoted scriptures, when the words had lost impact on him a long time ago. He couldn't understand her resilient faith. If a loving God existed, wouldn't Emma still have a mother? Wouldn't Joe still have his? Wouldn't his little-boy prayers have had an impact, instead of slamming against the ceiling while his mother wasted away in slow, deadly steps? And he wouldn't let himself get started on natural tragedies, like Hurricane Katrina, or manmade ones, like 9-11. Those wouldn't have happened, either, would they?

"I don't want to go to your house, Aunt Lindsay," Emma whined as they struggled along. "I want to go to *my* house."

"Sweetheart, that's not—" Lindsay stopped herself with a frustrated sigh.

Joe didn't have to wonder if her next word would have been "possible." Lindsay had already told him that Delia Banks's house had been sold as part of the estate. Emma would have a tough time understanding that she could never go home again.

"I want to go to my house," Emma hollered this time.

"Come on, Emma. We're leaving now."

Joe wanted to tell Lindsay she was handling the situation all wrong, but he doubted she would appreciate his opinion. Not for the first time this afternoon, he wondered if Brian and Donna Collins were right in questioning their daughter's ability to raise a child.

Maybe he should give her a few tips—no. He put a quick stop on the path his thoughts were taking. He'd already fulfilled his promise to tell her about the accident—well, most of it. He couldn't bring himself to tell her the rest. What possible good purpose would it have served? She already had some serious survivor's guilt. The last thing she needed was to learn that her pleas for help for her sister first had fallen on deaf ears. It was more likely that he just didn't want to confess that those deaf ears had been his.

"I don't want to go," Emma started again.

"You're just tired."

The little girl shook her head hard, her ponytails hitting her aunt's hip with each swing. "I'm not tired. I want to stay. Want to play with Trooper Joe."

He couldn't help but to smile at that, so he turned his head so they wouldn't see. Wasn't it just like a kid to forget what she was causing a ruckus about in the first place and to just keep arguing for the point of arguing?

She tried to pull Emma along again, but the child had gone limp. Lindsay couldn't pull her without falling.

"That's enough, Emma." Her jaw flexed as she gritted her teeth. "We have to get home, and Trooper Rossetti doesn't have time to play with us all afternoon."

"No!"

Emma jerked free from her aunt's hold, making Lindsay struggle to keep her balance. The little girl only made it a few steps toward the playground before Joe caught her around the waist and lifted her from the ground. He wasn't doing a good job of not getting further involved.

"Where are you going, Little Miss?"

"I want to play," she wailed.

Holding her away from him to avoid kicking legs, Joe started up the path toward the parking lot again. He had to give the child credit for her effort, but she'd picked an opponent accustomed to wrestling squirrely suspects into handcuffs. It wasn't much of a contest.

"I'm sorry we can't play right now, but whipping around like a tornado isn't going to make anyone want to play with you."

After Emma settled in his arms as he'd hoped she would, he smiled at her. "Now, that's better."

Joe sensed before he saw Lindsay watching him. At his lifted brow, she mouthed the words "thank you," and then she struggled forward again. He hadn't done anything all that amazing, so it shouldn't have pleased him so much that he'd impressed her.

But as Lindsay stopped next to her car, Joe saw the reminder that it provided and felt the slap he deserved. The nondescript midsize with the child seat in the back was nothing like her sporty two-door that had fried in the accident. What was he thinking, trying to impress Lindsay Collins at all? Did he need any further reminders that he should cut his losses and put Lindsay and her niece in his rearview mirror without delay?

Lindsay opened the right-rear door and Joe handed the child to her.

"I want to play with Joe." Emma struggled against the constraints of Lindsay's arms.

The child's wiggling caused her aunt to lose her balance, the cane skidding from its position of support. On instinct, Joe reached out for them from behind, catching Lindsay and steadying her from beneath the elbows. He was almost convinced he felt her shiver under his touch. His fingers tingled so much from the contact that he almost opened his hands again and let the woman and child drop to the asphalt. What was wrong with him? That jolt inside him had to be the same adrenaline he felt at an accident scene. Any other type of reaction to Lindsay Collins would be unacceptable, and he wasn't about to cross *that* line.

As quickly as he could without being obvious in shoving her away, he set Lindsay back on her feet and released her. Ignoring the prickles in his fingers that refused to subside, he stepped up to Emma and tugged on one of her ponytails.

"Didn't we already talk about this tornado business?" He gave her a stern look. "We can make plans to play together again soon, but only if you stop this nonsense and let Aunt Lindsay buckle you in your seat."

Joe was as surprised as Lindsay appeared to be by his offer, but he guessed he shouldn't have been. He'd already been too personally involved in this case, and he'd chosen to dig in deeper the moment he'd suggested the trip to the park when he could have answered Lindsay's questions right in the Brighton Post parking lot.

But he'd had to make sure Lindsay and her niece would be okay, and now that he'd witnessed Lindsay's struggles, he couldn't resist stepping in to help. He was caught now in a trap of his own making. He should drive away as fast as the high-performance tires on his patrol car could carry him, but he knew he wouldn't, any more than he would leave a stranded motorist on the side of the interstate.

"Promise?"

Joe startled as Emma's question drew him back from his thoughts. Sitting docilely now in her aunt's arms, Emma looked back at him with a skeptical expression.

"That we can play together? Of course, I promise."

But Lindsay shook her head. "I don't think—"

"Come on. It will be fun."

Lindsay's jaw tightened as she buckled Emma in her seat and closed the car door. Finally, she turned back to him.

He held his hands up the way he usually expected suspects to do. "Before you say anything, let me make a suggestion. I really do have a lot of experience in taking care of kids, so maybe when we meet again I could give you some tips."

“You mean tips about how to *bribe* kids into behaving?”

Because her lips had formed a straight line, he couldn't help grinning at her. She had spunk. “Worked, didn't it? And it wasn't that big of a bribe anyway.”

“You shouldn't have promised her.”

“Why not?”

“Because you won't be able to keep that promise.” She cleared her throat. “Look, I appreciate you taking the time to fill in the blanks for me about the accident, but now I have to put that night behind me so Emma and I can get on with our lives.”

“You could make that life a little easier if you just let me—”

“Thank you. But no.”

He used the lazy grin that usually swayed women to his side. “Okay, then. But remember, the offer still stands.”

“Noted.” She swallowed visibly, but showed no signs of caving. “Thanks again.”

Lindsay hobbled around the car and climbed in as if she couldn't get away from him fast enough. She didn't look his way as she backed out of her parking place and started down the long drive to the park exit.

He knew he should just let her drive off into the southeast Michigan sunset, but he wouldn't. Whether she admitted it or not, Lindsay needed his help in figuring out how to handle Emma. He might not be able to do anything about the rest of her problems, might not be able to give Lindsay back her sister, or Emma her mother, but this was one area he could help if Lindsay would only let him.

Just like he didn't know her well enough to understand how her faith could have survived such a loss, she didn't know him, either. She had no idea how determined he could be, whether it was to get into the police academy or to keep a promise. And he was more determined than he'd been about anything in a long time to keep his promise to Emma and in turn help out the child's aunt. If he helped Lindsay adapt to her new life, then maybe, just maybe, he could escape from the weight of his guilt and get on with his own life.

“I'm so hungry.” Emma put so much emphasis on “so” that it sounded more like she'd been starving for years rather than minutes.

“Be patient, sweetie. I'm not finished cooking yet.” Lindsay had barely started, but it wouldn't help to tell Emma that. Lindsay had just changed from her work clothes into shorts and a T-shirt, and now she was banging around in the kitchen, hoping to finish before Emma had a meltdown.

“But I'm hungry *now*.”

Lindsay glanced down to see that her hand that grasped the saucepan handle was trembling. She squeezed her eyes so tightly closed that her temples ached. Getting out of work late had caused her to be tardy in picking up Emma from the day-care center. Delia had never been late in the three years she'd taken Emma to that center. The director had made a point of telling Lindsay so. Worse than that, the woman had offered her words with a pitying smile.

This wasn't working. What made her think she could handle parenting? She didn't know what she was doing. She'd asked a three-year-old to be patient. Lindsay hadn't learned that skill, and she was well on her way to thirty.

“Lord, please give me patience.” She whispered the prayer as she shoved the broiler pan in the oven.

Emma was sagging against the doorjamb, as if she were weak from starvation.

“Why don't you run into the living room and play with Monkey Man?”

“I don't want to play.”

“Then maybe you could lay on the couch for a few minutes. Dinner will be ready real soon.”

Emma looked doubtful, but slumped out of the room for what would only be a short reprieve. *Trooper Rossetti would have helped you out*. Lindsay shook off the thought. She might have been whining a few minutes before, but she didn't need help, least of all from Joe Rossetti.

Lindsay had resented every time images of the police officer crept into her thoughts at work today, so she'd spent most of the afternoon resenting. Why couldn't she get that man out of her mind? She had every reason to delete him from her mental hard drive, and yet he'd returned like an internet virus that refused to be wiped clean.

It couldn't be that she found the police officer unusually handsome and was replaying images of him for her own entertainment. Or that she'd enjoyed it so much when he steadied her at the park when she stumbled that she was daydreaming about repeating the clumsy move so he could come to her assistance again. No. Of course not.

The only reason she could be having any thoughts at all about Trooper Rossetti was that his answers yesterday had only caused her to have more questions. Like for instance, why he had spent so much time with her in the hospital after the accident. He hadn't said a word about it. And if Joe didn't believe in God, then why had he given her the poem that reminded her to have faith? If he'd given it to her on "impulse," as he'd said, then he must have once believed. Had there been some tragedy in his life that caused him to lose his faith?

"Stop it!"

She shot a glance over her shoulder, to see if Emma had returned to watch her again. But she was alone. She puffed up her cheeks and let the breath out slowly, hoping to expel her strange thoughts in the process. She had enough tragedy in her life, and too much on her plate right now, to be taking on someone else's problems.

Since no sounds were coming from the living room, except for the saccharine sound of Emma's favorite kids'-music CD, Lindsay was relieved that the child had found something with which to occupy herself for a few minutes. Now Lindsay would be able to finish making dinner in peace.

She lifted the pan lid and used a fork to test the doneness of the asparagus. She only needed to start on the salad and wait for the oven buzzer to go off for the salmon, and she would have a meal on the table. Maybe Emma would even like what she'd made for dinner this time.

But just as she chopped through a head of red cabbage, the doorbell rang.

"What now?"

She dropped the cabbage and knife on the cutting board and hurried down the hall to the living room.

"Remember, Emma, don't answer the—" The word "door" died on her lips as she glanced around the living room. Emma wasn't on the couch or near her pile of toys. Even her portable CD player lay abandoned.

"Emma?" Lindsay called, as she started up the stairs, her pulse scrambling. She expected the child to come racing down the hall. It and her bedroom were empty.

"Emma Claire, where are you?" She started down the steps again.

"Hey, Lindsay. Out here."

Her heart was pounding, but she stopped as she recognized the familiar voice coming from outside. What was Joe doing here? She hurried across the living room and opened the door. Joe stood on her porch with Emma resting on his hip. Lindsay could only stare at them, her mouth falling slack.

She wanted to yell at him for showing up at her condo after she'd expressly told him she didn't need his help, but how could she, when he was standing there holding the child she hadn't been watching closely enough? When Emma's escape was proof positive that she was doing a lousy job.

Joe stepped up to the storm door and opened it. "Look who just slipped out the front door to greet me."

"I can see that."

His smile grated on her. Okay, maybe she wasn't the best guardian, but he didn't have to rub it in. He was the one who'd popped in uninvited and had given a three-year-old a reason to sneak outside. And if he was insisting on showing up as the protector of the public, why was he out of uniform again, wearing jeans and a snug T-shirt that hugged his well-formed arms, chest and shoulders? She

didn't even want to think about whether she should have noticed those things at a time like this, or at any time for that matter.

"I was just telling Emma here that even when she sees a friend outside, she can't go out without her Aunt Lindsay." He lowered the child to the ground.

"Trooper Rossetti is right," Lindsay said, no matter how much it grated on her to admit it.

"Sorry," Emma said in a small voice.

"It's okay, but you'd better come inside now."

Lindsay made just enough room for her niece to slip past her, and then she reached for the door handle and tried to close it.

"Thanks for coming by, but it's a crazy time of day around here, and we were just about to eat, so ..." She paused, hoping he would get the hint to leave, but the oven timer went off, and he still hadn't turned down the walk.

"Shouldn't you get that?"

"Yeah, I'd better."

She waved and started down the hall. She'd only taken a few steps when a squeak of the door had her turning back. Emma had grabbed Joe's hand and was pulling him inside, and Joe was *letting* her. Was the trooper always this dense over social cues, or was he being this annoying on purpose?

"Do you want to play dolls?" Emma asked, as she led him toward the toy box Lindsay had moved from her old bedroom.

Lindsay started back toward them, but the buzz kept coming from the kitchen. Finally, with a frustrated sigh, she stalked out of the room.

Just as she pulled the pan from the oven, she sensed Joe behind her. Either that or the skin on the back of her neck was becoming gooseflesh for no good reason. Setting the pan aside, she turned to face him.

Joe stood in the doorway, with his thumbs hooked in his belt loops, like a blue-jeans model. Only his jeans had the spotted look of someone's painting pants, and the hole in one of the knees appeared to have been earned the hard way. At least he had the decency not to look smug that he'd managed to stay despite her wishes.

Lindsay peeked behind him, but Emma must have stayed in the living room.

"Wasn't I obvious enough that I was trying to get you to leave?"

The side of his mouth lifted. "No, you were real clear there."

"So why are you still here?"

"I was invited."

That lazy smile annoyed her, but the jolt of electricity she felt shocked her in more ways than one. What was wrong with her? She crossed her arms. Just who did he think he was, staying when he knew she didn't want him there? And an invitation from a three-year-old didn't count, either. Joe must have sensed that she was about to say something acidic enough to bore a hole through his skin because he held up both hands to ward off the assault.

"Look, I'm already here, so you might as well put me to work. I could hang out with Emma while you're finishing dinner. You said it's a hectic time of day, so ..." He glanced around the chaos in her kitchen. "And, besides, Emma is already setting up dolls in the living room. Do you want to be the one to tell her I can't stay to play?"

Lindsay caught sight of her saucepan in her side vision. Steam was seeping from under the lid where the asparagus had to be overcooked. The head of cabbage lay on the cutting board where she'd abandoned it.

"Fine," she said, blowing out a frustrated sigh. "You can stay. But this is *my* house and *my* rules, and I—" She stopped, wincing. "Did I really just say that?"

"From your parents?"

"My dad."

“My brother tells me that, as a parent, you say every one of those things you promised yourself you’ll never say to your own kids.”

In a roundabout way, he’d just called her a parent. During all of the discussions with her mother and father and even with Delia’s attorney, no one had called Lindsay a “parent.” She liked the way that sounded.

“So ...?” Joe gestured toward the living room with a flick of his thumb.

“Go ahead. Just play with Emma until I can get food on the table.”

Farther down the hall, he turned back. “I’ll be sure to follow *your* rules. In *your* house.” With a grin, he was off and around the corner to the living room.

Emma must have been hiding because giggles drifted down the hall. Lindsay could tell the exact moment when Joe found her hiding place as those giggles multiplied. Joe really was amazing with her niece. Fun but firm. Playful but not a pushover. Maybe he could teach her a few things about working with children.

No matter what it took for her to become the best caregiver for Emma, the kind that Delia had hoped for when she’d named her guardian, Lindsay was willing to do it. And if that meant taking unsolicited advice from a Michigan State Trooper, then she would do that, too.

“You could stay for dinner,” she heard herself saying.

Joe popped around the corner with Emma hanging on his leg. “Sure, I’d love to stay. Thanks.”

Lindsay nodded. He’d won. She should have been frustrated that he’d gotten his way, after all. But she was relieved that Trooper Joe Rossetti *wasn’t* leaving, and she couldn’t explain why.

Yet, relief wasn’t the worst of what she was feeling. Her sweaty palms and the butterflies in her belly felt an awful lot like anticipation. Was she really looking forward to sharing dinner with the guy who reminded her of everything she’d lost and whose presence there today was like a neon sign announcing her weaknesses as a guardian? Even telling herself that he was there on her terms, not his, didn’t make her feel any less edgy. Anticipation ... now, that worried her most of all.

Chapter Four

“That was great,” Joe said, as he pushed back from Lindsay’s blond-wood dinette table and wiped his mouth on a cloth napkin.

A pretty pink blush crept across Lindsay’s cheeks, and she stared down at her plate. “No, it wasn’t. The salmon was overdone, and the asparagus was as limp as pasta noodles.”

“I happen to like pasta noodles, even when they’re well past al dente.” He also liked the little smile that spread on her lips over the compliment and how pretty she looked in her T-shirt, cutoffs and ponytail, but he kept those things to himself. No need to ruin a pleasant dinner by getting himself tossed out on his ear.

“Then you should have *loved* that stuff.”

“It was fish.” Emma’s tone left little doubt about what she thought about fruits of the sea.

Joe and Lindsay looked at each other across the table and laughed. They’d done an awful lot of laughing over this dinner, which had started out tense at best. Mostly, they’d laughed about the antics of the three-year-old who sat in a booster seat so high that her knees bumped the table edge. Occasionally, though, they’d found something funny that one of the adults had said, as well.

“I guess that says it all when you’re three,” Joe said when the laughter died down.

“I should have known better than to cook fish for a child, anyway,” Lindsay said with a frown.

“Some kids like fish,” he said because she seemed to need some kind words.

“I don’t like it.” Emma made another face.

“Not *that* one, apparently.” Lindsay tilted her head to indicate the child who’d eaten only enough to survive, mostly pushing her food around on her plate to create little pink-and-green piles.

Not most of the kids he’d ever met, either, but Joe didn’t mention that. And asparagus was seldom a hit with the under-ten crowd. He kept that to himself, as well.

After Lindsay sent Emma upstairs to get her pajamas ready for her bath, she started stacking the dishes. “Dinner’s a daily battle around here.”

Joe carried several plates to the counter. “Have you ever considered making ‘kid-friendly’ meals like pizza, chicken fingers and mac and cheese?”

He was glad she hadn’t lifted her stack of serving dishes because as aghast as she looked, she would have dropped the whole thing on the floor.

“I don’t want to feed her that stuff. What kind of guardian would I—”

She stopped herself, but he got the gist of what she was saying. “Plenty of people give their children kid food. Do you think they’re all bad parents?”

“Of course not, but I ...” She let her words trail away and shrugged.

“You’re awfully hard on yourself, aren’t you? My brother and I survived for a whole year on grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup after—well, we survived, anyway.”

Lindsay turned back from the dishwasher with curiosity in her eyes. “Why did you—”

“Never mind. It’s not that interesting a story.” He was sorry he’d mentioned it. Since when did he talk about his mother’s death and the lost years that had followed it? Rather than stand back and give Lindsay the chance to ask more questions, he helped her load the dishwasher.

“All I’m saying is, you should relax and give yourself a break. It’s okay for kids to have those things sometimes. It’s all about balance.”

He thought he’d been convincing, but Lindsay only started shaking her head.

“I have to get this right. To be the best guardian for Emma. I have to do it for her ... and for Delia.” Immediately, her eyes filled, but Lindsay blinked back her tears. “I *will* get it right.”

“And I thought you were just worried about some deep-fried balls of processed chicken and globs of high-fat cheese mixed in with carbohydrate-filled pasta noodles.”

It wasn't the best timing for a joke, but Joe either had to tell one or allow the emotion clogging his throat to really embarrass him. This all hit a little too close to home, to two little boys and the father who'd been forced to raise them alone.

"I was worried about those things, too."

He couldn't decide whether it was her smile or her determination that dazzled him, but he heard himself saying, "You'll get it right. I know it."

Lindsay stared back at him with wide eyes. Why did she find his statement of belief in her so surprising? He'd already said too much, yet he was tempted to say more, to tell her how impressed he was by her determination and her loyalty. That he'd thought those qualities were exclusive to people in uniform, not pretty redheads with the cutest freckles on their noses.

Okay, he wouldn't have said that, but still he was grateful when the sound of a faucet from upstairs made sure he wouldn't have the chance. A literal gift from above.

"Uh-oh." Lindsay glanced up to the ceiling before starting for the stairs. "Emma, honey, please turn off the water until I get there."

She seemed surprised when the faucet squeaked off again, as if she hadn't expected the child to obey her.

"Well, I'd better get up there before she goes tub diving." She started out of the kitchen, but then stopped and turned back to him. "Do you want to—"

"See myself out? Sure." He hoped he didn't sound as disappointed as he felt.

She blushed just like she had when he'd complimented her cooking. "Uh ... I was going to ask if you wanted to wait here until I finish with Emma's bath and her bedtime story, but if you need to get home—"

"I could stay," he rushed to say. Yes, he could, but the question was whether he *should*. His sweaty hands and dry mouth suggested that answer was a big "no."

"I'll finish cleaning up the kitchen while you're doing that."

"You don't have to."

He waved off her refusal. "It will keep me occupied while I wait."

"Okay, then."

She appeared as nervous as she had two days before, when she'd shown up at the Brighton Post to dig around in a recent past that would have been better left undisturbed. He listened for her footfalls on the steps, and then the sound of running water upstairs, before collecting the pans on the stove and filling the sink to wash them.

But all he could think about as he scrubbed the pans and wiped down the counters was what he was still doing in Lindsay Collins's condo when the child he was concerned about wouldn't be around for the rest of the night. He was still helping out, right? He was here because he wanted to come to Lindsay's aid to relieve his guilt over the accident and what he'd failed to tell her about it. Only those things.

"Yeah, you keep telling yourself that, buddy," he said under his breath.

"Did you say something?"

Caught, Joe shut off the faucet and turned to face her. The running water, as he rinsed down the sink, must have been what kept him from noticing her approach. His senses were off with her. Until lately, he wouldn't even have considered it possible that someone would be able to sneak up on him, and she'd done it without even trying.

Lindsay stood in the doorway with her arms crossed, her frustration obvious in the hard set of her jaw.

"It was nothing." He cocked his head to the side. "Boy, that was a quick bath and story. What was it, a picture book?"

But Lindsay didn't smile the way he'd hoped she would. If anything, her posture tightened.

"No book at all. Just a bath."

“Oh, weren’t you planning to read—”

“I was. We read a book together every night. It’s one thing that she used to do with Delia that I’ve tried to continue every night she’s with me. It keeps away her nightmares. Usually.”

“Don’t feel as if you need to change your nighttime schedule just because I’m here.” That was all he needed, for his presence there to make things worse between Lindsay and her niece. “In fact, you really shouldn’t change—”

“I didn’t.”

Joe stared at her. She wasn’t making sense. The same woman who was afraid to let her niece munch on a few chicken nuggets was just going to blow off one of their few daily routines because they had company.

“I don’t understand.”

“She didn’t want me to read a story to her tonight.” She blew out a frustrated breath. “She wants you.”

Lindsay expected gloating when Joe joined her on the tiny deck a half hour later, after story time with Emma. Time that should have been hers. How would she prove to her parents, a judge in the custody proceeding and even herself that she was the right guardian for Emma if she couldn’t even get the child to choose her as the person to read her a bedtime story?

This was what she deserved for inviting Joe to stay just because she needed adult conversation. Okay, who was she kidding? She’d invited him to stay because he was easy on the eyes, and he’d made her laugh all night. No matter how flattering the attention he paid her was, Lindsay needed to remember he was only there for Emma.

Shifting in one of the chairs in her faux wicker deck set so she could straighten her stiff leg, Lindsay watched him and waited.

But Joe didn’t say anything at all as he stood resting his hands on the rail and staring out into the wooded area at the back of her complex.

“Well, did she go to sleep?” she asked finally.

“She was about to when I left,” he answered without looking back at her. “She asked me to leave the closet light on.”

“She likes that. Can I get you some iced tea?”

“Maybe in a while.”

She waited for him to tell her more, but he seemed strangely subdued as he continued to look out into the darkness. “What book did she choose for you to read?”

“*Love You Forever.*”

“The one by Robert Munsch?” Now she understood why he’d become so quiet. She could barely avoid choking up when she read Emma that story about a lullaby that a mother sang to her son. “She picks that book a lot. Delia used to sing parts of it to her.”

“She told me.”

His eyes were shiny when he turned back to her, but it might have been just from the fancy streetlights that lit the walking path through the woods. She’d been ready to be angry with him because Emma had chosen him over her, but it was hard to hold a grudge against someone so obviously moved by the story.

“Don’t tell me you sang it to her, too, or I’m going to give up right now and crawl into a hole.” He smiled at that. “Oh, no. I wouldn’t do that. No kid deserves that kind of punishment.”

“You mean you’re not good at everything?”

“Not by a long shot. Do you sing it to her when you read it?”

“Oh, no. I happen to like my niece.”

“Funny.” Appearing more relaxed than he had been since coming outside, he backed away from the rail and settled into the second chair, with a tiny table between them.

She stared out into the same night that Joe had been watching with faraway thoughts a few minutes before. “Delia had an amazing singing voice.”

His only answer was a nod.

“That was just one of the things she was good at.” She couldn’t help smiling at the memory of the sister she adored. “Everybody loved her. She was smart and beautiful and generous. Voted both Homecoming Queen and ‘Most Likely to Succeed.’ She was amazing.”

“Sounds like it.”

“She was a doctor, you know.”

“Your parents mentioned it.”

There was a flash of something unreadable in his eyes, but he didn’t say more.

“She could have gone into any specialty, but she chose family practice because she thought she could help the most people that way.” Lindsay smiled again. “Did you know she was still in her residency when her husband died? Complications from diabetes. She still managed to finish the program and join a group practice, all while still being a great mom to Emma.”

“She sounds amazing.”

“She was.”

“Didn’t you say you also worked in the medical field?”

The surprise on Lindsay’s face over his question bothered Joe. Was she shocked that he remembered that she’d mentioned her work, or that he was more interested in knowing about her than her late sister?

“I’m an ultrasound technician.”

When she didn’t say more, he asked, “You said you worked in a doctor’s office?”

“A women’s practice.” She repositioned herself as though her leg was becoming stiff again. “Most of my ultrasounds are on OB patients.”

“It sounds like fun work.”

“Sometimes.”

Joe waited and kept waiting. Okay, he could imagine times when her work would be difficult—when the test showed abnormalities or worse—but still, he would have expected her to tell him how much she enjoyed introducing parents to their babies for the first time. To at least tell him a little more.

“So ... how long have you worked as a state trooper?”

She was watching him when he looked over at her. He answered her questions—ten years on the force, a commendation on his record—but it bothered him that she’d changed the subject.

Why was Lindsay more comfortable talking about Delia’s accomplishments than her own? Had someone led her to believe that her achievements were less valuable than her sister’s, or was it just survivor’s guilt that made Lindsay gush about Delia? He’d already gotten the sense that Lindsay had no idea how beautiful she was, but was there more to it? Did she see herself as second-class?

“Was your sister a runner like you?”

Again, she looked surprised, as if he’d discovered a long-buried secret or something. “I saw all those certificates and medals in the hall.”

“Oh. Right. I used to run 5Ks. But Delia? Oh, no. She said, for her to run three-point-one miles, there’d better be a mall at the finish line.”

She was grinning as she said it, so he grinned back, pleased that he’d found something she’d done better than her sister. It was unkind to think like this about someone who’d passed away, but Joe could only imagine how hard it had been for Lindsay to compete against an overachieving sibling who was even more revered in death.

“Are you a runner, too?” She cleared her throat. “I mean, are you a runner?”

He didn’t miss that she’d just excluded herself from the group. “Me? A runner? No way. I’d rather have all of my fingernails pulled off with pliers.”

“Pliers?”

“Maybe nothing that violent, but you get the picture.”

“But you do something. It’s obvious you work out.”

“Is it?”

Her only answer was a crimson flush that spread even to her ears. It was hardly a new thing for Joe to have women noticing him. He didn’t miss the furtive looks, but he rarely thought twice about them. So why was he impressed that Lindsay had all but admitted she’d been looking? She had to be the first woman who seemed so humiliated that *he knew* she’d been looking, though, so he let her off the hook.

“I just do weight training mostly. And the stair climber for cardio.”

“It’s healthy to do something.”

“From all those awards, I’m guessing you’re a pretty good runner. Your parents have to be so proud.” The last he added on impulse, based on an instinct he used to be able to trust before and hoped he still could.

“That’s in the past. It was just a hobby, anyway.”

When he glanced at her, she was staring at the deck boards beneath her bare feet rather than at him. She’d said running was in her past. Probably six months and one pelvis fracture ago. Another thing she’d lost with the accident. She’d called running a hobby when her wall of certificates suggested a passion. She hadn’t even answered his question about her parents, and he could guess why. He suspected that all had not been well with the Collins family long before the accident.

“Well, it’s getting late,” she said.

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