



Love Inspired® SUSPENSE

SHATTERED SECRETS

JANE M. CHOATE

Jane M. Choate

Shattered Secrets

Аннотация

BODYGUARD REUNION Narrowly escaping thugs who held her at knifepoint, lawyer Olivia Hammond turns to the man who once broke her heart, bodyguard Salvatore Santonni, for protection. However, when an anonymous caller reveals her boss has been kidnapped and will die if she doesn't comply with demands, she wishes she hadn't asked for help. Especially since the first order is to tell no one. But with someone determined to get something they think Olivia has, Sal won't back down. He can't let anything happen to the woman he never stopped loving. And as they uncover the truth, Sal and Olivia quickly learn that the threat is much more deadly than they ever would have guessed.

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"You might be able to hide your feelings from others, but not from me," Sal said.

He looked at Olivia and added, "Your expression gives you away every time."

When she started to put her hands to her cheeks, he stopped her. "Don't try to hide. Not from me."

Deliberately, Olivia backed away from him and the touch that could still turn her inside out.

She knew she was putting off the inevitable, and she hated the fact that she felt cowardly for doing so. She'd never been one to shirk from her responsibility, but now...now she didn't know where her duty lay.

Sal took her hand and squeezed it. "Right now, we're operating in the dark. We don't know who's doing this. We don't know what

they want. We need something, anything, to give us a handle on this.”

“Okay,” she said reluctantly.

“You’re doing the right thing.”

Was she? She didn’t know.

Olivia looked up at Sal, not surprised to find his eyes flat and dark. He was all Delta at the moment.

Good. She had a feeling she was going to need his special set of skills and training.

Dear Reader,

I hope you have enjoyed Sal and Olivia’s story.

When I started this series several years ago, I wasn’t certain I could tell Sal’s story as he wanted it told. He is a strong man with a gentle side, as the best men are. But I didn’t understand him until I realized that he was struggling to forgive himself. And then I knew I could write about him, because I struggle to forgive myself as well. Olivia helped Sal remember that the Lord is always on his side, always ready to forgive him.

Sal and Olivia didn’t have an easy time of it. Their love path was punctuated with embezzlers and killers. Most of us won’t have to deal with that kind of conflict, but we, like Olivia and Sal, have to work at keeping our love alive and strong. With the Lord’s help, we can find our own happy endings.

With love in the Lord,

Jane

JANE M. CHOATE dreamed of writing from the time she

was a small child when she entertained friends with outlandish stories complete with happily-ever-after endings. Writing for Love Inspired Suspense is a dream come true. Jane is the proud mother of five children, grandmother to seven grandchildren and the staff to one cat who believes she is of royal descent.

Shattered Secrets

Jane M. Choate



www.millsandboon.co.uk

For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy and to all them that call upon thee.

—Psalms 86:5

To Dina Davis, editor, whose suggestions for this book made it much richer and stronger.

To my friends at Front Range Christian Fiction Writers. Thank you for all the encouragement and support.

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ONE

A hiss of energy brushed her face as the deadly blade cleaved the air a scant inch from her cheek.

Olivia Hammond forced herself to remain still. To move even a fraction would cause the knife to slice open her skin. She dared not breathe until the need for oxygen forced her to take a noisy gulp of air.

“Ah, I see I have your attention. Now you will tell us where you hid it. Maybe we will kill you quickly rather than taking our time about it.” The heavily accented voice held no particular menace, as though the man who pressed the weapon to her face was discussing a business transaction rather than taking her life.

“Or we will be forced to encourage you to tell us.” This was from the second man who had said little during the interrogation.

The two intruders had already ransacked the law offices of Chantry & Hammond. It had been her misfortune to return for a file and run into them.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” How many times had she uttered those words? The effort of not moving and the fear of what the men intended to do to her had dulled her energy and her wits.

Don’t give up. The small voice inside her head had her sitting up straighter despite the duct tape binding her to the chair. She was far from beaten. Her passion for defending the underdog had

earned her a reputation for taking no prisoners, both in and out of the courtroom. She called upon that now.

It was up to her to free herself. No one was coming to her aid. Immediately her mind rejected that. There was always One who was at her side.

Lord, I'm in a fix here. I need Your help. The silent prayer said, she tried once again to reason with her captors. "Why don't you tell me what it is you're looking for?"

"Enough!" Impatience shimmered in the single word. The first man, whom she'd identified as the leader, nicked the delicate skin of her cheek with the blade.

Blood trickled down her cheek. The metallic scent of it stung her nostrils and sickened her stomach.

"You know what we want. Do not play the innocent. You are part of this, along with your boss, trying to cheat us out of what is ours."

"Calvin?" What did this have to do with Calvin Chantry, the head of the law firm where she was an associate? And where was Calvin anyway? He hadn't shown up for work yesterday or today.

"Yes. Calvin. Your boss. He could not pull this off without help. You, his partner's daughter, are the logical choice."

Though the man spoke English, she struggled to understand his thick accent that gave a hard jab to every syllable. "Please... Calvin didn't tell me anything. I don't—"

A key turned at the office door. Teresa, the cleaning lady.

Olivia held on to a breath of hope. Just as quickly, the sliver

of hope died. Teresa, sixtyish and stout, would be no match for two armed men.

An exclamation in the woman's native Portuguese was quickly followed by the clump of her sturdy shoes down the carpeted hallway outside the office. Seconds later, a fire alarm shrilled. Teresa must have pulled it.

Thousands of gallons of water spilled from the sprinkler system above.

"This is not over," the first man said just before he and his partner fled.

Drenched, Olivia waited for help and said another silent prayer, this one in gratitude for the Lord's intervention.

An hour later, after the fire department had arrived and departed and the EMTs had checked her over, she was still answering questions from the Savannah police, some in uniform, some in plain clothes. She didn't fool herself that she was that important. The Chantry & Hammond law firm, a Savannah institution, carried a lot of weight.

"I don't know what they were looking for," she repeated. "They kept saying I knew where it was. And then they accused me of being in on it with Calvin Chantry."

"Did the men say what it was they wanted from Chantry?"

"Like I said, no."

Olivia shivered in her wet clothes. "If you don't mind, I'd like to go home and change."

The older of the detectives, whose suit bore the stains of a

quickly eaten dinner, nodded. “Sure.” He handed her a card. “If you think of something, anything at all, give us a call.”

After promising to do so, Olivia headed home. Though a long shower helped to rid her skin of the memory of the knife and the stench of her own fear, she admitted what she hadn’t wanted to just an hour earlier: she needed help.

She picked up the phone and punched in the number of the man she had thought never to see again. She needed the kind of help that only Salvatore Santonni could give.

* * *

At core, Salvatore Santonni was still a soldier. He shoved a hand through his hair. Though he’d left Delta several years back, he had only recently exchanged the military haircut for a nonregulation one. He missed the buzz cut that had been his for more than a decade.

Now an operative for S&J Security/Protection, he took the jobs assigned him with the same dedication to duty with which he had carried out missions for his country. Individuals contacted S&J only when circumstances had turned dangerous and they needed a bodyguard.

When he’d gotten Olivia’s call, he’d driven through the night, unable to wait until morning. He knew she wouldn’t have called unless she was terrified. He rapped on the door of the Savannah law offices of Chantry & Hammond.

Olivia Hammond let him in and stared up at him, her mouth forming a soft O, her eyes widening. He took a moment to

take inventory of her. Tall and willowy, she was elegant in a red suit. He imagined she thought the severe style made her look powerful, even tough, in the courtroom where she shredded witness testimony on a regular basis. Instead, it only emphasized the delicate femininity that was so much a part of her.

Sun-streaked blond hair swung to her shoulders, framing a face that was so breathtakingly beautiful that he couldn't look away even if he wanted to. Which he didn't. Her features weren't perfect: her nose was slightly too small, her lips too full, but together, they made for an arresting package.

Something flitted through her eyes, but he couldn't make out what it was. His eyes narrowed when his gaze zeroed in on the bandage that marred the perfection of her cheek. He fisted his hands at his sides to keep from reaching out and skimming his fingers over it.

"It's nothing. Only a prick of a knife," she said softly.

His hands tightened at the thought of men threatening Olivia, using a knife on her. Even though he'd decided that he and she couldn't be together, he cared about her. Always would.

"Olivia." Just her name. It was all he could manage. The feel of it on his tongue was infinitely sweet.

She looked down, away, and then gestured to her office. "Let's talk inside."

He followed her into the office. His tongue seemed stuck to the roof of his mouth so he looked about. Water damage from the sprinklers was as evident here as it was throughout the suite

of offices.

Even with the damage, though, he could make out the spartan decor. A desk with an efficient-looking chair behind it, a couple of battered file cabinets and two uncomfortable chairs for visitors comprised its only furnishings. He remembered her saying that comfortable chairs invited visitors to linger and she had too much work to do to indulge in small talk.

“Thank you for coming. I didn’t know who else to call. I know Shelley would have come, but she’s like a hundred months pregnant.”

Sal smiled at the exaggeration. Shelley was eight months pregnant and counting, but to hear her tell it, Olivia’s description was more accurate.

Olivia looked down at her hands. “You didn’t have to come, but I’m glad you did.”

He schooled his voice to a coolness he was far from feeling. “You called. I came.” Because he cared about her. Whatever had transpired between them didn’t change that. “You had to know I would.”

“I wasn’t sure.” The silence stretched until the air was thick with it. “I figured you never wanted to see me again.” A punch of hard silence followed.

He ignored the past and focused on what was important. “What’s going on, Olivia?”

“I told you over the phone. Two men broke into the office. If it hadn’t been for Teresa—the cleaning lady—they’d have killed

me.” She recited the words by rote, probably having said the same thing to the police.

“Can you describe them?”

She gave a detailed description that had him nodding in approval.

“What about their clothes?” he asked.

“Their pants dragged on the floor. One man kept having to yank his up. He looked annoyed each time he did it and I remember wondering why he just didn’t wear clothes that fit.”

“Prison shuffles,” Sal said, naming the pants in question. “Anything distinctive about their voices?”

“They both had an accent, but I couldn’t place it. It wasn’t Spanish. I would have recognized that.”

“Middle Eastern?”

“More guttural.” She shook her head. “I don’t know. I was too busy concentrating on not throwing up on their shoes and making them really angry at me.” The last was said with a half smile that quickly died.

Sal kept his voice quiet as he asked further questions. The last thing Olivia needed was for him to come on like gangbusters. She looked fragile enough to break. Who could blame her? Being held captive and threatened with torture and death was enough to send anyone into a tailspin.

She picked up a mug of coffee from her desk, her hand trembling so much that she had to set it back down again. The small gesture was telling in the extreme, but he pretended not to

notice. Just as he pretended not to notice that his own breathing was having a tendency to stutter.

“What did they want?”

“I don’t know.” Her already husky voice turned even huskier.

“You said the men mentioned your boss. Where is he?”

“I haven’t seen or heard from him in two days.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences,” he said, thinking aloud.

“First your boss disappears, then you’re threatened by two men you’ve never seen before. The two have to be connected.”

“I don’t see how. Calvin would never have anything to do with men like that.”

“He’s a lawyer. Lawyers work with all kinds of people, including ‘men like that.’”

There was a new edge to his voice now, and he worked to gentle it. Olivia wasn’t one of the men he’d commanded in his unit. She didn’t snap to attention when he barked out an order.

In an attempt to curb his impatience, he lifted his gaze to study the vivid print hanging on the far wall. Fortunately, it had escaped being drenched with water. Bold colors depicted a boat docked at the Savannah harbor at sunrise, the clashing tones juxtaposed against the quiet scene. That was Olivia, he thought, both bold and quiet.

She was a contradiction in many ways. Right now, she was frightened and looking to him for help, both in keeping her safe and in finding out what the men were after.

“I’m here now. You’re not alone.”

And with that, tears gathered in her eyes.

“Ah, Livvie.” The nickname came automatically to his lips. He watched—oddly helpless—as she swiped at the tears now trickling down her cheeks.

He had fast-roped from a helicopter into choppy seas, done HALO drops from 30,000 feet, and escaped the clutches of a warlord who’d put a price on his head and a target on his back, but he was as clueless as the next man as to how to handle a woman’s tears. Helpless wasn’t an emotion that sat well on his shoulders.

Being with Olivia had always been emotion-laden and fraught with unspoken feelings and unanswered questions. Those too-short weeks with her had been the best of his life. She’d filled him, and all of those dark places inside of him had grown a little smaller, a little brighter. He couldn’t forget that, didn’t want to forget it, even when he’d realized there was no hope for a future between them.

Though he’d fallen in love with Olivia, he knew he wasn’t the right man for her. The violence in his past made him unworthy of her. He’d walked away from her two years ago, certain it had been the right choice. The only choice. So why was he regretting it now?

* * *

After spending most of the night answering the police’s questions followed by a full day in court, Olivia returned to her office, slipped off her jacket and toed off her shoes, yawning heavily. She’d worn a lipstick-red suit, a favorite that gave her

much-needed confidence. She had splurged on it last year, living on macaroni and cheese for the following month in order to afford it, and wore it on days like today when she needed a boost.

Feminine vanity had her wishing she didn't look as exhausted as she felt, and she put a hand to her hair to push it back from her forehead. Out of habit, she sat behind her desk while Sal took one of the uncomfortable chairs in front of it.

"Why?" The question had taunted her all day. "Why did those men come after me? I don't know anything." The breath tumbled from her lips at the memory of the wicked-looking knife pressed to her cheek.

"Someone thinks you do," Sal pointed out.

"Not helping." She tried a smile, but it came out flat.

"Sorry. It's likely you know more than you think you do. A couple years ago, you were Chantry's right hand. I'm guessing that's still true."

"I suppose. But that doesn't mean I know what those men were talking about." A fresh shudder poured through her.

Across the desk, Sal reached for her hand, squeezed. She glanced at him, then away.

Two years ago, he'd overwhelmed her with the strength of his personality. She felt a frown take hold before she could stop it. That had been part of the problem, her fear that he would consume her, that her own sense of self would be eroded if she stayed within his orbit. Not even the most expensive of suits could help with that.

Had she done the right thing in calling Sal for help? She knew of his work for S&J Security/Protection, knew he would protect her with his own life, but could she afford what that protection involved? Inviting him back into her life spelled trouble, if not disaster.

He'd broken her heart when he walked away. If it happened again, she wasn't sure she'd survive.

"This case you're trying, is there anything about it to make someone threaten you?" he asked, breaking into her thoughts. The pensive quality in his voice told her he was trying to make sense of the attack, just as she was. The knowledge that he was on her side warmed her.

"You mean aside from the millions of dollars it's going to cost the company if we win?"

"Yeah. Besides that."

Deep lines scoured Sal's forehead. Despite that, he was more attractive than ever. His appeal came from something that went much deeper than superficial good looks to the very core of the man. The steadiness in his gaze, the acceptance of who and what he was, would always set him apart from other men. There'd been a time when her heart had raced when she looked at him.

His large body blocked much of the light given from the desk lamp, but even in that muted light, she could detect the near black of his irises. They were a compelling color. Just like the man himself.

"I'm looking for something more personal. Anything that

would give someone a score to settle with you.”

“I’m the lawyer of record. Another member of the firm could have handled it, but I wanted it.” After twenty-one children had died as a result of the company substituting fake medicine for the real thing, the parents had retained Chantry & Hammond to represent them in the deaths. Her lips drew tight in silent fury at the thought that children had died due to greed.

Olivia pushed her chair back from the desk, stood and started to pace. “Parents are depending upon me to get justice for their children. I have no intention of letting them down.” Or herself.

“You care about the kids who died, their parents.” The quiet understanding in Sal’s voice was balm to her soul.

A few disgruntled colleagues, two in particular, had accused her of wanting a big payoff as her part of the settlement. Olivia hoped the settlement the parents received would be generous, but no amount could make up for the loss of a child. She planned on donating any fee she made to the families, many of whom were still paying off medical bills.

Tears leaked from her eyes over what the parents had endured. No parent should lose a child.

Sal rose, started to move toward her, then paused.

Olivia noticed an odd expression in his eyes and wondered what had caused it.

He didn’t give her the opportunity to puzzle over it. “What’s Chantry been working on lately?”

The abrupt change of subject startled her, causing her to stop

midstride as she thought about it. “He’s been spending more and more time away from the office. He told me he’s practicing for when he retires.” A half smile touched her lips before slipping away. “I teased him that he wouldn’t know how to retire. He gave me this funny look and said I might be surprised.”

“Funny? How?”

She lifted her shoulders. “I don’t know. Just different.”

Though Sal seemed disappointed that she couldn’t be more specific, he didn’t press the issue. “Okay. Let’s try another tack. Tell me about him. What he likes. What he doesn’t. Who he hangs out with.”

“You can’t believe Calvin has anything to do with this.” She couldn’t keep her irritation from showing. He didn’t know Calvin the way she did or he wouldn’t be asking questions like this.

Tension crackled.

“You said the men mentioned your boss,” Sal reminded her.

“So I did, but like I told you, Calvin would never have anything to do with men like that. He’s too—” she searched for the right word “—refined.” Her stomach rumbled, and she flattened a hand against it with an embarrassed laugh. “It’s been a long time since lunch.”

“Come to think of it, I’m hungry, too. I’ll run out and get us something. Is Thai all right? I saw a restaurant advertising genuine Thai cuisine around the corner. We can talk while we eat.”

“Perfect.”

In truth, she welcomed a few minutes to herself. Sal's presence filled the small office, as though the very air was absorbing his unflagging energy and unflinching courage. She wanted to breathe it in, that potent mix, and take it inside her. At the same time, she felt almost light-headed as the strength of his personality threatened to consume her. And then there were the disturbing questions about Calvin.

She leaned back, closed her eyes and felt some of the strain of the last twenty-four hours leave her body.

It was then that the call came, the call that sent her world into a freefall and her emotions into a frenzy of fear.

"We have your boss." The mechanically altered voice, giving no hint as to who was speaking, sent a chill of foreboding skittering down her spine. "Wait for further instructions. Do not go to the police or FBI, not if you want to get Calvin Chantry back alive." A breath-stealing pause. "If you tell anyone about this, you will both pay the price."

Olivia's thoughts raced, even as her heart did a double beat. The threat was clear: talk and she'd put her life as well as Calvin's in jeopardy.

She wasn't a coward, but right now, she was scared right down to her toes.

TWO

After spending ten years in the mountains of Afghanistan, Sal was still adjusting to being home in Georgia, with its supercharged humidity and honeyed air. Though he'd been back

in the States for over three years, he was still struggling with the difference in climate. The heavy smog that had hung over the city was absorbed into the darkening sky and was only a memory, but the humidity hung in the air and played havoc with his right shoulder, which still carried pieces of shrapnel from enemy fire, a souvenir from his days as a sniper's spotter. Even in the air-conditioned offices, he felt the clamminess that clung to his skin like cheap polyester.

But it wasn't the heat or even the energy-stealing humidity that caused him to go on high alert. Something was wrong. His senses flared in alarm at an unknown threat.

He felt it in the tension that pulsed in the air, saw it in the drawn lines that had moved into Olivia's face in the short time he was gone to pick up dinner.

"What is it?"

She turned away for a few seconds as if gathering her thoughts. When she faced him once more, she smiled brightly. No doubt she believed she'd successfully hidden whatever was bothering her, but it wasn't good enough to fool him. "Nothing. Why do you ask?"

On the surface, she sounded calm, even convincing, but something was off. Her smile was too wide, her voice too determinedly cheerful. Her eyes were full of turmoil that hadn't been there thirty minutes ago. She'd barely picked at the plate of steaming food he'd set in front of her.

"Something happened. You might as well tell me because I'm

not going anywhere.”

“What? Are you my keeper now?” The harsh words appeared to have surprised her as much as they did him.

“Olivia.” He kept his voice soft. He didn’t want to spook her. “What happened?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking, bringing you all the way here. I realize I overreacted about the whole break-in thing.” She gave a forced laugh, the sound only deepening the taut atmosphere that charged the air. “I’m fine. Really.” Another laugh. “I appreciate you coming all this way, but you don’t need to stay. I’m sure you have real work, something better than babysitting me.”

The dismissal in the words had him wincing. Well, she’d find that it wasn’t so easy to send him packing.

Sal went at a problem straight-on and didn’t turn away until he had a solution. Seeing Olivia again wasn’t the usual kind of problem. Charging at it full speed ahead wouldn’t change the way things had ended between them. Nor would pretending that he no longer had feelings for her.

Right now, he had to put those feelings away and find out what she was hiding from him. That required finesse, not Delta strong-arm tactics.

“You don’t look fine. You look like you’d blow away if I breathed on you too hard.” It was no exaggeration. Olivia looked like a strong sigh would topple her. Shadows, as deep as a Georgia night, had taken up residence under her eyes.

Her earlier smile had vanished, a frown taking its place. “Thanks. I needed that.” The sarcasm in her words didn’t get to him, but the flash of hurt in her eyes did.

Sal wanted to kick himself. From the moment he’d shown up in Olivia’s office that morning, he’d blundered. Big-time. The drive from Atlanta to Savannah, plus worry for Olivia, had ratcheted up his impatience and sent his tact, never abundant under the best of circumstances, into a nosedive. That was no excuse, though.

Something had caused Olivia to turn her back on his help.

“You know I can’t leave you. Not like this. Tell me.”

Her frown darkened into a scowl, the lines of it so hard that he thought her face would break. She squared her shoulders, as though she needed to shore up her resolve. Chin pulled in, she gave the impression of a queen looking down at her subject. The effect was mitigated by the quiver of her lips. “I told you. I’m fine. You can go back to Atlanta.”

Sal had been trained in interpreting microexpressions, those unconscious gestures that revealed far more than words. His Delta unit had been assigned to Counter Terrorism for a stint.

The CT boys knew their stuff when it came to ferreting out information from suspected terrorists. Once back in the States, he’d gone to work for S&J Security/Protection, named for its founders Shelley Rabb Judd and her brother Jake Rabb.

Shelley, an ex-Secret Service agent, had shown Sal other tricks in detecting lies. Not much got by him.

Olivia's gaze kept sliding to her left, a telltale sign that she was lying. "You have to go. Please."

The plea in her voice caused him to frown. Gone was the calm of a moment ago. She sounded frantic. He was more certain than ever that something was going on, something that terrified her at least as much as last night's attack.

"What aren't you telling me?"

She shook her head from side to side, as though willing away whatever had scared her. "N-nothing."

Sal fitted his finger beneath her chin, raising it until her gaze was level with his. She held it for a moment before looking away. "You always were a poor liar."

"I'm not lying."

"No? Then why can't you look me in the eye?"

"Please, Sal." Her voice hitched on a tiny sob. "You don't understand."

He placed his hands on her shoulders. "What don't I understand? Tell me, Livvie. I want to help."

"It's Calvin. Someone took him." Her shoulders trembled beneath his hands. "They said if I contact the police or the FBI, they'll kill him." She waited a beat. "And me, if I tell anyone."

Sal took a moment to absorb that. "I'm not police or FBI," he pointed out at last. "What are you going to do?"

She thrust out her chin. "I'll find out what they want and deliver it." The steel was back in her voice.

Sal kept his face impassive, but his mind was churning through

possibilities. None of them good. As capable and intelligent as she was, Olivia was no match for kidnappers. He wasn't going anywhere, but first, he had to convince her that she needed him. "What if I promise to not interfere and to keep a low profile?"

"I can't risk it."

"I'm afraid you don't have a choice because I'm not leaving."

"Then I guess you're staying." The begrudging tone told him that she didn't want him there but was glad he was there anyway.

A smile tugged at his lips. That was Olivia. Self-sufficient to a fault. Her mouth trembled, though, mute evidence that she wasn't as confident as she pretended. If he hadn't looked closely, he would have missed it.

Olivia put a hand to her mouth, as though aware of the giveaway. He didn't comment on it. She wouldn't appreciate the observation.

For a fraction of a moment, he wondered why he was trying so hard to convince her to let him help.

Not for the first time, he wondered why he had been born with a conscience that was as much taskmaster as moral compass. He should walk away from Olivia and her problem, content in the knowledge that he'd tried to help. The few times he'd ever ignored his conscience, however, he'd lived to regret it.

He had enough regrets to last several lifetimes.

* * *

One look at Sal and Olivia knew she'd have a fight on her hands to convince him that she could handle this on her own. The

sharp angles of his face were cast in even harsher lines than usual.

It was his warrior face, one she'd seen only once before but the memory was forever etched in her mind. Two men had tried to rob her and Sal as they'd left a restaurant one night. One of the men had pushed her to the ground, causing her to cry out.

Sal had taken them down quickly and efficiently. When he'd turned to her, the ferocity in his eyes had sent her pulse into overdrive.

"The police will be here in a minute," she'd said to defuse the anger that radiated from him.

"They wanted more than to rob us. If they had hurt you..."

"I'm okay. Thanks to you." The experience had made her determined to never again be so powerless and she'd started studying martial arts.

He still wore the mantle of the soldier he'd been across his shoulders, telegraphing an innate desire to protect, to defend, to stand between danger and those weaker than himself. He was a good man, an honorable man, whose self-assurance and unshakable sense of justice defined him as much as the dark hair and skin that hinted at his Italian ancestry.

Against her will, Olivia felt herself responding to his appeal. To him. That stunning realization unfolded in the space of one heartbeat and shocked her into stillness. With an effort, she did her best to ignore it.

He looked the same as he had the last time she'd seen him, right down to the off-center dimple that punctuated his chin. She

longed to smooth her finger in that shallow dent. Deliberately, she fisted her hands at her sides to keep from doing that very thing.

She couldn't deny the frisson of pleasure she'd experienced when he'd walked into her office that morning as the sky grew pink with dawn. Nor could she shake off the sweet memories that assailed her, memories she'd locked away for two long years.

Olivia wanted to believe he was here because he cared about her, but she knew better. She pushed from her mind the unwelcome memory of how they'd parted, and concentrated on the present.

She let her gaze take in the man who had once meant so much to her. At five feet and nine inches, she was hardly petite. Still, she had to look up at Sal, who stood a good five inches over six feet. Broad shoulders, narrow waist and legs that were as sturdy as telephone poles, not to mention a military bearing, gave him an imposing presence.

No, there was nothing soft about Salvatore Santonni. With hard planes and abrupt angles, his face would never place him in the pretty-boy category. It had too much strength and stubborn resolve for such insipid looks and bore the lines and ruggedness that came from long hours exposed to the wind and the sun. His dark eyes missed nothing and portrayed a startling intensity.

Arms folded across his wide chest, he broadened his stance as though preparing for resistance. He knew her too well and had already anticipated her response.

But how else could she react? This was Calvin's life they were talking about. She had to do what the kidnappers said. Exhaustion and hunger dragged at her, but it was the riot of emotions roiling through her that had turned her stomach inside out and her mind to mush.

She wet her lips. "I can't risk involving you," she said at last, panic rising with each syllable. "The kidnappers will know."

"How will they know?"

"I don't know." She all but shouted the words. "All I know is that I have to do what they said. If I don't... Calvin will die. I can't let that happen. I won't let it."

"Just how do you plan to get him back? Ask nicely and hope the kidnappers play by the rules?"

Resentment filled her. Sal wasn't responsible for bringing Calvin home safely. She was. With renewed purpose, she squared her shoulders and braced herself for what came next.

"You won't get Chantry back on your own. Take a breath and then we'll decide on our next step."

"You can't be here. They'll know."

Sal knelt in front of her. "You can do this. We can do this. But we have to be smarter than the bad guys." He took her hands and folded them inside his own. "Whoever's behind this is counting on you reacting with fear. You're smarter than that."

"Am I?" She hated the self-doubt in her voice and looked down at their clasped hands. Then raised her gaze to his. His dark eyes locked on hers. She saw strength and courage there. Maybe

she could draw on some of his when her own was so lacking. Before she thought better of it, she voiced her thoughts aloud.

“I didn’t want to call you.” The admission cost her, but she plunged on. “I didn’t want to lean on you, but I’m doing exactly that.”

“You can lean on me whenever you like,” he said.

In that instant, she thought of the Lord and remembered that He’d said that all who came to Him could lean on Him.

She’d never doubted that the Lord would be there for her, but a man she hadn’t seen in two years was asking her to put Calvin’s life in his hands. Could she do it? Unbidden, the memory of Sal leaving her with scarcely a goodbye intruded into her thoughts, sending a spear of pain through her.

“Lean on you like I did two years ago?” She flushed at her rudeness. Sal had made the trip from Atlanta to Savannah solely to help her. He didn’t deserve the back side of her tongue.

His lips thinned, but he didn’t respond to the barb.

She wanted to snatch the words back, was about to do just that, when he said, “You have to see that you can’t do this on your own. These people don’t play fair.”

Gone was the apology that hovered on her lips. “I’m not an idiot. I know that.”

“I never said you were an idiot,” Sal said, his patience underscoring her lack of the same. “You’re one of the smartest people I know. But you don’t have experience in dealing with this kind of situation.”

“And you do?”

“In Afghanistan.” Pain darkened his eyes. “A group of insurgents grabbed a couple of locals who had been helping us. They had promised to make an example out of anyone who assisted the US. They had a reputation of being particularly brutal with their captives. My unit was called in to get them out.”

The words had a staccato rhythm to them, as though he could pry them out only by infusing every syllable with a mechanical precision. Whatever memory he was recalling obviously wasn't a pleasant one. What he'd left unsaid was somehow worse than what he'd told her. “Let's just say that kidnappings are unpredictable. Things can go south in a hurry.” His face morphed into a hard mask, a stark contrast with the gentleness he'd shown her only moments earlier.

Olivia wanted to ask him what had happened, but something held her back. If Sal wanted to share, he would, but she doubted he'd do so.

He had always been protective of her and had never wanted to bring the ugliness of war into her world. It had been one of the problems between them, his reluctance to share all of himself with her.

And what about you? an inner voice chastised. She hadn't shared everything about herself, either. They had each held back parts of themselves, as though afraid they would give away pieces they wouldn't get back should the need arise.

Another regret.

* * *

Sal's mind clicked through possible scenarios of Olivia dealing with the kidnappers on her own, each more frightening than the last. She wasn't equipped for it, as he'd tried to tell her.

Judging from her reaction, he'd made his point all too well.

"You're not thinking straight," he said now, his voice gentle. "That's what kidnappers do. They want you off balance so you'll do what they say without thinking it through."

When her phone rang, she jumped. Sal motioned for her to put it on speaker, and she pressed a key. "Yes?"

"You disobeyed instructions." The artificial voice gave no hint as to the caller's identity. Man or woman. Young or old. There was no way of knowing.

"I didn't go to the police," she said quickly.

"But you told someone. Do not bother denying it. Your instructions were to tell no one. Now you will pay the price." An ominous pause followed. "More precisely, Chantry will pay the price."

"Wait! Please wait."

A second voice. "Olivia, please. You have to do just as they say..." Calvin's words ended in a scream.

Sal watched as Olivia held her breath. "Please. Please don't hurt him. I'll do what you want. Anything. Just please don't hurt him again." Her words dwindled to a sob.

"It is too late, lady. Your interference cost your boss much pain."

“It was my fault.” She shouted the words in the phone.

“Why didn’t you listen? Why—” A hoarse cry followed. And another.

“Calvin!” But Calvin Chantry was no longer on the phone.

“What are you doing to him?” When she swayed, Sal placed his free hand at her waist, steadying her.

“Do you see what your failure to obey the rules has caused? This is on you, Ms. Hammond. Remember this the next time you are tempted to disobey instructions.” The voice was all the more chilling for its total lack of expression.

“Please,” she cried, voice slurred with shock and grief. “Please stop. I’ll do anything. Anything. But please stop hurting him.” Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Sal resisted the urge to wipe them away. He understood she wouldn’t want his acknowledgment of their existence.

“Then start obeying instructions. Or next time your boss will lose more than a body part.” A sly pause. “And you, Ms. Hammond, how would you look without one of your lovely ears?”

THREE

After a night of Calvin’s tortured cry echoing in her head, Olivia found herself on her knees, praying for the Lord’s guidance. She remained there for long moments, absorbing the quiet of the early morning.

Memories of her boss’s screams filled her throat with a lump of fear. She tried to swallow it, but it was like swallowing broken

glass. Each shard sliced at her throat, spilling drops of blood and tears.

Why hadn't she followed instructions? Why had she—It was too late for self-recriminations. The only thing she could do was to move forward. And that meant sending Sal away. She couldn't afford to do anything else to antagonize the kidnappers.

Be still and know that I am God. The familiar scripture wrapped its peace around her, and she got to her feet, determined to do what she must.

Sal was a good and honorable man, but she had to keep him out of this from now on. Look what had happened when the kidnappers learned he was helping her. No matter what he said or what experience he'd had in dealing with abductions, he was a threat to Calvin's safe return, which had to be her priority.

When he arrived to pick her up, he took one look at her and shook his head.

"You're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Wondering how you're going to convince me to go away and let you handle this on your own."

How did he do that? He'd read her mind as though her thoughts were written across her face in bold strokes.

"Your face gives away your every thought and feeling. So don't bother trying to deny it."

"I know you want to help, but this is Calvin's life we're talking about. If the kidnappers learn that you're still helping me, Calvin

will be punished.” She let her gaze meet Sal’s squarely. “Can you accept the consequences of that? Because I can’t.”

She watched as his broad shoulders stiffened and his lips pulled into a tight line, the controlled anger locked in his jaw a mute testament to his frustration.

Sal wanted to argue with her, to convince her that he was right—she saw it in his eyes—but he didn’t try to. All he said was, “I’m staying. Get used to it.”

* * *

Determination lit Olivia’s eyes. He knew that look. It was her I-can-handle-this-by-myself face. While he respected her independence, he couldn’t allow her to be hurt because she was too proud to admit she needed help. He knew he had to tread lightly.

He didn’t want to scare her. At the same time he needed to make her realize that kidnappings and ransom drops rarely, if ever, went smoothly. She didn’t know what she was getting herself into. He’d do whatever he had to in order to protect her. It was time she accepted that.

Olivia reached for his hand, nails biting into his palm. Visceral shock leached the color from her face until her skin appeared almost translucent.

“I’m sorry, Sal. You came all this way and I barely even thanked you.”

“It’s all right. But don’t try to send me away again. Whether you admit it or not, you need me.”

“You’re right.” She twisted a strand of hair. “That’s one thing I resented about you. You’re always right.”

Had he been right two years ago when he’d walked away from Olivia and what they had together?

At the time, he’d been sure it was the right thing to do. He’d left for a reason. That reason still held. His past was pockmarked with pain and despair. He couldn’t inflict that upon someone as full of light and love as Olivia.

He couldn’t focus on the past. Not now. They had to find Chantry. Both instinct and experience told him the kidnapping was more than a simple snatch-and-grab for money. If that had been the case, Olivia would have already received a ransom demand. Instead, the kidnappers were toying with her, trying to rattle her into making a mistake.

He had to convince her that she couldn’t blindly give in to their demands. He’d keep her safe, whether or not she agreed to it. His sense of duty and honor, drilled into him during his years in Delta, demanded that. Though he’d left the military behind, he hadn’t left the essence of it in the mountains of Afghanistan. It was in his blood, his pores, his heart.

He wouldn’t have it any other way.

When Olivia and Sal arrived at the office, the receptionist greeted them and pointed to a box. “Ms. Hammond, a package arrived for you.”

Before Olivia could take the package, he stopped her. “Let me.” He withdrew a pair of thin protective gloves from his pocket

and donned them. If there were any fingerprints or DNA on the box, he didn't want to disturb them.

"You think this—" she gestured to the box "—is from the kidnappers?"

"I think there's a strong possibility." He looked about the reception area. So far only the receptionist was here, but other workers would probably soon arrive. "Do you want to take this into your office?" Inside her office with the door locked, Sal didn't let go of the package.

She held out her hands. "I'll do it."

He shook his head. "There could be a bomb inside. Probably not. But we have to have it checked."

Her nod indicated reluctant agreement.

Sal made a call to a friend still in uniform, explained the situation. Within ten minutes, an explosives expert arrived and told them to wait outside. A short time later, the man gave the all clear.

"No bomb. Something else." He pushed aside wrapping paper.

Inside lay a severed finger.

* * *

Sal and his friend exchanged a grim look. "I don't know what you're dealing with here, Sal, old buddy," the man said, "but you'd better get some help." With that, he left.

Olivia barely registered the conversation. She could only stare. The gasp that escaped her lips was filled with revulsion. She'd expected something like this, but the reality was worse. A lot

worse.

“It’s Calvin’s.”

“You sure?”

She nodded. “I recognize the ring. He bought it a few months back. We had just won a big case and he wanted to celebrate.” She frowned. “I remember mentioning that it wasn’t his style. Calvin said something about maybe I didn’t know everything there is to know about him. Then he laughed and patted my hand.” She squeezed her eyes shut against the memory.

Sal studied the box with its grisly contents. “The ruby looks real,” he said of the large stone set in the pinky ring.

“Calvin would never have had a fake. Real or nothing, he used to say.”

“We don’t have a choice anymore,” Sal pointed out. “We have to take this to the police. It’s evidence of a crime.”

Of course he was right. She was an officer of the court. If she didn’t turn the finger and ring over to the police, she was guilty of committing a crime. But what of Calvin?

Obviously the kidnapers had eyes on her. What she did now could sign his death warrant, but doing nothing wouldn’t bring him back, either. She was caught between two untenable choices. The weight of indecision was crushing.

Calvin’s screams remained fresh in her memory. How was she supposed to agree to taking the box to the police when she could still hear his cries in her mind? A hard fist tightened in her belly at the acceptance that she was to blame.

“You’re doing it again. Blaming yourself.”

How did he know? She feigned ignorance, not wanting to admit that he knew her so well.

“You’re blaming yourself for what happened to your boss. Don’t fall into that trap. You’ll never get free.” Sal skimmed a finger along her jaw. “You might be able to hide your feelings from others, but not from me. Your expression gives you away every time.”

When she started to put her hands to her cheeks, he stopped her. “Don’t try to hide. Not from me.”

Deliberately, she backed away from him and the touch that could still turn her inside out.

She knew she was putting off the inevitable, and she hated the fact that she felt cowardly for doing so. She’d never been one to shirk from her responsibility, but now...now she didn’t know where her duty lay.

“The sooner the police start processing this, the better.” Sal stood, grabbed her hand, squeezed. “Right now, we’re operating in the dark. We don’t know who’s doing this. We don’t know what they want. We need something, anything, to give us a handle on this.”

She needed the wisdom of Someone wiser than herself. Lord, please help me make the right decision. I can’t afford to make a mistake.

The silent prayer afforded her a measure of peace.

“Okay,” she said, reluctance drawing out the two syllables.

“We take this to the police.”

“You’re doing the right thing.”

Was she? She didn’t know.

Olivia looked up at Sal, not surprised to find his eyes flat and dark. He was all Delta at the moment. Good. She had a feeling she was going to need his special set of skills and training.

She’d kept track of him during the last two years. Stories of what he’d done in his work for S&J Security/Protection frequently made the Savannah papers. Sal was a hero, though he’d deny it with his last breath.

He’d brought home the courage that had defined him as a Delta, risking his life to safeguard others. It would always be so with this man who put country and honor first. Her heart had filled with pride when she’d read the articles chronicling his bravery and resourcefulness.

On top of that, she was still trying to make sense of the feelings swirling through her system at his nearness, making it difficult to breathe. The slightest touch sent sparks arcing between them. Or had she imagined it?

Her instincts couldn’t be trusted at the moment. High stress and emotional upheaval were a potent combination. Mistaking vulnerability for something else could only lead to heartache, and she did her best to set aside the complex feelings the last twenty-four hours had stirred up.

She’d managed to take a few deep breaths; at least, she didn’t sound like she was gasping for air any longer. She looked at the

man who had burst back into her life, riding to her rescue like the hero he was.

His code of honor was a way of life, dictating how he lived and what he stood for. That's why he was here, to help her, to save Calvin's life and maybe her own. No other reason.

She'd do well to remember that.

FOUR

The trip to the police station was made in near silence. Sal slanted a glance in Olivia's direction. The lines that fanned from her eyes and scoured her forehead were new and emphasized the paleness of her features.

Finding a severed finger in a box was enough to send anyone into shock. Added to that was the threat that the same could happen to her. After the initial fright, she'd handled it with a steely resolve he could only admire, but the experience had taken its toll. The shadows under her eyes had grown darker with every minute.

Olivia needed something—someone—to hold on to. And right now that someone was him. Even though things had ended, he still had feelings for her. Guilt over his past gnawed at him. He couldn't ask someone as full of faith and goodness as Olivia to share that with him. Seeing her beat herself up over what had happened to her boss tore him apart.

He'd do his best by her, if only because he didn't know any other way. Doing his best, giving his best had been drummed into him during his Delta days. Deltas never gave in and never

gave up.

Outside the police station, Sal pulled into a parking slot and turned to Olivia. Going with instinct and need, he placed his hands on her shoulders, drew her in.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” she murmured against his chest. “You heard Calvin. I can’t be responsible for them hurting him again. I can still hear his screams in my mind.”

He felt the shudder race through her and tightened his grip. “You aren’t responsible. For any of it.” He waited until she stopped shaking before releasing her. “Going to the police is the right thing.”

“If you say so.” But her tone lacked conviction.

He wasn’t going to convince her, but neither could they keep evidence of a kidnapping from the police.

Olivia was an officer of the court, but she was also a woman made vulnerable by her feelings. He knew how intensely she felt things. Whether fighting for a client or fighting for a friend, she gave her all. In that respect, they were very much alike.

He wanted to reassure her that everything would be all right, but she would see that for the lie it was. The truth was, there was no guarantee that they would get Chantry back alive. The kidnappers had already proved how far they would go to achieve their ends. The only thing he could promise was that he’d give his own life before he allowed anything to happen to her.

Sal took her hand and squeezed. “Remember, you’re not alone.”

The lack of a ransom demand bothered him. Kidnappers always had an agenda. It was obvious they were trying to rattle Olivia, to frighten her into doing whatever they said when they issued the demand. But why hadn't they done so? It made no sense.

He didn't believe for a moment that the people who had taken Chantry would let the man go once they had what they wanted. If anything, they'd be more likely than ever to kill him, and Olivia as well.

There was something else Sal hadn't told Olivia. They were into day two of the kidnapping, maybe more seeing as how Chantry had been unreachable two days before that. The second day was a threshold. Any possibility of a positive resolution decreased substantially after that. The situation tended to harden up, the danger to the victim rising dramatically.

Sal hadn't shared his worries with Olivia yet. She needed time to regroup before facing the next hard truths.

The police department wasn't filled with bored cops and surly criminals as television shows depicted. Instead, it looked like any other office made up of professional men and women going about their jobs in a purposeful fashion. The occasional shout or cry didn't cause a dozen guns to be drawn. No, the atmosphere was one of grim purpose, flavored with the smells of old coffee and new sweat.

Sal had been in his fair share of PDs during the last several years of working for S&J. They were much like the military,

with a clearly established chain of command and organizational hierarchy.

He steered Olivia to the desk sergeant where they stated their names and business to the efficient-looking woman behind the desk. A raised brow and the order to have a seat was her only response.

When a detective appeared, Olivia and Sal stood, followed him through the bull pen and went inside an office. He closed the door behind them. “Detective Richard Nynan. Now suppose you tell me what this is all about.”

Sal opened the box, indicated the finger inside and gave an overview of what had transpired.

“You say this belongs to your boss?” Nynan asked Olivia.

She nodded. “I recognized the ring.”

“No chance it could have been removed from your boss’s finger and put on—” he gestured to the severed digit “—whoever this belongs to?”

“No. The ring was custom-made for Calvin, I mean, Mr. Chantry, to reach the joint of his finger, just like it does. See how the stone tapers at the top?”

“Okay. That helps.” Nynan made notes on a legal pad. “I think I have it all.” He fixed his attention on Olivia. “You have no idea what the kidnappers want?”

“As I told you the first six times you asked the question, no, I don’t.”

“Sorry. Just trying to get things straight in my mind.” He

put down his pen, scratched behind his ear. “It doesn’t fit the pattern of an ordinary kidnapping. Usually, kidnapers make their demands up front. They want their payoff right away, whether it’s money or something else.” Once again, he looked at Olivia. “This court case you talked about—could the kidnapping have something to do with that?”

“It’s possible,” she said thoughtfully. “If it goes the way I think it will, the company is going to have to pay out a huge compensation package. Twenty-one families are involved.”

“So it’s back to money.”

Sal had remained silent during the exchange, listening and thinking. He saw where the detective was going with this. “You think the kidnapers are going to barter for Chantry’s firm pulling out of the case.”

Nynan nodded. “I think it’s a strong possibility. As Ms. Hammond said, there’s bound to be a big compensation package.”

“But even if we did pull out of the case, some other firm would take over,” Olivia pointed out. “It doesn’t make sense.”

They’d been over this again and again but kept circling back to it.

“Why kidnap Chantry?” Nynan asked, more to himself than to Sal and Olivia. “Why him?” A few minutes later, Nynan stood. “I think I have all that I need for the moment. I’m sorry about your boss,” he said to Olivia.

She nodded. “Me, too.”

Outside, the Georgia sun beat down on those foolish enough to spend more than a minute under its unrelenting rays. Sal hurried Olivia to his truck, helped her inside, then circled it to slide in on the driver's side. He punched up the AC.

"I hope we did the right thing," she said. "What can the police do that we can't?"

"They have resources we can't hope to match."

Her phone chirped. She switched it to speaker phone. "Yes?"

"You disobeyed orders." A pause gave emphasis to the next words. "Involve the police again and your boss will be returned to you in pieces."

* * *

Olivia was barely holding it together.

She knew it. Felt it. First the men in her office threatening her. Then the call about Calvin. The box with his finger. The second call. How much more could she take without falling apart?

In the meantime, she still had a case to try, the most important case of her career. Yes, there'd be some prestige to it. More important, though, was the precedent it would set that no company, however big, could pass off fake medicines for real ones and get away with it.

The parents, she knew, could use the money to pay off astronomical medical bills, but nothing could restore their families, make up for the unthinkable loss they'd endured. No amount could atone for the loss of a child.

"I need to work," she told Sal. Of course, the case needed

work. But more than that, she needed the purpose of it, the satisfaction of making a difference. A smile slid over her lips. Her daddy had always said that when you had a problem, take it to the Lord first, then get to work. He had lived that right up until the end.

“Okay. But I’m staying close.”

Sal’s words reminded her of his innate goodness. He didn’t back down from trouble; nor did he turn away from those in need.

Covertly, Olivia studied the man beside her. Two years ago, she’d thought she’d known him, but then he’d walked away, shattering her dreams and her heart. They’d gone their separate ways. Not without regret, at least on her part. Though she’d dated other men since then, none had touched her heart the way Sal had. None had come close to measuring up to him.

Olivia didn’t deceive herself—she was risking her heart by asking Sal for help. She had briefly thought of calling Shelley Judd instead but had immediately rejected the idea. Shelley was nearing the last month of pregnancy. No way could Olivia involve her friend in this.

She and Sal had shared something special, or at least she thought they had. Shelley had introduced the two of them on one of Olivia’s frequent trips to Atlanta to see her friend.

From that moment on, Olivia had known that this was a man who could become important in her life.

Within a week, they were spending every spare minute together, unwilling to let a moment go by without being close.

They were so attuned to each other that they could finish the other's sentences.

When she had returned to Savannah, Sal had followed. It had been a glorious six weeks of heady happiness and foolish dreams. Then, without warning, he told her that things weren't working out and she'd do better to find someone else. She thought she'd moved on until she'd seen him again and knew that she hadn't moved on at all.

"I don't know what I would have done without you these last two days." The acknowledgment caused her cheeks to redden.

"You would have managed, but I'm glad I was here."

Her stomach did a jittery dance at the warmth of his words. As though aware of her thoughts, he drew her to him and held her. Just held her. Did he know that was what she needed at that precise moment?

And then she remembered her vow to keep him at arm's length. Letting Sal back into her life had been a risk from the beginning. She had to remember why he was here.

Pushing away from him, she gathered strength, but her breathing was ragged. Not from the effort of putting some distance between them but from the knowledge that she needed the distance if she were to maintain her sanity.

Sal had always had that effect on her. It wasn't his size, though that was impressive. It wasn't his unflinching courage that was so much a part of him. It was the overall package, strength tempered by gentleness, honesty and compassion.

She and Sal didn't say much on the way to the office. Once there, she planned to go over depositions while he headed to Calvin's office.

"I want to get a handle on your boss," he said in explanation. "If I learn more about him, maybe I can predict how he'll react to the kidnappers. It might help us down the road."

It made sense. Only a few of the partners and associates had arrived, so she was able to get Sal into Calvin's private office without attracting attention.

Olivia spent the next hour working on witness depositions, preparing motions that would be reviewed by the court and writing a brief. The work was tedious, but it soothed the ragged thoughts that swirled through her mind.

How did the kidnappers know what she was doing practically before she did? How had they known she'd called Sal? How did they know she and Sal had gone to the police? She trusted the employees of Chantry & Hammond implicitly and couldn't imagine any of them kidnapping Calvin, but that didn't answer the question.

In many ways, the law firm was her family. When her father and Calvin had started it decades ago, they'd built more than a business. They'd forged a family of friends. How could she suspect anyone who worked there of spying on her, of abducting Calvin?

She'd lost her father five years ago to a blood clot that had moved from his leg to his heart with frightening speed. It had

been Calvin who had stood beside her at her father's graveside and held her as she wept. She'd turned to him with work and personal problems, depending on his experience and pragmatic nature.

How would she survive if something happened to him? She had to get him back. She had to.

The prayer that sprang to her lips came without thought. Taking her problems to the Lord was second nature, had been since the time she'd been a small child, frightened by one of the sudden thunderstorms that frequently punctuated Georgia summer evenings.

"Whenever you're afraid, there's always Someone you can turn to," her mother had told the then five-year-old Olivia.

"You and Daddy," Olivia said confidently, secure now in her mother's arms.

"Daddy and I may not always be here," her mother said softly. "But the Lord will. Turn to Him. He'll never let you down."

Laura Hammond was gone less than a year later, taken by cancer. Olivia had often wondered if her mother had known even then that her time with her daughter would be limited and had wanted to teach her the importance of going to the Lord in prayer.

Olivia tucked the memories away to focus on the present. Though she'd felt a measure of peace after pouring out her heart to God, she was still gripped by paralyzing fear and the awful knowledge that she was responsible for getting Calvin back.

* * *

Sal had done some thinking of his own. Whoever took Calvin Chantry knew the man, knew what cases he was working on. Chances were that someone at the law firm was involved, at least peripherally.

Sal's lips narrowed at the thought of someone Olivia knew, someone she worked with, putting her through this. Whoever was behind this would pay.

He headed to Olivia's office, found her at her computer, a look of consternation on her face.

"I've written hundreds of briefs before. Why can't I write this one?"

The question didn't need an answer as they both knew why. "I want to do some snooping. I believe one or more of the people in your office is involved in this. The timing fits. It's the only thing that makes sense."

Olivia's denial wasn't as emphatic as he'd expected. He looked at her keenly, saw the doubt in her eyes. "You've already thought of it."

Her nod confirmed it. "You're right. I did. But I can't believe it. Calvin's like a father to everyone there. Many of the people have been here since my father was still alive."

"Think, Olivia." Sal kept his voice quiet but let a thread of steel run through it. "Someone had to know Chantry's schedule. Where and when they could snatch him. That means someone on the inside. Someone he trusted." Sal paused. "Someone you

trust.”

She pressed her fingertips to her eyes. “I can’t believe it. We’re family. We go to birthday parties for each other’s children. We have a Christmas gift exchange and a Fourth of July barbecue.”

Sal sighed. Time for a different tack. “You read the scriptures, right?”

Olivia nodded. “Every night.”

“Then you know that they’re full of stories of brothers killing brothers. Sons killing fathers. Cain and Abel come to mind.”

“That’s different.” There was enough starch in her voice to iron a dozen shirts.

“Is it? Or is it only that you know the people at the office and like them?”

“Okay,” she said, resentment filling her voice. “You win. Someone at the office may have had something to do with Calvin’s kidnapping. How do we find out who it is?” And some of the starch evaporated.

“We’re going to do a little digging. Ask a few questions. See if we make anyone nervous.”

“How’re we going to explain what you’re doing there?”

“We stick to the truth as much as possible and tell everyone I’m here to make security upgrades.”

“I guess that works.”

“We’ll make it work. This is our best chance.” He took her hands, squeezed them gently before releasing them. “I can’t promise that we’ll get your boss back. But I can promise to do

everything I can to make it happen.”

She squared her shoulders. “If spying on my coworkers is what it takes to bring Calvin home safely, then that’s what we’ll do. It doesn’t mean I have to like it.” The starch was back.

“I didn’t think you would.”

FIVE

Olivia introduced Sal as a security expert.

“Bryan Hewston, Salvatore Santonni,” she said to a colleague. “Bryan’s one of the best litigators in the firm.”

Bryan preened a bit. Olivia hadn’t exaggerated. Bryan was a top-notch litigator in the boardroom and the courtroom, but he relied too much on his charm without putting in the necessary work to back up his arguments.

It occasionally made for hard feelings, especially when she had been chosen as lead counsel on the pharmaceutical case over him. She knew he’d wanted the case, primarily for the publicity it would bring along with his part of the settlement, not because he believed in it.

She did. That was why she’d fought for it.

Bryan had been noticeably cool ever since Calvin had assigned the case to her. She’d shrugged it off. There would always be some in-fighting in a law office. She didn’t have to like it to accept the reality of it.

Sal stuck out his hand and, after a brief hesitation, the other man took it. “Glad to meet you.”

“Same here,” Bryan said with his million-watt smile. The man

had charisma by the boatload and knew how to use it. He was great with clients but, in her opinion at least, lacked the discipline to carry through with a case. “Look, Olivia, if this case is too much for you to handle on your own, I can pitch in.”

“No,” she said quickly. “I’m fine.”

He darted a doubtful look her way. She didn’t blame him. A glance in the mirror that morning had confirmed what she already knew. Her naturally fair skin was now paper-white, her features pinched, her eyes like sunken sockets.

“You look a little peaked.”

“Long nights,” she said lightly.

She hoped the worry and fear didn’t show in her voice. She wasn’t adept at lying. Not that it was a skill she wanted to develop, but she occasionally wished that her face didn’t broadcast her every feeling.

“Let me know if you decide you need help,” he said and walked away.

Olivia bit back a sigh that hovered on her lips. It wasn’t the first time he’d insinuated that the workload was too much for her. It probably wouldn’t be the last.

Vicky Newman, another associate and full-time flirt, sashayed over. It didn’t take her long, Olivia thought a bit waspishly, to zero in on Sal. She made the introductions, noting that Vicky made certain that Sal knew she was single within minutes of meeting him.

Though Olivia had nothing against the other woman, Vicky

had been noticeably cool to Olivia ever since she had briefly dated a man Vicky was attracted to. In addition, Vicky, like Bryan, had resented that Olivia had been given the case against the drug company.

Olivia continued the casual introductions until Sal had met everyone, including the mail room delivery man.

“Seems like a decent bunch of people,” he said when they ended up in her office.

“That’s what I told you.” She tried to keep the impatience from her voice, but some of it leaked through. “No one here would hurt Calvin. Or me. It just isn’t possible.” She had to believe that. If not, much of what she held dear was false.

“I’m sorry this hurts you. But we have to look at every possibility.”

“Due diligence and all that. And I’m the one who’s sorry. I shouldn’t have said what I did earlier. I lashed out at you when you were only trying to help. It’s just that Calvin is special. If something happens to him...” Tears stung her eyes, trickled down her cheeks. She swiped at them. “Sorry. Crying isn’t my style.”

“I know.” With that, Sal drew her to him in a one-sided hug. His touch was gentle, but there was a quiet strength to it, reminding her that he was a man a woman could lean on. With that, she pulled away. She wasn’t some helpless woman needing a man. She’d always stood on her own feet and intended on keeping it that way.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes.” No.

“You don’t have to be strong all the time,” Sal said. “Not with me.”

He was wrong. She had always had to be strong. Especially around him.

* * *

Sal started with Hewston. He’d picked up on the lawyer’s barely disguised antagonism toward Olivia.

Hewston was of average height and weight with features that in another era would have been called patrician. He had a tanned and toned look that spelled expensive athletic clubs and time on the links.

His suit bore the quiet elegance of hand tailoring and his shoes appeared to be Italian. Sal didn’t care about fancy clothes or shoes, but he’d learned enough about them while working for S&J Security/Protection to recognize the real thing.

But it wasn’t Hewston’s bespoke clothes or Bruno Maglis that interested Sal. It was the man’s nervous energy that all but vibrated in the air, making Sal suspect the lawyer had something to hide.

The man studied Sal with frankly curious eyes. “So how do you know our Livvie?”

Sal raised a brow. He knew Olivia didn’t share the nickname with many people. That this man used it so casually told Sal that Hewston intentionally wanted to convey a closeness that Sal had determined wasn’t there, based on the coolness in Olivia’s voice

when she'd made the introductions. "We've known each other a few years."

"She's a great gal. A little emotional sometimes. You know women."

Sal didn't react to the obvious dig. Hewston clearly had his own agenda. You learned more by listening than talking, and so Sal let his silence encourage the other man to continue.

"Don't get me wrong. I like Livvie. I like her a lot. The whole office does."

"That's good to hear." Sal waited a beat. "She seems very fond of the head of the firm."

"Yeah. She and Chantry are tight. Nothing romantic, of course. Just good friends. He and her old man started the firm together back in the day."

"So she said." Sal nodded knowingly. "Must be nice to have a foot in the door, so to speak." His tone invited the other man to share.

"Yeah. And let me tell you, she isn't afraid of using her name to get what she wants. Take this case for instance."

"What about it?"

"Olivia wanted it, so Olivia got it. That simple." Bitterness twisted the man's lips.

"You don't think she earned it?"

"No way." Apparently wondering if he'd gone too far, Hewston backpedaled. "I mean, she's a good enough lawyer, but a case that big needs someone with more experience."

“Someone like you?”

“Maybe.” Modesty didn’t sit well on the lawyer’s shoulders. “There’re other lawyers in the firm. Any one of us could have handled the case, but Olivia got it because her last name is Hammond.” Resentment splashed through his voice. He couldn’t hide his true feelings, Sal thought. Not for long.

“Does the rest of the firm feel the same way?” Sal asked.

Hewston darted a quick look around the office. “I couldn’t say.”

* * *

After a lot of thought, Olivia had come to the conclusion that Calvin’s kidnapping had to be connected with the case against the pharmaceutical company. Otherwise, why take him at this particular time?

While Sal talked with her coworkers, she went through the files again, looking for something, anything, that would point to what made this case so important. Sure, the company would lose market shares and a chunk of money if a judgment were filed against it, but such things happened all the time. Other companies had weathered worse setbacks and rebounded.

Two hours later, she sat back and tried without success to rub the kinks from her shoulders. All she’d gotten for her efforts were strained eyes and knotted muscles. What had she expected to find? A big sign saying, “This is what you’re looking for”?

Obviously she wasn’t any good at this investigation stuff, and she hoped Sal had done better. She went in search of him and

found him charming the receptionist.

“Thanks for chatting with me,” he said, and the girl blushed prettily.

Olivia hooked her arm in his as they headed back to her office. “Did you learn anything?” she asked once they were inside with the door not only shut but locked as well. She normally didn’t lock her door, but she didn’t want anyone barging in on them while she and Sal were discussing the members of the firm.

“It seems that not everyone loves Chantry.” Sal checked his notes. “According to a couple of the secretaries and a law clerk, Hewston made no secret of the fact that he thought Chantry was too old and set in his ways to lead the company.”

Through the door’s window she saw Bryan talking with one of the other associates. “Bryan was passed over for a partnership last year. For the third time. Rumor had it that he was ready to quit, but he didn’t have anywhere to go. So he’s still here.”

“What do you think of him?”

“He’s competent enough. Good at the grip-and-greet thing with clients, but he lacks follow-through.”

Sal hiked a brow. “Not much of a recommendation.”

“Bryan knows his stuff, but he tends to be lazy when it comes to doing the pre-trial work like looking up precedents and putting motions before the court.”

“What about you? Do you mind that you’re not a partner?”

“I’m not ready,” she said easily. “Someday. When the time is right. In the meantime, I enjoy what I’m doing.”

“Your father helped found the firm. That should count for something.”

“It does. For him.” She felt the familiar defenses slide into place. “I don’t trade on my father’s name. That’s not who I am.”

“No,” Sal said. “It’s not.”

“Then why’d you ask?”

“I wanted to hear you say it.”

They spent the next hour going over Sal’s impressions of the office personnel with Olivia filling in details where she could.

“What about Newman? She looks hungry. Like she wants whatever someone else has.”

“Hungry’s a good way to describe her. She’s poached other people’s clients when she could. But kidnapping?” Olivia stopped, thought about it. “Maybe. She hasn’t made a secret of the fact that she wants to be more than an associate.”

“You know these people. Know what makes them tick. Would any of them be willing to sell out Chantry for a big payday?”

“I don’t want to believe it. But maybe...” She thought of the designer bags that Vicky carried to work, the flashy car that Bryan drove. Neither of them could afford those on their salaries. “They might.”

Sal nodded. “I thought so. I spotted the Kate Spade bag.”

Olivia couldn’t contain her spurt of surprise. “You know Kate Spade handbags?”

“I have three sisters. They’ll live on ramen soup for six months if it means they can buy a genuine Kate Spade. Our brother,

Nicco, calls them purse snobs.”

She heard the amusement in the words, but there was more. There was real love, causing her to recall her childhood wish for a sister. Or a brother. It hadn't mattered.

“You're fortunate to have your sisters and brother.”

“We Santonnis are a loud, bossy bunch. I'll take you to meet them one day—” He stopped abruptly.

He was remembering the same thing she was, she thought, a pang of regret spearing through her. Two years ago, they'd planned a trip to meet his family.

It had never happened.

“What about you?” he asked. “Are you into designer handbags?”

Olivia shook her head and patted her battered briefcase. “Daddy gave this to me when I graduated from law school. It's getting pretty beat-up, but I always carry it.” Her voice caught. “It reminds me of him.

“I have to get back to work,” she said, the huskiness of her voice at odds with the teasing note of earlier.

“Yeah. And I should be talking with more of your coworkers. See what I can learn.”

He closed the door behind him, leaving Olivia feeling more alone than ever. Without her knowing how it had happened, Sal was starting to become important to her all over again. The question was, what was she going to do about it?

By the end of the day, Sal had a pretty good handle on Chantry & Hammond's personnel. There was the flirt. The jealous coworker. The ambitious partners. For the most part, they fit neatly into categories.

He'd do background checks on each, including any criminal history. It wasn't difficult to figure out that several members of the law firm were living beyond their means.

He'd zeroed in on Bryan Hewston and Vicky Newman. A call to Shelley netted him the information that Newman came from money and had a substantial trust fund. Okay, that explained the designer bags and clothes. Hewston was another matter. It wasn't clear, Shelley told him, where his money came from. She promised to do more digging.

"Thanks, boss."

"Take care of Olivia. From what you've said, she's in over her head."

"You know I will."

"I wish I could be there, but I can hardly tie my own shoes, much less chase down bad guys."

Sal gave the expected chuckle, but his mind wasn't really on what Shelley was saying. He was too busy trying to convince himself that he didn't still have feelings for Olivia, before giving it up as a lost cause. Mixing personal and private matters was a recipe for disaster, so he was determined to keep things strictly professional.

That was the way to go. The only way to go.

He'd insisted on accompanying her to the Savannah courthouse and seeing her home at the end of the day. In between chatting up her coworkers, he'd found a motel, stashed his duffel bag there. He could have stayed at his parents' place or with his brother, Nicco, but he preferred having the freedom of movement that a motel room offered.

Though he'd grown up in Savannah, he'd kept his distance from his family since his return from Afghanistan. The past kept tripping him up. He'd hidden the darker parts from his family as well as Olivia.

He knew he needed to make time to see his family. Until then, he contented himself with a phone call to his parents, assuring them that he was all right and would see them once the case was resolved.

He now waited at the side entrance to the courthouse as they'd agreed.

Heels clicking on the marble floor, Olivia made her way to where he stood. He took in the defeated expression on her face.

"A setback in court?"

"Waterloo was a setback. This was a disaster." She tried a smile, but it barely made it to her lips. "I let everyone down." Her shoulders slumped. "Especially the parents. They're depending on me."

"You're too hard on yourself. Always tilting at windmills."

"That's what windmills are for."

He understood that defending the underdog was what had

made her want to be a lawyer in the first place. “You’ll get ’em tomorrow.”

“I hope so. I have to.” Her voice hardened. “What the company did to those children is as good as murder. And that’s what I’ll take it down for.”

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