

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 grey circular badge with a white dotted border containing the text '36 HOURS' in red and white.

36
HOURS

FATHER AND CHILD REUNION

CHRISTINE FLYNN

PART 3 OF 3

Christine Flynn

Father and Child Reunion Part 3

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 3Investigative reporter Rio Redtree is digging into the mayor's murder. But the closer he gets to answers, the more signs are pointing to Hal Stuart—the son of the murdered mayor and brother to the woman Rio realizes he has never stopped loving.The only thing he wants more than to catch Olivia's killer is to be with Eve and her daughter, Molly. How will Eve trust him if he's willing to send her own brother to prison? Can Rio risk the family life he's always wanted to see justice done?Don't miss the next book in the continuing story of Grand Springs in The Rancher and the Runaway Bride by Susan Mallery.

Содержание

36 Hours Serial	5
Father and Child Reunion Part 3	6
Father and Child Reunion Part 3	8
Contents	9
Chapter Nine	10
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	35

36 Hours Serial

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Father and Child Reunion Part 3

Investigative reporter Rio Redtree is digging into the mayor's murder. But the closer he gets to answers, the more signs are pointing to Hal Stuart—the son of the murdered mayor and brother to the woman Rio realizes he has never stopped loving.

The only thing he wants more than to catch Olivia's killer is to be with Eve and her daughter, Molly. How will Eve trust him if he's willing to send her own brother to prison? Can Rio risk the family life he's always wanted to see justice done?

Don't miss the next book in the continuing story of Grand Springs in *The Rancher* and *The Runaway Bride* by Susan Mallery.

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 3

Christine Flynn



www.millsandboon.co.uk

The facts are adding up: 1) Olivia was murdered, 2) her son, Hal, has taken her mayoral seal, 3) he's driving a car he can't afford, 4) Hal is living in a house above his pay-scale, and 5) based on his bank records, Hal is getting deposits that don't make sense. Could Hal kill his own mother for money? Investigative reporter Rio Redtree is leaning that way. But if Rio is right, what does this mean to his relationship with Hal's sister, Eve?

Contents

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

Chapter Nine

The odd deposits to Hal Stuart's checking accounts had nagged at Rio Redtree like an aching tooth. It wasn't that he didn't believe Hal should have a business interest in the community. Many of the city council members did. That was how they'd become involved in city government to begin with. But Hal didn't have an ownership interest in any of the six businesses routinely fortifying his checking accounts. Even after searching records at the Corporation Commission in Denver, Rio hadn't found a thing with Hal Stuart's name on it.

He hadn't come up empty-handed, though. After checking out the two laundromats, the restaurant, both bars and the auto repair shop in question, Rio had reduced them to one common denominator. Every one of them was owned by the same person. A local businessman by the name of Maxwell Brown.

It was late afternoon before Rio caught up with Hal in the employee's parking lot behind City Hall. He'd been waiting for him, using the time to wade through an inch-thick complaint a citizen had filed against WGGG, a local radio station. He was halfway through it when he saw the sporty silver Mercedes glide over the faded Mayor Stuart that was stenciled across the parking space by the building's rear door.

Climbing out of his Durango, Rio tucked the back of his white shirt into his slacks, slipped his recorder into his pocket and

intercepted Eve's brother just as the man started to get out.

The expectant look on Hal's face faltered only slightly when he realized whose shadow had darkened his door. Giving Rio a wholly unexpected smile, he got out, then reached back inside for his suit jacket and briefcase. The briefcase had his initials tooled into the chamois-soft leather. The jacket, Rio noted when Hal slipped it on, had a decidedly custom fit.

"Redtree," he greeted, sounding like the affable politician the public tended to see. "Sorry I can't talk right now. I'm in kind of a hurry."

"I won't take long." Rio gave him an easy smile of his own. "I tried to catch you at the Children's Charity luncheon. I'd heard you'd be there."

"I had a change of plans."

"I noticed. By the way, Eve did a nice job with your mother's speech."

The practiced congeniality slipped. Giving Rio a level look, he hit the security button on his key ring. The car door locked with a chirp.

"I'm sure Mother would be proud." Pocketing his keys, he started for the door of the old building. "That's what this is all about with Eve, you know. Making Mom proud." Something that sounded suspiciously like envy tainted his tone, stealing the last of his superficial pleasantness. "After the way she let her down, I suppose carrying on in her name is her only means of atonement."

Hal reached for the door of the building to jerk it open. Rio kept it closed with the flat of his hand.

Blue eyes narrowed on black. "What are you doing?"

"Keeping this between us." Rio's features hardened dangerously. "Atonement?" he repeated, too aware of his own role in Eve's situation to let the dig go. "Care to explain what you're talking about?"

An explanation was hardly necessary. Both men knew exactly what Hal was referring to, but Rio doubted Hal knew how supportive Olivia had been of Eve during her pregnancy. Or maybe, Rio thought, he did know, and their closeness ate at him, just as it clearly burned him to think that his little sister might be more of a hero to the town just then than he was.

Considering what had prompted Hal's chameleonlike change, Rio couldn't help but wonder if he hadn't always been jealous of his little sister.

"I'm not going to get into this with you," Hal muttered, looking as if he hadn't expected Rio to call him on his comment. "My sister lives her life and I live mine. We don't interfere with each other."

They didn't interfere? Or Eve simply didn't listen to him? Suspecting more of the latter, Rio's hand slid from the door. "I didn't come to discuss your sister," he informed him, forcing calm when what he really wanted to do was get the guy by the throat and make him understand that he didn't deserve the concern Eve wasted on him. Rio's boss at the newspaper wouldn't

like that, though. Eve probably wouldn't, either. "I want to talk to you about a business developer. One of our locals."

Rio opened the door himself, standing back to let Hal pass. Skepticism slashed the acting mayor's patrician features, but with the reporter's focus off of him, his antagonistic attitude vanished. It could also have been the prospect of running into a city employee now that they were inside that kept him in line. In politics, image was everything.

Following him in, Rio breathed in the institutional smells of pine cleaner and floor wax and matched Hal step for step down the wide, green-and-white-tiled hall.

"If you want to know anything about a developer, check with city planning."

"I need a more personal touch on this."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Maxwell Brown."

If Rio hadn't been watching Hal, he would have missed his hesitation before the man pasted on his politician's smile. "Max? What about him?"

"What do you think of him?"

Tile gave way to gray marble when they passed from the back of the building into the more public areas. A quick right and they were heading up a wide stairway, cutting a path through the middle of the two people coming down.

"I think a lot of him. He's sharp. He knows how to make a buck, but he doesn't forget the little guy. Between all the

businesses he owns in Grand Springs, he provides jobs for at least a hundred of our citizens.”

The dark double doors of the mayor’s office loomed straight ahead. Walking past frosted glass doors marked City Clerk and City Manager, Hal pushed through the door with the empty brass plate holder on it and entered the outer office. A beige leather sofa and a table sporting Chamber of Commerce literature formed the waiting area off to the right. To the left was an L-shaped secretarial desk.

Rio watched Hal scowl at his administrative assistant’s empty chair. The attractive young woman he’d hired to replace Olivia’s faithful workhorse of an assistant was obviously occupied elsewhere.

“While the cat’s away,” Hal muttered, and picked up the pink message slips from the holder on her desk. Leafing through them, he continued talking to Rio. “As I understand it, Max sponsors a Little League team and he’s a deacon or something in his church. Very involved in the community. He’s a patron of our Winterfest and contributes to most of our charities.” Folding one message slip, he stuffed it in his pocket. “That’s about all I can tell you.”

“What about contributions to your checking account?”

Hal’s perpetual tan faded to gray when he blanched, but his recovery was impressive. The fact that he didn’t demand to know how Rio had come by the information made it even more so.

“Those are consulting fees,” he asserted, the flatness in his voice making it sound as if Rio had gone to a lot of trouble for

nothing. “Perfectly legitimate. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have calls to return.”

Hal turned toward his private office, but not before Rio caught the red of blood pressure on the rise creeping up his neck.

“Consulting for what?”

“I give him financial advice.”

“I didn’t know you were licensed to do that.” As quick and painless as Rio tried to be when he interviewed victims of chance or circumstance, he had no qualms whatsoever about needling a liar. And Hal Stuart was literally lying through his teeth. Rio would stake his hard-earned reputation on that fact. “Is this a sideline you’re developing?”

When Rio had encountered Hal at Eve’s, he’d had the impression then that Hal was precariously close to snapping. That impression was compounded tenfold when Hal spun on his heel.

“I don’t know what you think you’re onto,” he muttered, jaw rigid. “But you can just drop it right here. Drop everything that has anything to do with me or my family. You hear? I don’t imagine your editor would be too happy about a lawsuit for harassment, but you’re getting damn close.”

He was certainly getting close to something, Rio thought, aware of the bulging blue vein throbbing in Hal’s left temple. But he wasn’t the least bit concerned about the threat. He was nowhere near to harassing this guy. The fact that Hal was feeling that way made it as clear as the window glass that he was onto something, though. But what?

He didn't get a chance to ask. Hal had wadded the rest of his messages in his fist and slammed his office door behind him. As Rio turned to the outer door, he also noticed that Hal hadn't wasted any time getting to his calls. One of the lights on his assistant's telephone had just blinked on.

He was saved from having to do battle with his conscience over whether or not to pick up the extension, by a long-legged brunette in a short red dress and lipstick to match. Hal's new assistant, a statuesque trophy in the barely twenty-year-old range, hurried through the doorway, her arms loaded with photocopies.

"Mr. Redtree," she greeted, flashing him a brilliant smile. "Mayor Stuart hasn't returned from lunch yet. Can I help you with something?"

"Actually," he said, hitching his thumb toward the door, "he's in there. He just got back."

She was about to lose the top of her stack. Taking it before it slid off, not sure how she'd pick up anything in the elastic band of a skirt she wore, he set the copies next to the calendar on her desk.

"Do you want me to let him know you're here?"

"Thanks...Stacy," he added, picking up her name from the nameplate on her desk, "but I already got what I was after."

He could feel her puzzled glance following him all the way out the door. But he had, indeed, obtained what he was after—confirmation that there was a story behind the acting mayor's finances. When he'd stumbled onto the oddities in Hal's checking

account, Rio had thought he might be dealing with a case of campaign fraud or payment for political favors. He was leaning more in the direction of the latter, though the large deposits of cash also hinted at money laundering. The one thing he did not believe was that the money was fees for financial consulting. He had no way to prove that, though. Not yet.

What he did have was another investigation on his hands. Unfortunately, he didn't have time to dig into it any deeper at the moment. He had the story on the WGGG lawsuit to do, then he had to clean up his copy on the state's grant of more funds for a wider road up to the ski lodge. And tonight, he wanted to stop by Eve's to go through the things she'd told him about. He'd give anything for a break in Olivia Stuart's murder case. One that would actually lead somewhere. Stone had told him just yesterday that the only fingerprints on the gardenia flower bowl that had been brought over just after the funeral were Eve's.

Another lead fell through. Those, they'd expected to find..

* * *

The police would come up with something. They just had to.

Eve sat on the edge of Molly's bed, the thought echoing in her mind as she quietly stroked her daughter's soft forehead. She usually found such comfort in her little girl. And she did now, she supposed, thinking how peaceful the sleeping child looked with Ted tucked securely in her arms. But the agitation that had been with her all day had yet to fade, and thoughts of what had happened to her mother were constant. Even reading three stories

to Molly and staying with her until she'd fallen asleep hadn't lessened Eve's anxiety.

She pressed a kiss to Molly's temple, breathing in the clean scents of baby shampoo and bubble bath, and forced herself back from scooping her baby up in her arms. It wouldn't be fair to disturb Molly's sleep just to make herself feel better. So Eve slipped quietly from the room, leaving the dream catcher Rio had brought her to guard her child's dreams, and headed down the stairs to finish a task she'd started earlier.

She was okay as long as she stayed busy. It was the only way she knew to deal with the unsettled thoughts that had lingered since the luncheon: thoughts of how Olivia's words had made Eve miss her mother so very much more; of the unsmiling detective's awful suspicion about Josie, one of her mother's closest friends; of how Eve had apparently been suspected herself. Someone had actually thought she might have killed her own mother. If she let herself think about any of it too much, she just might go out of her mind.

With the house on the market to be sold, keeping it constantly presentable was welcome duty. So she focused on that as she scanned the long counters in the kitchen to make sure there was nothing on them that shouldn't be. The glass panels in the beige cabinets sparkled, revealing neat rows of dishes and cups. Dried herbs, in muted shades of sage and lavender, hung in fragrant bunches above the window. Copper pots gleamed.

A dozen red gladiolus, still in their clear plastic wrapper, stood

in a pitcher of water on the counter. Eve had bought them at the grocery store that afternoon, thinking to replace the bouquet of mums on the dining room table with something more dramatic. Taking a tall crystal vase from the cabinet, she thought of the real estate agent's comment about how beautifully the house was showing. Eve was doing her best to see that it continued to do so. She just wished she didn't feel so ambivalent about everything she was doing lately. Every effort she made toward helping the house sell brought her one step closer to losing the only place that had ever truly been home.

That disquieting thought had just joined all the others when she heard the faint knock on the front door. She knew it was Rio. She also knew that ignoring his knock wouldn't do any good. Even if he went away this time, he'd be back. After all, she'd invited him.

Setting the vase on the counter, she wouldn't even let herself acknowledge where he fit into the mental mess she was trying to cope with. Her rule of taking one thing at a time had just been reduced to taking things one minute at a time. One second, if need be.

"I figured Molly would be in bed," Rio said, walking in as soon as she opened the door. He was still wearing the dress slacks and collarless white shirt she'd seen him in earlier, and looking every bit as comfortable in them as he did in faded jeans. The ever-present black cell phone was clipped to his belt. "That's why I didn't ring the bell. Is she asleep?"

He wanted to see his daughter. Since he hadn't seen her in a week, that was understandable.

"I'm afraid she is" was all Eve said, then motioned behind her. "The boxes are in the study. Hal packed up Mom's personal things when he moved into her office, but he just got around to sending them over. Help yourself."

Leaving him by the door, she headed back to the kitchen, her sneakers silent on the thick, patterned rug. She had no idea what he thought of her abruptness, but she could feel his glance moving over the back of her blue cotton shirt and faded jeans. When she'd returned after picking up Molly and running her errands, she'd pulled on her work clothes and oiled every inch of the wood on the banisters and newel posts, along with most of the downstairs baseboards. If she couldn't sleep tonight, she'd finish the rest.

Not until she'd passed through the kitchen doorway did she hear Rio move. When he did, he walked through the foyer and straight into the study.

The vase had been filled with water and she was cutting the ends from the flower stems when she heard movement behind her. Glancing over her shoulder, she watched Rio set three black, vinyl-bound volumes on the counter by the hunter green canisters. Barely meeting his eyes, aware of the curiosity in them, she turned back to slice off another stalk.

"I'd like to take her day planners with me."

Not at all sure why her hand was shaking, she stood a long stem

of bright red gladiolus into the vase beside her. “No problem.”

“The one for this year is missing. Can you find out where it is?”

She looked toward him again, her glance barely skimming his jaw. “I think so. Let me call Hal.”

“You don’t have to do it right now.”

“I don’t mind.”

Rio watched her pick up a dark green towel, thinking to tell her there was really no rush. The call could certainly wait until morning. But seeing her wipe her hands as she headed across the room and snatched up the phone hanging above the counter, he wasn’t so sure it would have made any difference. There was a stiffness to her usually graceful movements that spoke of intense preoccupation; an abruptness that made him think she was focusing only on what she was doing at that very moment and nothing more.

“Hi, Hal. It’s Eve,” he heard her say, her tone making him think she was surprised she’d reached him. “I’m sorry to bother you,” she went on, one arm holding her stomach as she faced a dish cabinet. “But Rio wants Mom’s day planner for this year. It’s not in the box you sent over. Do you know where it is?”

It wasn’t too hard for Rio to guess Hal’s reaction. Especially once she’d mentioned his name. Eve’s whole body went stiff as a plank.

“I know the police are working on it,” he heard her say. “But it can’t hurt to have...”

Hal must have interrupted her. Going silent, she closed her eyes, then proceeded to destroy the smooth line of her hair by shoving her fingers through it while she listened to her brother rant.

Wishing he'd stopped her from making the call, Rio started toward her. He was three feet away when she decided she'd had enough.

"Thank you very much, Hal," she said, her tone clipped, and hung up.

Her back was still to him when she crossed her arms.

"He said he needs it so he can keep her appointments. It has Mom's agenda for the rest of the year. He also said to tell you that the sheriff's already seen it." Turning, she found him standing behind her. Seeming puzzled to find him there, she scooted right back to the sink.

There wasn't a doubt in Rio's mind that Hal had said far more than what Eve had repeated. But she reminded him a little too much of an overwound spring at the moment, so he didn't ask her what she'd left out. He could pretty much guess, anyway.

Eve hands were always busy, especially when she was nervous or uncertain. But she didn't continue arranging her flowers as he'd thought she might. Or start fiddling with the towel or wiping an imaginary speck off some already pristine surface. She just stood with her arms wrapped around herself, staring at the night-blackened window.

As he watched her, the wide pane of mirrorlike glass reflected

the light haloing her short and slightly disheveled hair, the partially filled vase of spiky crimson flowers, and his own guarded features. He would have felt a whole lot better about whatever was going on with her if she'd started fidgeting with something. The way she held herself so tightly made it look as if she feared she might fall apart if she let go.

“What do you want with the day planners?” she asked, meeting his glance in the window. “Is there something specific you're looking for?”

He heard the hope in her voice, along with the brittle tension he'd seen in her the moment he walked through the door. When they parted after the luncheon, he'd thought then that she looked a little rocky. At the time, he'd figured that was to be expected, considering the emotional energy giving that speech would have required. She hadn't bounced back as she usually did, though. That wasn't like her at all.

Ignoring the self-protective voice that told him to stay where he was, he moved toward her. A lesser person would have broken down long before now. But he knew there was a backbone of solid steel beneath all that softness. The problem with that was that steel didn't bend or bow with its burdens. When the load became too much, it simply snapped.

“I just want to reconstruct her schedule.” She was looking to him to ease some of the anxiety she carried over her mother's murder. He hated that there was nothing of substance to tell her. “It's a long shot, but maybe there's something the sheriff missed.

Some name that's been overlooked.”

She pulled a steadying breath, seeming too numb to be disappointed. “There are some files in the boxes. Was there anything in them that might help?”

“According to the labels on them, they were for newspaper articles, but the files themselves were empty. I'd say either Hal or the police kept them.”

“Was there anything else in there? In the boxes, I mean?”

“You haven't looked?”

She shook her head, the tips of her fingers turning nearly white as she tightened the grip on her arms.

She hadn't been able to bring herself to do it. She didn't have to say a word for Rio to know that encountering another aspect of her mother's life would do nothing but bring fresh pain.

“Nothing that helps,” he had to tell her. “Pictures, vases, that kind of thing.”

His shadow fell on her as he curved his hand over her shoulder. In the window he saw her head jerk up. Beneath the soft fabric of her shirt, he felt her tension increase. Ignoring it, he turned her around to face him.

The sudden wariness in her eyes made him even more aware of the shadows beneath them. They made her look terribly, frighteningly, fragile.

“Are you all right?”

Eve closed her eyes, drew a breath. The man didn't play fair. As tenuous a hold as she had on herself, his concern threatened

what little composure she could claim.

“I will be.” Come morning, the awful feelings would have passed. It was just a matter of getting through the next nine or ten hours. Then, getting through them again the next time. “I just wish I could be like you,” she told him, slipping sideways to break his hold. “I wish I had your ability to keep things from getting to me.”

She made it about three feet before he snagged her arm. Blocking her retreat with his body, he scanned her face, concern for her etching his lean features. “I don’t know where you got the idea that nothing gets to me,” he informed her, sounding as if he already had an example to the contrary in mind. “But that couldn’t be further from the truth.”

“Oh, come on, Rio. You’re always in such...control. You always have been.”

“And you’re not?”

“Not here. Not since any of this started. And not like you. Never like you. I can’t...I feel...”

She shook her head, frustration piling onto everything else when the words seemed to fail her.

“You feel...what?” he encouraged, tugging her closer.

She tugged back. “Don’t, Rio. Please.”

“Just talk to me.” Though he eased his hold, he didn’t let go. “We could always talk. Remember?”

Relaxing her grip on her arms enough to restore the flow of blood to her fingers, Eve gave him a nod.

“Are you upset about what I told you today? That the police checked you out?”

“No. Maybe,” she amended, because denying it didn’t change the fact. “I understand that’s how these things work, but... Yes,” she finally admitted, because rationalizing didn’t help, either. “That’s probably part of it.”

“What about the rest? Is it your brother?”

“Not entirely, but he’s in there.”

“The investigation?”

“That, too.”

“What about having to sell this house?”

She gave him another nod, but he had the feeling there was still more.

He paused, his conscience kicking him squarely in the ribs.

“Me?”

“Yes.”

She was looking down. Since the top of her head barely reached the base of his throat, he couldn’t see her face. It was probably just as well. Everything he’d mentioned was ganging up on her, but all he considered was the certainty in her last reply. It was one thing to suspect that he added to her burdens. Hearing it when she seemed so defenseless made him feel like a snake.

“And what does all of that make you feel?” he asked, smoothing her hair. “Impotent? Alone? Scared?”

His hand slipped to her nape. With his fingers resting against her slender neck, he felt her swallow.

“For starters,” she whispered.

In other words, what she felt was...overwhelmed.

The pressure of his hand increased, urging her forward. But she held her ground, refusing to move.

“I just want to hold you,” he told her, not sure it wasn’t his own need he sought to fill.

“I want that, too.” So badly she ached for it. “But I can’t let you.”

Sliding his thumb along her jaw, he stepped an inch closer and tipped up her chin. Her eyes looked haunted when they met his.

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not that strong. I don’t think I can handle whatever it is that’s going on between us right now. Or what isn’t. I don’t know if that makes any sense to you, but I don’t know how else to explain it.”

“You did about as good a job as I could. I don’t know if I can explain what’s going on with us, either. But I do know,” he continued, running his hands down her arms to pry her hands apart, “that when something can’t be explained, it’s a waste of energy to try. Stop being so stubborn and come here.”

It wasn’t stubbornness. It was survival. But she went, anyway, more because she couldn’t not go than because he drew her closer. Rio knew her so well, knew what she felt, what she needed. He always had.

His arms were already around her. And when he pressed her head to his chest, she felt the fight drain out as surely as if he’d

pulled a plug. Not that she had much left. It was just that she couldn't fight herself and him, too. Not when there was so much else demanding her energy.

That was the only thought she allowed herself as she sagged against his strong, solid body. Enveloped in his arms, she simply let herself rest against him while he stroked her hair, his palm cupping the back of her head as he skimmed from crown to nape. The motion was more soothing than she could have ever dreamed, the feel of him more welcome than she could have imagined. And, in the past few weeks, she'd imagined him holding her more times than she could count.

"That's not so bad? Is it?"

She shook her head, the motion rubbing her cheek against his shirt. He smelled of soap and fresh air, and warm, musky male. Beneath the soft fabric, she could feel the strong, steady cadence of his heart. He was a rock, and she badly needed the support he offered. The way they'd been lately, with both of them staying away from each other as much as possible, he was the last person on earth she would ever have expected to offer it.

His arms tightened around her back, securing his hold. With a familiarity that shouldn't have been there, his hand curved easily around her side, the heat of his palm seeping inside her.

"I'd forgotten how small you are," he murmured, his voice as soothing as his touch. "At least now I know you won't break. The first time I held you six years ago, I was afraid you might."

Her whispered "You were?" was barely audible, muffled as it

was by his shirt.

“Yeah. I was.”

The admission surprised her. She couldn't picture Rio fearing anything. “But I didn't.”

“No,” he agreed, his breath feathering her hair. “You didn't. You're a lot stronger than you look. And a lot stronger than you think you are.”

She looked up to find a faint smile curving his sculpted mouth. He was telling her that she was doing better than she thought she was, and she appreciated the encouragement more than he could possibly know. But she wasn't strong when it came to him. She'd meant that when she said it.

She might have told him that, too. But his glance drifted to her mouth, pooling heat low in her stomach when the smile in his dark eyes faded. When he met her eyes again, a faint tension seemed to have entered his body. She could feel it in his arms, see it in the strong angles of his features. For long seconds, he searched her face, looking as if he didn't know whether to pull her closer or let her go. Then he carefully tucked back the hair she'd mussed earlier.

“You're going to be okay,” he told her, seeming to ignore the way his body hardened against hers. “A lot of it will just take time.”

He was right, of course. But she couldn't think why. She couldn't even remember what they were talking about. All she could think of was how safe she felt at that moment, how

protected. Nothing could intrude when he held her. None of the uncertainties, or questions, or hurts. Even if the feelings were an illusion, for now she needed them desperately.

“Rio?” Her voice sounded thready, hushed. “Please don’t go home tonight.”

The motion of his hand stopped, his fingers still threaded through her hair. “If that’s what you want,” he finally said, sounding as if he found it understandable that she didn’t want to be alone, even if he hadn’t expected the request. “I’ll sleep on the sofa.”

She shook her head. “I mean stay with me. Holding me.”

“Eve. I can’t do that.”

She didn’t know which hit harder. The absolute certainty in his voice, or the look in his eyes that clearly said he thought she’d finally slipped over the edge. She ducked her head, embarrassed for having asked, feeling like a fool for confusing his concern with caring.

“Honey, don’t.” He refused to let her go, his expression as tormented as his words when he saw the hurt clouding her eyes. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“It’s okay.”

He swore, the whispered epithet harsh and unforgiving.

“No. It’s not okay.” Knowing her as he did, he knew she’d never have asked such a thing of him unless she’d been desperate. And all he’d done was make her feel worse than she already did. “I said I just wanted to hold you, but that’s not true.” It had been

when he'd said it. When he'd reached for her, he'd meant only to offer comfort. But the moment he felt her sag against him, altruism had gone to battle with want, sensibility with need. "I've never stopped wanting you, Eve. Even after all these years, all I can think about when I'm with you is how you taste and feel and move. Don't you know that?"

Her heart hammering in her throat, she slowly shook her head. "When we're together, you never come anywhere near me."

"There's a reason for that."

He didn't trust himself around her. Eve got the message clearly enough when his eyes, dark and glittering, settled on her mouth. The knowledge did something very freeing to her spirit. As controlled as he so often appeared, inside he was a man doing battle. And she was a woman who very much needed that man.

"I'll stay." He would do that because he knew how long and lonely some nights could be, and heaven help him, he couldn't stand the thought of her here by herself. "But you know what will happen if we're in the same bed together."

"I think so." She touched his chest with her fingertips, her fingers trembling. "But it's been so long, you'll probably have to show me all over again."

Her words were too honest to be deliberately provocative, but the images they evoked of the first time they'd made love played pure havoc with Rio's brain. She'd told him then that he'd have to teach her what to do. And he had. Too impatiently, he was sure.

Clasping her hand in his, he drew it to his mouth and brushed

a kiss to her wrist. Beneath his lips, her pulse leapt. “It’s like riding a bike,” he whispered, threading his fingers through hers and drawing her arm behind her back. “It’ll come back to you.”

His last words were murmured against her mouth, his breath hot against her cheek. When his tongue touched hers, Eve thought her legs would buckle, but he caught her to him, letting her use his body for support. Long moments later, her breathing altered, his just as erratic, he bent and picked her up in his arms.

“Get the lights,” he told her, swinging her toward the switch on the way out of the kitchen.

He turned off the front lights himself, using his forearm as they passed through the foyer. With the filtered lights from the porch and hall upstairs illuminating the way, he carried her up the stairs, pausing just outside Molly’s open door.

“Is she okay?”

Seeing the soundly sleeping child, Eve whispered that she was. Quiet as air, he turned to the room Eve had claimed for herself and used his foot to swing the door partway closed once they were inside.

The filmy curtains were open, moonlight streaming into the tiny, atticlike room. The daybed was against one wall. A chair and dresser against another. Eve watched the shadows move over his face as he slid her down his body to the floor, then reached past her to close the door the rest of the way. In those muted shades of gray, his noble features were taut with purpose and possession.

“I can still sleep on the sofa,” he told her, skimming his hand

down her arm. He laced his fingers through hers, smoothing her hair back with his other hand.

She shook her head. At least, she thought she did. She was really only aware of his eyes, intent on her face, and the feel of his fingers drifting down her neck.

“I want you here,” she finally said, just so there’d be no doubt.

There was none. The possessiveness in his eyes moved to his touch as the mesmerizing movement of his hand reached the collar of her blouse. With the tip of his finger, he nudged the fabric aside and drew his finger along her collarbone, trailing a line of heat to the hollow of her throat. His touch lingered long enough for him to feel the quickened beat of her heart before he carried it between her breasts, then back up to trace her jaw.

“You haunt me, Eve.” His features seemed to tighten even more. “You must.”

His fingers drifted back to her throat, robbing the strength from her voice. “Is that bad?”

He shook his head, but she didn’t know if he meant it wasn’t, or that he didn’t know. It didn’t matter. The way he touched her, sensitizing her nerves as he reacquainted himself with the texture of her skin, the shape of her body, made it impossible to think of anything other than what he was doing.

His mouth brushed hers, causing her to tip her head back with a little moan when he stepped closer and began to slowly unbutton her blouse. His tongue slipped intimately over hers, teasing, coaxing, while his hands worked their way down to the

waistband of her jeans. When he reached denim, he tugged out her shirt, shaping her bare ribs with his hands and her breasts with his palms before he peeled the cloth back over her shoulders.

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