

A photograph of a man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a red and blue plaid shirt, carrying a young boy on his shoulders. The boy is wearing a maroon hoodie and is smiling. They are outdoors with green foliage in the background. In the top left corner, there is a dark circular badge with a dotted border containing the text '36 HOURS' in red and white.

36
HOURS

FATHER AND CHILD REUNION

CHRISTINE FLYNN

PART 2 OF 3

Christine Flynn

Father and Child Reunion Part 2

Аннотация

36 Hours SerialAs a devastating summer storm hits Grand Springs, Colorado, the next thirty-six hours will change the town and its residents forever....Father and Child Reunion Part 2Eve expected a quick trip home to Grand Springs. But the night of the storm changed her carefully planned world. Her mother, Olivia, has been murdered, and Eve's sorting through her loss and confusion—and facing the feelings for Rio she ran away from years earlier.Rio thinks he's getting closer to finding Olivia's killer. But he's getting closer to Eve, too—and the little girl who looks so much like Rio himself. Solving the murder will make his career—but could destroy any hopes he has of making a life with Eve and Molly....The story concludes in Father and Child Reunion Part 3.

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The story concludes in *Father and Child Reunion Part 3*.

Dear Reader,

In the town of Grand Springs, Colorado, a devastating summer storm sets off a string of events that changes the lives of the residents forever....

Welcome to Mills & Boon exciting new digital serial, 36 Hours! In this thirty-six part serial share the stories of the residents of Grand Springs, Colorado, in the wake of a deadly storm.

With the power knocked out and mudslides washing over the roads, the town is plunged into darkness and the residents are forced to face their biggest fears—and find love against all odds.

Each week features a new story written by a variety of

bestselling authors like Susan Mallery and Sharon Sala. The stories are published in three segments, on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and the first segment of every three-part book is free, so you can get caught up in the mystery and drama of Grand Springs. And you can get to know a new set of characters every week. You can read just one, but as the lives and stories of each intertwine in surprising ways, you'll want to read them all!

Join Mills & Boon E every week as we bring you excitement, mystery, fun and romance in 36 Hours!

Happy reading!

About the Author

Christine Flynn is a regular voice in Mills & Boon Cherish and has written nearly forty books for the line.

Father and Child Reunion Part 2

Christine Flynn



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The weather forecasters didn't predict the intensity of the storm which hit Grand Springs, Colorado, that Friday night. It was as if the massive thunderstorm was the accumulation of all that was going wrong: Hal's bride-to-be, Randi, took off just before the ceremony, Jessica Hanson hit her head and started having visions, including seeing the mayor murdered, and Eve Stuart had come home, hoping to avoid her past. But as Eve was learning, there was no escape. Rio quickly found out that he had a daughter. Six years ago Eve ran away from everything but her feelings. Today those feelings are just as strong—but are they still one-sided?

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Chapter Four

It had taken some doing, and more than another week, but Eve Stuart finally coerced her brother into looking over the inventory she'd prepared of their mother's earthly possessions. The message she'd left on Hal's voicemail had finally done the trick. She'd made it clear that it wasn't his help she was after. Or his approval. She didn't need either. She wanted him to review what she'd prepared only because she didn't want to leave him out of anything. But if he wasn't interested in what was going on with the estate, she'd have the attorney file the inventory as it was. Tomorrow. Before the first of August.

She'd left the message that morning. Hal himself had arrived a few minutes ago, just as she and her daughter, Molly, were finishing the lasagna her neighbor, Millicent, had brought over. He'd promptly declined her offer of a drink or something to eat and, with little more than a perfunctory "Where is it?" proceeded to pace the dining room while he studied the long yellow pad she'd handed him.

Eve couldn't see him from where she stood at the sink, surrounded by copper pots and the wildflower-patterned plates visible through the glass doors of the cabinets. But every minute or so she could hear the sharp crackle of a page being quickly turned. The sound was as agitated as Hal himself.

Had she thought it would do any good, she'd have gone in there

with him. She knew he hadn't been inside the house since the funeral, so his being here had to be difficult for him. There were so many memories a person had to sort through when faced with a loss, and being eight years older than she, he had eight more years of memories to deal with than she did. But he didn't seem to want whatever support she could have offered. He just wanted to get the job done so he could leave.

She turned the water off at the sink and reached for the towel. As she did, she became aware of voices drifting through the foyer from the front porch. The low tones were definitely male. The higher ones were Molly's giggle.

The male voice didn't belong to Hal, either.

Since Molly and her teddy bear were outside playing with her dolls, Eve had left the front door open. The little girl liked the big railed porch with its wicker chairs and potted geraniums better than the backyard because, out front, she could watch the big kids play.

Eve could hear the boys now, the three preteens from two doors down. The new dentist's sons, Millicent had told her. They were playing soccer on the sidewalk. Even with them out there, Eve still didn't want her daughter talking to strange men.

She was past the narrow entry table in the foyer when some of the urgency left her stride. Rio Redtree sat on the top step next to Molly. A black shirt covered his broad back and one back pocket of his faded jeans was worn white around his wallet. She couldn't see much of his face, though. Molly was on her knees

beside him, grinding dirt into her pink overalls as she scooted as close as she could get to see what he held in his hands. With her dark little head bent toward his, one of her beribboned pigtails had draped across his shoulder. There wasn't a shade's worth of difference in the color of their hair.

Eve started to open the screen, only to be stopped by what she could hear Rio saying.

"It does look like a spiderweb," he quietly said, sounding as if he were confirming an observation. "It's supposed to. Have you ever seen a bug caught in one?"

The smaller head bobbed vigorously.

"Do you know why they can't get out?"

Molly's head went just as vigorously the other way.

"It's because a real web is sticky. The more the bug struggles, the more it gets caught. That's why the bad dreams can't get out of a dream catcher, either. When you go to sleep, the good dreams know the way through the hole right here in the center. Then they slide down the feather so they can come back to you and you can dream them again. But the bad dreams don't know the way out. They get caught in the web, and when the sun rises the next morning, they disappear."

The two heads became two profiles as Rio and Molly looked at each other.

"Really?"

"It worked for me," he said, looking as honest as a Boy Scout. "I had one when I was little, and I sure don't remember having

dreams about monsters under my bed.” He nodded toward the hoop of twig and crystal-clear filament Molly held in her hands. “Maybe it’ll work for you, too. I’ll hang that above your bed if you want.”

As Molly skeptically studied the talisman, Eve realized that Rio must have heard Molly mention the monster the other night on her way upstairs. That was the only reason she could think of why he had brought the child such a gift.

In light of everything he’d learned that night, the fact that he’d remembered something so seemingly insignificant was definitely telling. So was the concern he’d shown by wanting to alleviate the fears of a child. His child.

Rio was still sitting on the step, but he’d noticed her standing in the doorway. He lifted his chin to acknowledge her, then returned his attention to the child.

“So what do you think?” he asked. “Should we ask your mom if we can hang it?”

As gifts went, Molly was more accustomed to girl-stuff. Spiders and twigs were definitely in the boy category. Still, she must have been impressed either by Rio’s story, or with Rio himself. After another moment of consideration, she gave him a nod, remembered to say “Thank you,” and before Rio knew what was coming, she threw her arms around his neck.

He clearly wasn’t prepared for the impulsive response. The instant Molly’s wiry little body pressed to his chest, he went stock-still. Seconds later, looking as if he feared the child might

break, he swallowed hard, closed his eyes—and hugged her back.

The breath Eve drew caught in her throat. Rio had never held his daughter before, and the moment left him totally exposed. Fear, wonder, apprehension and joy were all wound up in an expression that bordered on pain. The feelings were familiar. She had experienced them herself the very first time Molly had been placed in her arms. She still felt them sometimes just watching Molly sleep. But Rio was revealing far more of himself in this unguarded moment than he could possibly realize. No man who did not truly care for children could possibly be so moved by nothing more than an exuberant hug.

She realized something else, too. She was very probably going to lose a piece of her daughter's heart.

Molly's narrow little body had all but disappeared in his strong arms. But as quickly as she had flung herself at him, she just as quickly pulled back.

Seeing her mom, she turned her grin to her and held up the saucer-size hoop. Its gray feather swayed from a beaded leather thong.

"See what he brought me, Mommy." She frowned at the man rising beside her. "What is it called? Oh, yeah!" Remembering, she turned back before he could answer. "It's a dream catcher. It's going to catch the monster under the bed and make it disappear."

"So I heard," Eve returned, her soft smile masking the quick surge of annoyance she felt with the bearer of the gift. "Do you want to play out here for a while longer, or come inside?"

“Stay out here.”

Eve’s glance slid to Rio.

Taking the hint, his air of control firmly in place, he stepped inside with her. Following her far enough into the foyer to escape inquisitive little ears, he matched her frown.

“What’s the matter?”

“You shouldn’t tell her things like that. If she has a bad dream now, she’s not going to believe anything else you say.”

“I didn’t promise she wouldn’t have bad dreams,” he said, defending himself. “You heard what I said. I said maybe it would work. And it will, if she believes it.”

“But it’s deceptive.”

“Deceptive? You’ve never told her about Santa Claus? Or the tooth fairy?” He eyed her evenly, his expression turning shrewd. “Does it bother you that I brought her something?”

What bothered her was that he might be able to calm a fear of Molly’s that Eve hadn’t been able to do anything about herself. Not sure if she was feeling jealous or inadequate, suspecting more of the former, she made herself back down.

“Maybe. A little,” she amended, wishing he couldn’t read her so easily.

“Would you prefer that I checked with you before I brought her anything?”

There was enough challenge in the question to make it clear that he was testing his ground where Molly was concerned. Or maybe he was testing her. The more she was around him, the

more apparent it became that they couldn't go longer than a few minutes without stepping on each other's toes. Before, they'd never argued about anything.

“Only if it will ruin a meal, or needs to be fed.” They definitely had to set a few more rules. But now wasn't the time. Not with Hal and Molly around. “As for what you just brought,” she had to add, because she truly was touched by what he'd done, “it was a very thoughtful gift.”

Her last words were underscored by the faint squeak of the back screen door. Hal must have heard their voices, she thought, and headed out for a cigarette. Considering that he didn't want to be there to begin with, it was a sure bet he wasn't up to meeting anyone dropping by.

“My brother's here,” she said, since Rio had heard the door, too. “Did you come just to see Molly?”

A faint frown pinched Rio's forehead as he glanced over her shoulder. Seeming a little distracted when he looked back at her, he pushed his hands into his pockets. “I just met a friend not too far from here, so I thought I'd drop the dream catcher off for her.”

“A friend?”

“Stone Richardson. You've met him.”

The skirmish of moments ago was all but forgotten as the image of a big, square-jawed cop formed in her mind. Detective Richardson was on the team investigating her mother's death. “Several times,” she confirmed, thinking there was precious little Rio didn't seem to know about her. “He's the one who told me

about the woman from the ski lodge. The one who had the visions about Mom.”

The strange visions plaguing Jessica Hanson in the days following Olivia’s death were what had turned the pain of losing her mother into an ongoing nightmare. Until the coroner had requested the autopsy based on what the soft-spoken and shy young woman had “seen,” everyone accepted that Olivia had died of natural causes.

“Has she offered any new information?” she asked, speaking of Jessica.

Rio pulled a breath, hating how susceptible he was to her when they talked about the investigation. Every time she asked a question, her eyes would fill with hope. And every time he saw that hope, it never failed to get to him.

“There’s no new information. Stone accepts that Jessica can see things that have happened in the past. But it seems she’s had a couple of premonitions about things that haven’t happened yet, and that’s got him a little nervous. He knows I believe in psychics.”

“You do?”

His glance never wavered. “Why not? There’s all kinds of energy out there.” The songs and chants he’d learned as a child taught that people and nature were all inexorably joined in the sacred circle of life. At its most basic level, Rio figured a cursory study of the food chain bore that claim out easily enough. The elders also taught that nature was energy. The movement of the

wind. The beat of a bird wing. The firing of a neuron in a human brain. “Who’s to say it can’t be transmitted telepathically? Or that the energy patterns forming to make an event happen can’t be picked up by a receptive source? But Jessica hasn’t had any new visions concerning your mom,” he had to tell her, hating how the hope dimmed in her eyes. “I already asked.”

Hope might have been dimmed, but it hadn’t been defeated. “But she thinks a woman attacked Mom, right? When Detective Richardson explained what had led them to do the autopsy, what it was Jessica was seeing, I mean, he alluded to the attacker being female. Did anyone ever have her look at mug shots of women? Maybe if she did, that would trigger something.”

Caution made Rio hesitate. It wasn’t unusual in an investigation for the police to withhold information from the public. Most often, the press didn’t know what that information was. In this case, it did. Rio did, anyway. But he was no more interested in jeopardizing the case than he was in breaking his word to his friend about what he’d overheard. That was why the paper had never reported all of what Jessica Hanson claimed to have seen in her vision of the attack. That she’d had no sense of a whole person. What she remembered was an impression of the attacker being female, an image of that person’s hands, a hypodermic syringe—and the overpowering scent of gardenias.

The public didn’t have that particular information. But Rio knew that Hal Stuart, with his connections to the department, certainly would. He’d apparently refrained from sharing any of

it with his sister, though. And Rio wasn't in a position to say anything himself.

Unwilling to let her think some avenue wasn't being explored, the best he could do was remind her of what had been reported. "Stone would agree with you. So would I. But Jessica never had an impression of a face." Once more, Rio heard a door closing in the back of the house. "What she visualized could have just as easily been a man in a wig."

The sound of footsteps drew his attention from the disappointment adding to the shadows in Eve's eyes. The slim figure of a man was moving past the doorway leading to the kitchen.

Hal Stuart seemed to catch himself mid-stride. In the time it took for the reporter's commanding presence to register, Hal's eyebrows had slammed together.

"What are you doing here?"

At her brother's surprisingly inhospitable demand, Eve whirled around, her hand flattening over the pearl at her throat.

"Hal? What's the matter with you? This is Rio. Redtree," she added, though she was sure her brother, being a public official, must have met the reporter on any number of occasions.

Hal kept coming, the sound of his polished Italian loafers going from impatient to muffled when he moved from hardwood to Aubusson carpet. He'd loosened his red silk "power" tie from the collar of his tailored white shirt. With his hands planted at the waist of his perfectly pleated slacks, and his meticulously cut,

dark blond hair silvering prematurely at his temples, he looked like a poster boy for a high-fashion executive ad. Or he would have, had he been smiling.

The fact that he wasn't puzzled Eve far more than she let on. Her brother usually treated everyone as if they were his best buddy.

"I know who he is," Hal muttered.

Rio was no slouch when it came to being personable himself. Eve had seen his quiet charm at work on Millicent the day he'd shown up on her porch, his gentle patience with Molly only minutes ago. What Eve witnessed now was his absolute self-possession. With her brother staring at him as if he'd like to see him trussed and on a spit, Rio simply inclined his head in acknowledgment and, keeping his hands at his side since the other man had his hands planted on his hips, regarded him evenly.

"How are things going, Hal?"

"You never answered my question."

Eve's glance bounced from the dark and compelling man at her side to her fair-haired brother. At a loss to explain his behavior, she reached for his arm to draw his attention.

"Rio's investigating Mom's death," she told him, catching the scent of tobacco clinging to his shirt. "We were just talking about the woman who had those visions. Apparently she won't be of much more help."

"I know all that. What I want to know is where he gets off

following me here. He's been hounding me all day."

"I've only called you twice," Rio countered, his tone as reasonable as Hal's was not. "I don't believe that qualifies as hounding. And just for the record, I didn't know you were here. The only car out front—" Cutting himself off, his glance sliced toward the front door and the vehicle parked at the curb. "I thought you drove a Lexus. Is that your Mercedes out there? The silver SL?"

"Am I going to see that on the front page tomorrow? Acting Mayor Buys New Car?"

Hal's scowl removed the natural affability from his even features. Rio was amazed by the man's defensiveness. Hal Stuart usually covered himself better than this. The city's acting mayor was a master at public relations. In the five years Rio had been on the paper, he'd seen the politician portray sincerity, outrage, sympathy and enthusiasm with the skill of an Oscar-winning actor. But the man wasn't acting now. Noting the pallor beneath his tan, Rio couldn't help thinking that Hal looked far too tense to make the effort. To him, he looked very much like a man who'd been stretched about as far as he could go and was about to snap.

It also appeared that he wasn't going to be real cooperative.

"Since you are here," Rio continued, too practical to waste the opportunity, "you could save me another phone call in the morning. All I want is your statement about the stock you owned in the mining company Olivia was fighting on its lease renewal. As it stands right now, the article that will appear in the morning

paper says you couldn't be reached for comment." It could easily be changed to "refused to comment," but he didn't care to pose that subtle threat. Not with Eve uneasily watching them both. "I can still get your remark in before the paper goes to press tonight."

Closing his eyes, Hal raked his fingers through his hair, his expression moving from defensive to beleaguered.

"The police have already questioned me about this. I did own stock, but it was a poor choice of investments and I've already unloaded it. It's no secret Mom and I had philosophical differences over the impact of that mine on the environment and the economy here, but it's ludicrous for anyone to think I'd want her harmed because of it. I wish to hell that someone in this town would use a little logic. Why would I be pushing the investigation of anyone involved with the mine if I was illegally involved myself?

"Look," Hal muttered, overlooking the fact that he'd revealed more to his sibling in the past minute than he had in the past month. "I'm as convinced as anyone in this town that someone connected with that mining operation is responsible for my mother's death. Our mother," he amended, belatedly including his sister. "I just wish the police would get some evidence on whoever it is so this would all be over with." He paused, looking as if he didn't know why Rio wasn't writing any of this down. "You've got your statement, Redtree. You can leave now."

Rio said nothing to Hal. He merely looked at Eve, who at that

moment had no idea which of the two men she knew the least. Two minutes ago, she'd have bet her sanity she knew far less about Rio. "Hal," she began, "Rio didn't come to get a statement from you. He said he didn't even know you were here, remember? He came to see Molly."

Incomprehension flashed over her brother's features. But any confusion he suffered lasted only long enough for his glance to slide in the general direction of the front porch. Molly had her back to them all, involved as she was with her bear and her dolls.

Hal apparently didn't need a side-by-side comparison, anyway. His narrowed eyes jerked to the man at Eve's side, then back to her.

It was obvious to most people that her child's father was of ethnic blood, but Rio was hardly the only Native American man in town. There had been talk among their family friends since Eve had returned, and speculation, she was sure, about who Molly's father might be. There always was when an unmarried woman had a child. But her mother, fiercely independent herself, had understood that cutting all ties with the father was sometimes the only way a woman could move on with her life, so Eve's secret had been safe. Until now.

"I see."

Without another word, Hal turned on his heel and disappeared through the kitchen. A moment later, having made the loop through the dining and living rooms, he emerged at the opposite end of the foyer near the front door.

His jacket dangled by the middle from his fist.

“I got about halfway through what you wanted me to look at,” he told her, refusing to meet her eyes as he fished his cigarettes out of his shirt pocket. “I don’t know why you’re in such a damn rush to get this done, but if you insist on taking everything to the attorney tomorrow, go ahead.”

The screen opened with a whine, causing Molly to look up from her play. Her sweet “Bye, Uncle Hal” drifted in on the early evening breeze, but whether or not Hal answered back, Eve couldn’t tell. He didn’t break stride until he reached his shiny new car. And not until he reached his car did Eve give up the impulse to go after him, whip him around and make him listen while she explained that she was hardly in a damn rush. She’d already been there for nearly three weeks, and she was simply trying to do what needed to be done. The house couldn’t sit there forever. She had other obligations—another life—waiting for her a thousand miles away. Though, as removed from it as she felt, it might as well be a million.

Willing herself to calm down, she turned back to Rio, her glance skimming his chin to settle on the middle button of his black rayon shirt. His chest looked so solid, his arms so strong. And she really hated that what she wanted right then was to feel those arms around her.

She was saved having to wonder where that impossible thought had come from by Rio’s quiet observation.

“I take it he didn’t know.”

“No one did. Other than Mom,” she added, just as the telephone rang.

Eve closed her eyes and rubbed her temple. Telling herself she could deal with all of this just fine if she'd take things one at a time, she set aside her frustration with her brother, put her concern over the police questioning him on hold and excused herself to the man who was in the process of slowly upending her life. Tomorrow, if she had time, she was going to have a nervous breakdown.

Straightening her shoulders, she headed into the living room.

Rio stayed back, watching her pick up the phone by the deeply tufted royal blue sofa. She seemed rattled and worried, and he was pretty sure from the paleness of her delicate skin that she hadn't slept any better last night than she had the nights before. He was also dead certain she attributed her brother's abrupt departure to what he'd just put together about the two of them.

He didn't think she was right, though. He had been watching Olivia's son for a while now, and he'd bet his laptop that the man had been more concerned just then with how he had embarrassed himself than with the paternity of his niece. Rio had to admit a little ambivalence on that matter, however. Though it would have been his own hide the guy would have gone for, he'd have thought a lot more of Hal had the man shown a little protectiveness toward his sister. Or even a little interest. As it was, when it came to Hal's treatment of Eve, he was truly beginning to dislike the man.

It appeared that Eve's conversation was going to take a minute. From what he could make of her end of it, the call had to do with a women's shelter auction. With her attention occupied, Rio moved into the elegantly understated room, with its rich colors and gleaming mahogany. He'd never been inside this house until last week. The campus or his apartment had been his and Eve's world. Even when he'd asked Olivia that last time where Eve had gone, he'd done the asking in her mother's office downtown. But this had been Eve's world, too, and it was light-years from the near poverty he'd grown up with.

Had he been the sort of man who craved wealth or possessions, he might have felt resentful or bitter about the disparity. He certainly knew those who would have. Indian and white. But the lure for him had never been material things. He had no need now for anything he didn't already own. So all he considered as he moved through the room, aware of the fresh flowers Eve had added and the potpourri scenting the air with roses and spice, was that Olivia had done very well for herself.

According to what he'd dug up in the archives, Olivia was a self-made woman. Her husband had died twenty-one years earlier, and she'd managed to put herself through law school, work her way into private practice and then into politics, all while raising her family alone.

His glance skimmed Eve's slender frame, her crisp white slacks, the navy blouse, the sleekly fashionable haircut. As he moved into the dining room, he listened to her voice, the

certainty and sincerity in it. The sweetness. No one would ever have described Olivia Stuart as “sweet.” Tenacious and passionate. Dedicated, definitely. And, in many of those same ways, Eve was definitely her mother’s daughter. The one thing she didn’t have, however, was her mother’s thick skin. When something bothered Eve, it showed.

At least it did to him.

The long mahogany dining table gleamed beneath an ornate brass chandelier. The papers spread over one end caught his attention.

“I’m happy to help,” he heard Eve say, listening unashamedly to her conversation as he picked up a long yellow tablet.

He held the tablet toward Eve, lifting it as he raised his eyebrows in silent question to see if she minded his taking a look at it.

Her response was the slight pinch of her brow, but she didn’t shake her head no, so he turned his attention to the exhaustingly extensive list.

Thinking that these had to be the papers Hal had referred to before he’d split, Rio cast a quick glance across the rest of the documents. Those nearest a vase filled with yellow roses were formal pleadings that Wendall Norton, a local attorney, had prepared for filing with the probate court. Beyond them was the calling card of a real estate agent and an unsigned agreement to list the house for sale. What Rio held appeared to be a list of every item of value in the place. Everything from the crystal

sparkling in the china cabinet behind him to every teaspoon, book and trowel in the house, garage and garden shed.

He pulled a breath and slowly released it. He didn't have to try very hard to remember the day he'd come barging in here with all the finesse of a tank wanting his interview. Eve had been sorting through her mother's clothes when he'd arrived, and the task had torn her apart. It seemed that she'd since had to go through the entire house.

"If you're sure that's what she wanted to donate, I'll pick one up and drop it by the center this week. No, that's fine. I can do it myself. I'm sure the electronics store on Juniper has plenty of Blu-ray players. It's no problem at all."

She watched him from across the room as she spoke. Hanging up a few moments later, she looked from him to the list he held. The consternation she'd masked during her call reasserted itself.

"That's private."

It wouldn't be once it was filed with the court, but he didn't mention that. He wasn't looking for a story. Though he didn't want to admit it, he just wanted to know what all she was dealing with.

He also wanted to know why she was looking at him as if he'd just pulled the wings off a butterfly.

He set the tablet back on the table. "I didn't think you minded. I was just looking."

"Like you were just asking my brother about his car and his stock?"

The accusation in her voice threw him. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“Eve, I was doing my job. He’s the one who assumed I’d come here looking for him. I wouldn’t have brought any of that up, if he hadn’t.”

“It doesn’t matter who brought it up.” Crossing her arms, she moved toward him, stopping a cautious arm’s length away. “I just want to know what that was all about. Why would the police treat Hal like a suspect?”

She was truly bewildered. That was easy enough to see. He could also tell, despite the way she’d deliberately lowered her voice, or maybe because of it, that she was more upset than she wanted to let on.

“The police are looking into anything that appears even remotely out of line, Eve. No one is exempt.”

“But he’s family!”

She spoke as if the relationship provided automatic immunity. Hal was family, therefore he was incapable of harming any of its members. While Rio admired her loyalty and idealism, he couldn’t help wondering at her naiveté.

“I take it you don’t catch much of the evening news or crime shows,” he muttered, not particularly proud of how jaded his own thinking had become.

“I have a five-year-old. At our house it’s ‘Princess Jasmine and reruns of ‘Dora the Explorer’ all the time. But I don’t see what that has to do with anything.”

“It has to do with motive. That’s the key to any investigation. The members of the victim’s family are usually the first people the police check out in a murder case. Especially when one of those members isn’t being terribly cooperative. Your brother didn’t even want them to do the autopsy that revealed what had happened to your mother. Remember?”

Of course she remembered. The fact that she hadn’t sided with Hal on that issue hadn’t helped his attitude toward her at all.

“Did it occur to anyone to consider the stress he was under at the time? If he was less than cooperative, it was because it seemed so unnecessary to him to have that awful procedure done on her. If you think he’s not as cooperative as he should be now, maybe it’s because he’s as frustrated as I am with the lack of progress in the investigation. Instead of wasting time looking into his affairs, the police should be out looking for whoever killed our mother. It’s been nearly two months.”

Molly was on the porch. For her daughter’s sake, Eve tried to calm herself. She didn’t want Molly to know she was upset. The little girl never slept well when she knew her mommy was troubled.

“Losing Mom has been hard on him,” she continued, her tone lower even if her level of anger and frustration was not. “Aside from that, I don’t think he’s heard a word from his fiancée since she left. I don’t know if he’s hurt or worried or what he’s dealing with there, but being dumped two minutes before the ceremony would certainly impact a person’s mood. When you add all that

to the fact that he's trying to handle his city council work along with doing Mom's job, it doesn't take a degree in psychology to figure out that the stress might be getting to him."

Her thick bangs slipped down to brush the corner of her eye and the top of her cheek. She started to push them back, but when she lifted her hand it was trembling. Not wanting him to notice, she lowered her hand before it reached her chin and recrossed her arms.

That small show of control got to him.

Had it not been for that effort, he could have stepped back, considered himself chastised and let it go at that. But he knew the stress of all she was dealing with was getting to her, too. It was obvious to anyone who cared to look closely enough. But instead of thinking of her own needs the way her brother seemed to do, she reached beyond herself, graciously handling all that needed to be done and protecting the people she cared about. Her daughter. Her brother.

He didn't want another connection to her. Sharing a child and needing her as a source were about two too many strings as it was. But Rio understood all too well the need to keep feelings in check. And to protect. Like it or not, that was how he felt toward her. He must have. Otherwise, he'd have put the questions he had about her brother to her long before now.

"I understand things aren't easy for him," he said, his objectivity firmly in place. The guy really had been dumped on lately, and, despite his thoughts about the way he was treating

Eve, Rio kept his mind truly open where Hal was concerned. The chips could fall either way. “It’s just that he raises more questions than he answers, Eve. Take that car he’s driving.” He lifted his hand toward the door, then threaded his fingers through his own hair to keep from pushing her bangs back from her eyes. “How can he afford a new Mercedes on a public servant’s salary? That car’s worth seventy thousand bucks, easy. The Lexus hadn’t been cheap, either. Forty, at least. Is he spending his inheritance already?”

She shot him a disgusted look.

Taking that for a no, he tried again.

“He mentioned investments. Is that how he makes his money?”

She didn’t know. And when Eve admitted that, she also had to admit that yet another facet of her life was no longer what it had once been. She and her brother had never been close, but now it seemed she knew precious little about him. Except for one thing.

“I love my brother, Rio. And he loved Mom as much as I did. He can’t possibly know anything about her murder.”

She spoke with conviction, but what Rio heard was a plea. She wanted him to believe as she believed. Or maybe, he thought, lifting his hand toward her face, she was just trying to find a belief she could hold on to herself.

With the tip of his finger, he drew her bangs away from her eyebrows. Her skin was warm to his touch, and so soft that it almost felt like air.

His fingers lingered at her temple, his palm curving near the side of her face. “For your sake, I hope not,” he said. Feeling her head move almost imperceptibly toward his hand, he pulled away.

From the way he stepped back, his jaw working as he shoved his hands in his pockets, it was apparent that his action had caught him off guard. But while Rio looked as if he wished he’d kept his hands to himself, Eve couldn’t deny the oddly calming effect the gesture seemed to have on her. Maybe it was because it had so abruptly shifted her focus. Or maybe it had been the gentleness of the contact itself. As big as he was, as strong as he was, he’d always been amazingly gentle with her.

The bang of the screen door was followed by a bellowed “Mommy? There’s nobody else playing outside. Do I have to come in now?”

Grateful for the distraction, Eve stepped back. “Yes, you do.” That was the rule. Molly could be on the porch only as long as other children were outside. “Bring in your dolls.”

Molly walked into the living room, her arms already laden with two Barbies and a bear. From her right fist dangled the dream catcher.

“I already got my dolls. Can he hang my catcher up for me now?”

He. Twice now, Eve had heard her little girl refer to Rio that way.

With anyone else, she would have pointed out that the man

had a name and encouraged her to use it. But since this particular man's name happened to be Daddy, and Eve was nowhere near ready to bring that particular subject up tonight, she let it go.

“Can he?” Molly repeated when her mother hadn't answered.

Eve slid a hesitant glance toward Rio. He was waiting for an answer, too.

Chapter Five

Hanging the dream catcher didn't require any special skill. It didn't even require a hammer. Molly could have done it herself. But Rio had brought the child the gift, and since he'd offered to hang it earlier, Eve knew it was something he wanted to do. What made her feel like the Grinch was the fact that Molly wanted him to do it.

Jealousy was new to her. Hating it, but afraid to focus on the other feelings churning inside her, Eve stood in the doorway of the room that had once been her own and watched her inquisitive five-year-old direct the placement of the talisman. All the way up the stairs Molly had chattered away, wanting to know if the catcher Rio'd had when he was little was just like hers and if he had brothers and sisters.

The non sequitur was typical Molly. Her facile mind often took enormous, logic-defying leaps. But Rio took the jump in stride, seeming to have no trouble at all tracking her thoughts. No, the dream catcher wasn't exactly the same, he'd told her, but it was close enough to do the job. And yes, he had a brother and a sister. He also had a mom and more nieces, nephews, aunts and uncles than he could count, he told her, then asked if she wanted him to hang her catcher high or low.

That's what they were trying to decide now.

Molly sat on the edge of the bed, hugging Ted and

contemplating the underside of the white eyelet canopy. Rio was stretched at an angle as he reached across the bed to secure his gift in the corner of the canopy frame, looking totally out of place in the overtly feminine room. Corded muscle shifted beneath his black shirt when he pulled back, his dark head reappearing from under the filmy white fabric.

“How’s that?” he asked the child.

Molly looked to her mom.

“How about there, Mommy?”

“It’s up to you, honey. If you like it there, it’s fine.”

“But I want you to see.”

Eve couldn’t see where “there” was from the doorway. Forcing back her reluctance, she stepped into the room, picked up a coloring book from the floor on her way and dropped it on the French provincial dresser by the old rocking chair.

“You know, Molly,” Rio said when Eve stopped next to the child. “Even without the dream catcher, you don’t need to be afraid when you sleep. I don’t imagine your mom is very far away.”

“She sleeps in there.” A small index finger pointed to a door kitty-corner across the hall. “It’s where she used to study. This is where she slept when she was little.”

The room, like its former occupant, had grown up over the years. But other than the bright art prints on the wall, there was nothing to reveal much about the woman herself. The storybooks and dolls all belonged to her daughter.

Rio seemed to sense that there was little here of the girl he'd once known. And all that was visible in the room across the hall was the corner of the rose-print coverlet on the daybed. So he didn't bother to look around as he might have, searching for clues as to who Eve had become. He simply held her glance, watching her as if her eyes told him all he needed to know—that his presence here wasn't as welcome as she let it seem.

He didn't know quite what to make of her. For reasons he didn't care to explore, it made him feel better to know she felt that way about him, too.

"She keeps the door open," Molly added, ever so helpfully. "Cept sometimes when I wake up at night, she's not there. That's when I get scared."

Eve saw Rio's wide brow lower just before she smoothed her hand over the little girl's shoulder. "I always leave the light on for you," she reminded Molly, more concerned with what the child had just revealed than with what Rio might think of it. "And you know I'm never far away. I'm usually right downstairs."

Molly's little mouth screwed up in one corner. "I know. But how come you always get up after you go to bed?"

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