

LINDA
WARREN



THE RIGHT
WOMAN

Cherish

Linda Warren

The Right Woman

Аннотация

Sarah Welch didn't know she had a twin until five years ago, when a string of events led her through the seedy underbelly of Dallas to the family she didn't know she had. Sarah has spent those five years trying to forget what she went through - forget the man who was gunned down, the criminal she helped put behind bars and the cop who saved her life. Now Sarah is in danger once again. And while this time she's able to confide her fears to her twin sister, there's only one person who can truly help her - Daniel Garrett, the cop who never stopped loving her. Working by Daniel's side to stop a killer, Sarah begins to accept Daniel as part of her past. And part of her future...

Содержание

“I thought I would love Greg forever, but...”	4
The Right Woman	6
Acknowledgments	7
CONTENTS	8
CHAPTER ONE	9
CHAPTER TWO	26
CHAPTER THREE	41
CHAPTER FOUR	58
CHAPTER FIVE	75
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	81

“I thought I would love Greg forever, but...”

“But what?” Daniel asked.

“But now I get angry. He knew how dangerous his mission was and he still let me go along. I shouldn’t have been there.”

“No, you shouldn’t have.”

Again Sarah was surprised she was telling Daniel this. She hadn’t even told Serena. “I’m not blameless, though. I can be persuasive sometimes, and Greg had a hard time saying no to me.”

“I can imagine. I get angry at him, too, for taking you into that situation. He must have been so blind in love that he ignored the dangers.”

“That’s just it,” she said. “If he really loved me, why would he do that?”

Daniel turned from the window. “I don’t have an answer for you.” All Daniel knew was that he would never expose her to that kind of danger—even if it meant he’d never see her again for the rest of his life.

Dear Reader,

For those of you who have written and e-mailed me to ask about Sarah’s story, this is it. Sarah was first introduced in *The Wrong Woman* (Harlequin Superromance #1125) as the

identical twin of Serena.

Separated at birth, the sisters met for the first time when they were thirty-one years old. Their personalities were very different—Serena was sweet and outgoing while Sarah was quiet and reserved. It took time for me to plot Sarah's life, but once I started the story quickly took shape. Sarah struggles to overcome her turbulent past and has to adjust to having a real family and an identical sister. Finding the perfect man for her wasn't easy, but one man kept coming back into her life—Daniel Garrett. But there was one problem—Sarah didn't like Daniel. So the tug of emotions began and Sarah's story became more emotional than I'd planned.

I've never wanted two characters to find happiness as much as Sarah and Daniel. As you read their story I hope you will feel the same.

Warmly,

Linda Warren

You can contact me at www.lindawarren.net, www.superauthors.com, lw1508@aol.com, or you can write me at P.O. Box 5182, Bryan, TX 77805. Your letters will always be answered.

The Right Woman

Linda Warren



In this book there is a little girl who lights up the world.
I dedicate this book to the little girls who brighten my life
with their special personalities (the great ones):
Jaci Siegert, Emily Robertson, Reagan Phillips,
Cassidy Siegert, Jamie Siegert, Taylor Tharp,
Hunter Phillips, Megan Rychlik and Charity Patranella.
And to the new additions to our family,
Jessica Reagan and Nikki Herring.

Acknowledgments

I'd like to acknowledge the following people for sharing their expert knowledge so graciously: Kristen Tubbs, LPC-I, Laurie SoRell, M.A., and Laurie and Lee Fay for answering my endless questions about Dallas.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

EPILOGUE

CHAPTER ONE

NOT AGAIN.

Sarah Welch rushed through the emergency room doors, her heart slamming against her ribs so hard that she had to stop to catch her breath.

Another rape.

As a licensed professional counselor in private practice with Dr. Karen Mason, psychologist, she should be used to this. It was her job to provide the hospital with assistance for the victims of violent crimes. But some things were impossible to get used to.

It would have to happen while Karen was away, Sarah thought as she tried to locate a nurse. There was no one at the desk so she hurried down the hall. She loved her work, but at times she felt so inadequate, especially when she came face-to-face with the person—the victim. In truth, though, this was her specialty. She'd once been a victim and knew the crippling fear that overtook the body, mind and soul.

“May I help you?”

Sarah turned toward the voice. “Yes. I’m Sarah Welch with Dr. Mason’s office. Dr. Daley called about a rape victim.”

“Oh, yes.” The nurse shifted the charts in her arms. “The doctor is waiting for you. Come this way.”

The nurse opened a door and Sarah followed her into the sectioned-off emergency area. She stiffened when out of the

corner of her eye she noticed Daniel Garrett and a couple of police officers standing to one side. She didn't spare them a glance.

What is Daniel doing here?

Every time she saw him something in her unwillingly froze. He was a reminder of the past—a past she wanted to forget. She quickly wiped him from her mind as she walked up to Dr. Daley.

“Hi, Sarah,” Jim Daley said, scribbling in a chart. “Karen out of town?”

“Yes. She'll be back on Monday.”

“That's too late.” Dr. Daley gave her the chart. “I need someone to talk to this girl now. She's been severely traumatized. Physically she'll be fine, but I'm concerned about her mental state. She's not responding to anyone and she refuses to see her parents.”

“How is she otherwise?”

“The rapist almost killed her and would have if someone hadn't interrupted him. He banged her up pretty bad. Her neck is black and blue from attempted strangulation and her voice is hoarse from the injury.” He took a breath. “Her name is Brooke Wallace and she's eighteen.”

“Oh, no.” There it was. That familiar chill running up her spine.

“The rape kit has been done and the police are waiting,” Dr. Daley added, glancing toward the policemen. “This is the third rape in two months in the same area. Brooke is the first victim

to survive. The other two girls died at the scene so the police are eager to talk to this one.”

“I see,” Sarah murmured, trying to control an attack of nerves.

That still didn’t explain what Daniel was doing here. He worked narcotics. What did he have to do with this case?

Opening the chart, she began to read. Now she understood why Daniel had been called in. The rapist had given the girl an injection of heroin, a fact not mentioned in news coverage of the other rapes, and Daniel was an expert on drugs and drug dealers in Dallas. He knew every small-time pusher and the big drug lords like...

“We have her in one of the rooms.” Jim’s voice penetrated her thoughts. “Earlier she was thrashing around, almost violent. We’re not sure how much heroin he gave her—waiting on the toxicology report—so I was hesitant about giving her anything. We’re flushing out her system and she’s calmer now, lying in a fetal position, unresponsive. Just see if you can get her to talk to you.”

“I’ll try.”

“Her parents are in the waiting room, frantic, but when I mentioned they were here, she became even more hysterical. Try to get her to see them.”

Sarah nodded and walked into the small room. The girl was just as Jim had said, curled into herself and staring off into space. An IV was in her arm. Memories dark and deep stirred, a reminder of a time when she, too, needed to shut out the world

and everyone in it. Still, there were sleepless nights and days that tortured her...

She pushed away those debilitating emotions and moved to the side of the bed.

DANIEL WATCHED SARAH until she disappeared into the room. She wore a dark business suit with a blouse buttoned to the top, her red hair coiled neatly at her nape. Every time he'd seen her in the past five years, she'd looked the same—nunlike. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't disguise her beauty; copper-red hair, porcelain skin, gorgeous blue eyes and a body that women envied and men fantasized about.

He shifted uncomfortably. Thoughts of Sarah Welch filled a lot of his sleepless nights. He never quite understood why—but then again, he did. It was good old-fashioned guilt and it gnawed away at him, especially when she ignored him as she had a few minutes ago.

She disliked him intensely, that was all too obvious. She held him responsible for her fiancé's death. Greg Larson, a member of his narcotics squad, had been killed while doing undercover work. Sarah had witnessed the murder and been kidnapped by the drug lord, Rudy Boyd, and forced to strip in one of his clubs. After being rescued, it had taken her a while to recover from the traumatic events.

The sad part was that Sarah should never have been put in that situation. Greg had broken the rules by exposing Sarah to danger, and that's what bothered Daniel. He had failed in his role

as leader. He had failed Greg and Sarah by not making Greg understand how dangerous the mission was and how breaking the rules, no matter how tempting, was out of the question. That was a burden he was never going to lose. The guilt of losing one of his own because he hadn't known Greg's secret activities—that he was in love and foolish enough to involve his girlfriend in his job.

“Goddammit, can you believe this?” Homicide Detective Russ Devers interrupted his reverie.

Daniel straightened from leaning against the wall. “What are you talking about?”

“Sarah Welch went into the girl's room.”

“I know. I saw her.”

“Any chance of us getting to question the girl tonight just got blown to hell.”

“Don't be so damn eager, Russ,” Daniel said. “The girl's been through a horrendous ordeal and she needs some private time with someone that understands.”

Russ's eyes darkened. “Whose side are you on?”

“Justice,” Daniel told him. “I'm always on the side of justice.”

“Yeah, fat chance of that happening with the victim's number one advocate on the case.”

“Sarah's been there, Russ. She's knows what it's like to be a victim, to be abused, so cut her some slack.”

Russ started to pace. “Why the hell can't Ms. Welch understand that the faster we catch this creep, the less victims there'll be? The first few hours after the attack are crucial. The

memory is still fresh in her mind and she could give us important information. We have two girls dead and not one damn clue as to who's doing this. We need something, Daniel, and we need it fast."

"I'm aware of that. That's why I'm here in the middle of the night."

Russ stopped pacing to stare at Daniel. "The needle in the girl's arm throws me. You can't think of any MO that matches?"

Daniel shook his head. "The rapist gives the girl a dose of heroin and leaves the needle in her arm. We've never had anything like that before. Rudy Boyd was the big heroin dealer in Dallas and now he's on death row. My team is investigating the other known heroin dealers and I've checked out the small-time hoods that followed Boyd, but they're all clean." Daniel shoved his hands into his jeans' pockets. "We just have to wait. We'll get to talk to the girl."

"Yeah, even Ms. Colder Than Ice can't stall us forever."

Daniel grimaced at the nickname the cops had given Sarah. It was well known that Sarah Welch fought fiercely for a victim's protection from further trauma. This kept the police from getting vital information when they needed it, but somehow Daniel couldn't fault her motives. He understood her reasons and he understood her. Oh, God, he had to stop thinking about Sarah Welch.

SARAH PULLED A CHAIR UP to the bed and sat facing Brooke. She was blond, blue-eyed and pretty. And so very young.

Go by the book. Go by all the techniques you've learned on how to handle victims like this. Sarah kept repeating the words, but she recognized this was not a textbook case. This girl needed someone who could empathize. Sarah had been there and now she'd have to share a part of herself that she hadn't shared with anyone except her twin sister, Serena. That was the only way to help Brooke Wallace.

"Hi, Brooke," she said. "I'm Sarah Welch, a counselor."

No response. Not even a blink.

"I know you don't want to talk, but I'm here if you want to."

Nothing.

Suddenly, Brooke's bottom lip trembled and tears rolled from her eyes. Sarah waited, trying not to stare at the bruises on Brooke's body. Her neck was purple and blue and the skin had been broken in several places from blunt pressure. There were dark spots on her face and arms, too. Sarah realized how lucky Brooke was to be alive, but she was very aware the girl wasn't ready to hear that.

"I wish I had some magic words to make you feel better. All I can say with certainty is that the pain will lessen as each day passes."

Still no response.

"You might wonder how I can say that." She swallowed, dredging up the courage to keep talking, to keep pushing, gently. "I don't share this with many people, but I was once abused by a man and I know what you're feeling right now. You want to die.

You wish you were dead. You even pray that you will die. Death is preferable to what you're feeling.”

Brooke's eyes focused on Sarah. “You were raped?” Her voice was raspy.

This is what Sarah wanted—a response. Now she had to follow through. “I was kidnapped by a drug dealer who murdered my fiancé in front of me. He didn't rape me physically, but he raped my mind and my soul.” Her breath was trapped in her chest and she had to take a moment. “He...he forced me to strip in one of his clubs and he made me strip in front of him and he...he touched me in ways a woman fears, dreads—against her will.”

“Did you feel dirty?”

“Yes.”

“I do, too. I want to take a bath to wash his smell from my body, to wash everything away. But it will still be there, won't it?”

“Only if you let it.”

“How do I stop it?”

“By letting people, your family, help you.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I can't see my parents.”

“Why?”

“Because this is my fault. They said I couldn't go to the party, so I lied and said I was spending the night at my friend's house, then my friend and I went to the party.”

“Right now your parents are more worried than angry with you. They need to see that you're okay.” Sarah didn't know Brooke's parents. She was going on how most parents would

react.

Brooke didn't say anything, just plucked at the sheet with her fingers.

"This is how you start to get better—by facing life again. Your parents love you, don't shut them out."

"Mom said I could always talk to her about anything, but I don't think I can talk about...about..."

"You don't have to," Sarah assured her. "They only need to see you."

Dr. Daley stuck his head in the door and motioned Sarah outside. Sarah stood. "I'll be right back."

An anxious expression came over Brooke's face. "You won't leave, will you?"

"No. I'm just going to speak with the doctor."

Brooke was responding, asking questions. That was good, very good.

Sarah met Jim outside the door. "The police are getting antsy and want to question Brooke. I told the detective it's up to you, so you might want to speak with them."

"Fine," Sarah replied and walked to where Daniel, another detective and Russ Devers stood. She'd dealt with Russ before. He was a macho, take-no-prisoners type of cop who never quite understood how his brusqueness affected a traumatized person. She didn't like him. The other man, she didn't know. Daniel, she knew—too well.

"When can we see her?" Russ asked point-blank before she

even reached them.

“I’m not sure. I—”

“Listen, Ms. Welch,” Russ interrupted in a scathing tone. “This girl is the only person alive who can tell us anything about the rapist. That sicko is on the loose and we need information and we need it now. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, I understand you, Detective Devers, but if you go barging in there and bombard her with questions, she’ll shut down completely and you won’t get a thing. She won’t talk to her parents and she’s barely talking to me. I need more time.”

“Goddammit.” Russ swung away in anger.

“Calm down, Russ.” Daniel looked at Sarah.

She felt her insides tighten. She’d seen that compassionate gaze before and she didn’t need Daniel’s concern, nor did she want it.

“Sarah, it’s crucial that we speak with her,” Daniel said. “Two girls are dead and she’s the only link the detectives have to the rapist. We need your help here.”

Sarah knew how the cops felt about her and it didn’t bother her. What bothered her was their disregard of the victim’s feelings. What they didn’t realize was that she wanted the creep off the streets as much as they did. They just disagreed on how to go about doing it. In this case, though, she was aware that time was of the essence.

“I’ll see what I can do.” With that, she went back to Brooke.

BROOKE WAS IN THE SAME POSITION, but this time

she turned when Sarah entered. Before Sarah could say a word, Brooke said, “They want me to talk, don’t they?”

“Yes, the police are waiting.”

“I can’t,” Brooke cried. “Please don’t make me.”

Sarah resumed her seat and reached through the bed rail for the girl’s trembling hand. “I’m not going to make you do anything you don’t want to do.”

Brooke took a deep breath and Sarah tried to think of a way to reassure her yet convey how imperative it was for her to talk. “Have you read anything about the other rapes in the paper?”

“Yes. He killed them.”

“That’s right, and he will continue with his crimes until he’s caught.”

“You mean, he’ll rape another girl?”

“He’s what’s known as a serial rapist and he won’t stop until he’s put behind bars.”

The silence dragged as Brooke thought about the situation. “They want my help, but I don’t know anything.”

“You might and not realize it.”

“Did you have to tell your story?”

“Yes,” Sarah said. It had taken all the courage she had.

“I—I...” Brooke stopped and started again. “I don’t think I can, but I don’t want this to happen to another girl and...”

“And what?”

“Will you stay with me while I talk to them?”

A sigh of relief escaped Sarah. “Yes, I’ll be right here.”

“Okay,” Brooke said. “I want the police to catch him.”

Sarah patted her hand. “I’ll get them.”

Outside the room, she addressed all three detectives. “She’ll see you, but please take it slow and don’t push her.”

“Ah, Ms. Welch, I wouldn’t think of doing that,” Russ replied with his usual sarcastic wit.

Sarah didn’t respond as they entered the room, but she went to the girl and held her hand. “Brooke, this is Detective Devers and Detective Garrett. I’m sorry—” she glanced at the other cop “—I didn’t catch your name.”

“Joel Sims, ma’am.”

“They’re going to ask you some questions.”

“Okay,” Brooke replied.

Daniel decided to take the lead and stepped in front of Russ. “Can you tell us what happened, Miss Wallace?”

Russ glared at him, but he didn’t care. Russ had no tact, no propriety. After seeing the shattered innocence in the girl’s eyes, Daniel broke the rules for the first time in his career. He knew this wasn’t his case—it was Russ’s job to do the questioning. But the sight of this traumatized girl made him protective, gentle.

Brooke’s hand gripped Sarah’s. “I—I went to this party and there were older college students there doing drugs, drinking and having...and having sex. The party wasn’t like I thought it would be and I was uncomfortable and left. As I was walking to my car someone grabbed me and pulled me in the bushes and...”

Daniel waited a minute, then said, “I know this is difficult, but

we need to hear what happened next.”

Sarah squeezed her hand and Brooke continued. “I screamed and he hit me a couple of times and told me to shut up. I kept screaming, but no one heard me because the music was so loud. Then he...” Brooke visibly swallowed. “He ripped my clothes off and something stung my arm then he...he pushed my legs apart...and...he hurt me. He hurt me.” Brooke wept silently and her body trembled.

Silence filled the room.

“It’s okay, Brooke,” Sarah said, comforting her, rubbing her arm. “Can you continue?”

Brooke nodded and brushed away tears. “When...when he was through, I felt something around my neck and it grew tighter and tighter and I couldn’t breathe. I was choking and he was laughing...then someone began talking by the parked cars and he let go and ran off. I tried to scream, but my throat was too sore. I managed to get up and I was dizzy and felt weird. I stumbled over to a couple talking by their car and they called 9-1-1.”

“Did you recognize the man?” Daniel asked.

“No. It was dark and I was scared.”

“Besides telling you to shut up, did he say anything else?”

“He, uh, kept asking how I liked it. Did I like it now? It...it was awful and I was sick to my stomach with revulsion. Please, I can’t talk about it anymore.”

“It’s okay,” Daniel told her. He glanced at Russ and received a cold stare in return. Russ wasn’t pleased with Daniel’s

intervention and Daniel didn't care—sometimes he had to do what he felt was right.

Russ moved to the bed. “Then let's back up to the party. Was there anyone there you knew?”

“Yes. My friend, Whitney, and I went together, but she left with some guy.”

“Any other people?”

“Yes, several students from the university.”

“Did you speak with them?” Russ was doing his usual—firing questions. The girl seemed to be holding up, though.

“Yes.”

“What about?”

“Mostly about drugs. Everyone was doing them and they wanted me to do them, too, but I told them I didn't do drugs.”

“Who are they?”

“A guy named Neal, and Brian Colley who gave the party.” Russ and Joel scribbled names on a pad.

“Anyone else?”

“An older guy who brought the drugs, but I don't know his name. Neal pointed him out to me and said he was going to be offended if I didn't participate. I refused again and left.”

“Now think, Miss Wallace,” Russ instructed. “You heard the voices at the party. Can you identify any of those voices as the rapist's?”

Brooke shook her head. “No. I was so scared. I don't know who he was.”

“Are you sure?” Russ kept pushing.

Brooke nodded.

“Now, Miss Wallace, that’s hard to believe, you spoke to several guys at the party. Surely you can remember something.”

“I can’t.”

“Did you drink anything at the party?”

“A glass of wine.”

“Did you make out with anyone?”

Brooke’s face crumbled. “No.”

“You did nothing but watch. You didn’t participate in—”

“The questions are over,” Sarah broke in. “She’s told you all she knows.”

“Ms. Welch...”

“The questions are over, Detective Devers,” she repeated firmly.

Russ’s eyes narrowed.

“Thank you for your cooperation, Miss Wallace.” Daniel intervened before Russ could do any damage.

“Please catch him.”

“We’ll do our best.”

The trio left the room. In the hall, Russ turned on Daniel. “Don’t you ever do that to me again. I’m the lead detective on this case and you were way out of line taking over the questioning. You’re only here for your expert knowledge, that’s it.”

Daniel held up both hands. “I realize that, but you have as much tact as a telemarketer.”

“Don’t start with me, Daniel, or I’ll report you.”

“Go ahead. I’ve had about all I can stomach of this job.”

Joel stepped between them. “Let’s put the personalities aside and concentrate on what we’ve just learned.”

“Yeah.” Russ jammed his notebook into his pocket. “Now we locate Brian Colley and get a list of everyone at the party. Our rapist was there and I have a feeling Miss Wallace knows him. If Ms. Colder Than Ice hadn’t stuck her two cents in, I’d have gotten it out of her.”

Daniel was stunned at Russ’s insensitivity, but he didn’t say anything. Words would be wasted on Russ.

Russ and Joel started toward the door. Russ turned back. “Daniel, we’re through with your expert knowledge. I’ll inform your lieutenant that we don’t need your help anymore.”

“Fine,” Daniel replied. The two men stared at each other in stony silence. Russ was the first to look away and he hurried toward Joel.

DANIEL LET OUT a long sigh of frustration, trying to get Brooke Wallace’s story out of his head, trying not to see the look in Sarah’s eyes. He was tired. Tired of crime. Tired of dealing with cops like Russ. Tired of the bad guys always winning. He was just tired in general and he knew he was at a point in his career where he had to make a decision.

He raised his head and saw Sarah talking to a couple, obviously Brooke’s parents. When they went inside the room, Sarah sank into one of the chairs in the hall and buried her face

in her hands. Daniel's chest expanded at the defeated picture. He remembered the day he'd pulled her, barely breathing, pale and terrified, out of Rudy Boyd's closet. He hadn't known if she'd ever make it back to the real world after what Boyd had done to her. But she'd been a fighter, just as he sensed Brooke Wallace was, and she had rebounded with strength and determination.

Sarah had been the star witness for the prosecution in Boyd's trial and she had held up beautifully, as she had in the appeal, making sure Boyd paid for Greg's death. Mentally, though, he wondered how strong she was. Looking at her now, he feared she hadn't fully recovered.

Unable to stop himself, he headed toward her. He knew he shouldn't. He was the last person she wanted to speak to and although he didn't understand why, now he had to talk to her. He'd always thought it best to leave her alone, but tonight he didn't heed his instincts.

Since Sarah had been a witness at Boyd's trial, they'd been thrown together numerous times and he'd encountered her on several occasions in the years that had followed. On each encounter she treated him the same, with disguised disdain. They had to talk. He recognized this wasn't the time or the place, but he was tired of putting it off, just like he was tired of so many things in his life. Tonight Sarah Welch was going to tell him to his face why she hated him.

Then he could forget he'd ever known her.

CHAPTER TWO

SARAH BRACED HERSELF as Daniel sat beside her. What did he want? Why couldn't he just leave? It had been a horrific night and she didn't want to talk. If she looked at him, she'd see that expression he always wore when he was around her.

"Are you okay?" Daniel asked softly.

There it was—that worried tone. She restrained herself from gritting her teeth. "Yes, I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?" She raised her head, but didn't look at him. She just wanted him to go away and to leave her with her thoughts.

"Well, a young girl's life has been altered forever and I can see it has affected you."

This time Sarah gritted her teeth; she couldn't help herself. Then she calmly answered, "I'm human and what Brooke Wallace has just endured would affect anyone."

"But for you it's different."

She clenched her jaw so tight that it hurt. Go away, Daniel. Please go away.

Daniel could sense that she wanted him to leave and normally he would, but not tonight. Tonight they were going to talk even if those frosty blue eyes chilled him to the bone.

He took a deep breath and clasped his hands between his knees. "Why do you hate me so much?"

"I don't hate you."

“You’re stiff as a board and you won’t look at me. That’s not a positive, happy-to-see-you reaction.”

A tangible pause followed.

“Okay, Daniel.” Those cool eyes looked directly at him. “You make me uncomfortable, but it has nothing to do with you personally. You remind me of the past and when I see you, I relive that awful time. I just want to forget it. But you’re always there with your worried glances, asking how I am. I don’t need you to be concerned about me. I’m fine, and I think it would be best if we stayed away from each other.”

He’d asked and he’d gotten his answer. It was the reaction he’d been expecting so he didn’t understand why he couldn’t leave it alone—leave her alone. But he couldn’t wait any longer. Everything had to be brought out into the open then maybe he could let go of whatever the hell was bothering him.

“There’s another reason, isn’t there?”

“Like what?” Her eyes never wavered from his.

“Greg.”

She looked away.

“You blame me for his death.” He said the one thing that had stood between them for the past five years.

She bit her lip. “You were his boss, his leader. Why wasn’t someone there to help him? Why wasn’t someone there to save his life?”

“Greg volunteered to go undercover in the strip clubs to nail Rudy Boyd. A personal bodyguard doesn’t come with undercover

work. It's dangerous. We all know the risks and we gladly take them to get scum like Boyd off the streets." He took a long breath. "You're right about one thing, though. Greg's death is my fault. I should have been on top of his activities, but I didn't have a clue you were with him. That's something I'll never be able to forget."

When she didn't say anything, he stood. "So we'll agree to stay out of each other's lives. That shouldn't be too hard because I'm quitting the force."

Her head jerked up. "You're quitting the force?"

Daniel hadn't made his final decision until this very moment. Talking to Sarah, hearing the pain still evident in her voice, he made his choice—one he'd been wrestling with for months.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

He shoved his hands into his pockets. "I'm burned out and I've had my fill of seeing victims like Brooke Wallace. The good guys are losing and there's nothing I can do about it. I just have to get away."

"I hope it's not because of something I said."

"Don't worry, Sarah. I have a very thick skin." He glanced toward Brooke's door. "I hope you're able to help her."

Sarah followed his gaze. "Me, too."

His eyes caught hers. "But who's going to help you?"

She glanced down at her hands. "You're doing it again."

"Yeah," he sighed. "I'm sorry. It's just part of my nature, but

I can see you haven't dealt with the past."

"That doesn't concern you." She gripped her hands together.

"You're right about that, too. Just remember that Rudy Boyd isn't worth the pain you're putting yourself through."

"I..."

"Goodbye, Sarah. Have a good life." He turned and headed for the emergency room doors.

Outside, he sucked the frigid January air into his lungs, letting it cool the heated emotions inside him. For the first time in ages he felt good about himself. He wasn't exactly clear about the future. He might take a cruise or go fishing on the Texas coast. He just wanted to get away from the darker side of life and to find some sunshine. He wanted to laugh, to feel happiness again. All that was out there—he just had to find what was right for him.

Zippering his bomber jacket, he headed for his car thinking that, at forty, a man shouldn't have to find himself. He should already know who he was. But all Daniel felt was a discontentment he couldn't shake. And Sarah Welch had been a big part of that.

Now he planned to put her out of his mind, out of his future.

SARAH WATCHED DANIEL leave with mixed feelings. She didn't want to run into him all the time, but she didn't want him to quit his job, either. He was a good cop—even she knew that. An uneasiness settled in her stomach as she hoped she'd had nothing to do with his decision. But she felt she had.

She picked up her purse and slipped the strap over her shoulder. She'd had this strange relationship with Daniel since

her involvement with Greg and Boyd.

Relationship? She wasn't sure what else to call it. All of a sudden, he was in her life. He was kind, understanding and supportive of the trauma she'd been through—and that's what irritated her. She obviously blamed him for Greg's death. That had become clearer as the years had passed. She knew, though, that it hadn't been Daniel's fault. She and Greg had lied to him. Daniel had no idea she'd been living in the apartment with Greg, who had gone to great lengths to ensure Daniel wouldn't find out. Daniel would never have allowed her to be in that situation. She'd wondered several times over the past years why Greg had. Love. They'd been so in love that nothing else had mattered—not even their safety.

He'd been her fiancé, yet she couldn't even conjure up Greg's face anymore. It was a blur, just the way she wanted the past to be. She'd made so many mistakes.

At thirty-one she should have been wiser, should have been more attuned to the danger Greg had put her in. But sometimes emotions were hard to control. Like now, at thirty-six, she was beginning to acknowledge that she'd made another mistake in blaming Daniel for Greg's death. She'd been more responsible than Daniel. She'd been the one to persuade Greg to let her tag along. And Rudy Boyd... Nauseating feelings welled in her stomach at the mere thought of him. Sometimes when she closed her eyes, she could feel his disgusting hands on her body. She fought the image—as she always did.

She swallowed, admitting something else to herself: Daniel's kindness irritated her because he shouldn't be kind to her at all. He should be upset with her for her involvement. Yet he'd never said a word. That was Daniel, though. He was as gentle and caring with Brooke as he'd been with Sarah. If Daniel left, there'd be too many cops like Russ Devers in charge.

Now what did she do? She didn't want to talk to him yet she didn't want him to quit his job, either. That left only one option.

Daniel Garrett, why can't you stay out of my life?

Mr. and Mrs. Wallace came out of the room and Sarah turned her attention to them. Bob Wallace walked off down the hall, a shattered expression on his face, and Lois came up to her.

"I want to stay with my daughter, but she said for me to go home. I'm not sure what to do."

"If she wants you to go home, then that's probably best," Sarah told the woman whose eyes were filled with tears.

"I don't want her to be alone." Lois twisted her hands in agitation.

"I'll stay until she falls asleep," Sarah offered.

"Thank you. That makes me feel better." Lois glanced toward her husband. "Bob's having a difficult time. She's his little girl, his tomboy. She does everything with her father—fishing, riding four-wheelers and the yard work." Lois wiped at her eyes. "I'm not sure how to help him. I don't even know how to handle the rage inside myself."

"It will take time, Mrs. Wallace. Just be there for each other

and for Brooke. Listen and be supportive without being critical.”

“I’ll try. I don’t understand why this happened to my daughter. She’s a good kid. She’s never given us any problems and now...” Her words trailed away.

Sarah put a comforting arm around her, realizing for the first time that this was probably how Celia and Gran felt after her rescue from Boyd. They’d wanted her to talk, but she would only talk to Serena. She hoped they’d be as patient with Brooke as her family had been with her.

“We have two more daughters at home. What do I tell them?”

“Just be honest and reassuring.”

Lois wiped her eyes again. “Please help my daughter.”

Sarah patted her shoulder. “I’ll do my best.”

Lois nodded, walked to where her husband stood, and they left the emergency area.

Dr. Daley motioned to Sarah. “I got the toxicology report back—a very small trace of heroin. Evidently she must have been fighting so hard he couldn’t get a full dose into her arm. I just gave her a sedative so she should be asleep soon.”

“Thanks, Jim. I’ll check on her.”

She took a deep breath and entered the room. Brooke was back in a fetal position staring at the wall. Sarah sat in the chair by the bed.

“Did they leave?” Brooke asked.

“Yes. Your parents have gone home.”

“My father...he...he couldn’t even look at me.”

“He’s just upset at what’s been done to you and your life. You’re still his little girl.”

“No, I’m not.” Brooke pleted the sheet with her bruised fingers. “I’m not a girl anymore. That’s been taken from me. I’m different now. Daddy knows it and I know it.”

“I’m not going to lie and sugarcoat what’s happened to you. Life will be different and it’s up to you how different it will be. I can see you have enormous inner strength, that’s why you fought so hard to live, and that strength will see you through. You have two parents who love you, which will be a tremendous help in the days ahead.”

“Did your parents help you?”

“No. My parents were dead. They died the day I was born.”

“Oh. What happened?”

“It’s a long, complicated story, Brooke.”

“Tell me, please,” Brooke begged. “Just keep talking. You have a nice voice and if you’re talking, I can’t think.”

Serena was the only one who knew her full story. Talking to people, sharing her feelings, had never been easy for Sarah and she knew it was because she and Celia, her adoptive grandmother, had moved around so much while she was growing up. She’d never had a chance to form lasting friendships. It had always been her and Celia against the world.

“I have an identical twin sister,” she found herself saying.

“That had to have been fun when you were growing up.”

“We didn’t grow up together. I met her for the first time five

years ago.”

“Oh,” Brooke murmured. She was falling asleep, so Sarah kept talking.

“When our mother, Jasmine, was eighteen, she fell in love with an older man, John Welch. He’d dated Jasmine’s mother, Aurora, in high school. Since Jasmine and Aurora had a tumultuous relationship, her dating John only added to the discord in the family. Finally, Jasmine ran away to be with John, who separated from his wife Celia. Then Jasmine got pregnant.”

She paused, thinking Brooke was asleep, but the girl opened her eyes. “What happened next?” she asked.

“Jasmine lived with John above his mechanic’s shop, but as the babies started to grow inside her, she became miserable and wanted to go home. John always talked her out of it. In her ninth month, she called Henry Farrell, her father, to tell him she was coming home. But she never made it. When she’d told John, they’d argued and he managed to get into the car with her. They crashed not far from their apartment.”

“And they died?”

“Not right away. Jasmine lived long enough to deliver my sister and me. John was able to talk to his wife, Celia, and ask her to raise his daughters. Jasmine agreed, signing papers to that effect before she died.”

“Why did they want Celia instead of Jasmine’s parents to have you?”

“As I said, the relationship was not good between Jasmine and

Aurora, and Jasmine felt that her mother couldn't truly love her daughters since John was the father. John felt the same way."

"Did it happen that way?"

"Partly. Henry, Jasmine's father, couldn't live with that decision so he went to talk to Celia and they made a deal. Henry and Aurora would raise one twin and Celia would raise the other."

"Who raised you?"

"Celia. Aurora and Henry raised Serena."

"You never saw each other after that?"

"No. Celia and I never stayed in one place long because she feared Henry and Aurora would hire an attorney to try to take me, too, since they were the biological grandparents. And the Farrells worried that Celia might change her mind and want Serena back since she actually had custody. For over thirty years they avoided each other and Serena and I never knew of the other's existence until..."

Brooke was breathing heavily—she was finally asleep. Sarah started to get up, but the story kept running in her head. Until Ethan Ramsey saw me stripping in one of Boyd's clubs. That one night had saved Sarah's life.

Ethan, a private investigator, was now Serena's husband. That night he'd come to Dallas to try to persuade his brother, Travis, to come home for a visit. Travis played in a band and liked the nightlife. Ethan hated that lifestyle, but went out to a strip club hoping to persuade Travis to come home.

Two months earlier Sarah had fallen madly in love with Greg Larson, a narcotics cop, while she'd been working on her Masters in psychology. She'd worked as a waitress when she wasn't in school. She'd met Greg at the restaurant and the attraction was instantaneous. At the time she'd been deep into her thesis on the lives of strippers, what made them do it and why. She'd felt it was bland and needed more—she'd wanted up-close-and-personal experiences. When Greg had told her about the undercover mission he was about to undertake, she'd thought it a great opportunity for her research. He'd resisted at first, but had eventually agreed because they hadn't wanted to be apart.

She'd gotten a job as a waitress in the strip club without a problem, but she'd been unprepared for the seedier side of life. The job was degrading and disgusting and nothing like working in a restaurant, as she'd thought it would be. But as long as Greg was there, she'd felt safe. Then Rudy Boyd, the owner of the club, had taken an interest in her. When she'd rebuffed him, it had made him angry.

She and Greg had decided it was time for her to leave, to go home to Celia. The night she was packing, Boyd and two of his men had shown up at the apartment. Boyd had somehow found out that Greg was a cop out to get him. He'd shot him without a second thought, right in front of her. She'd never been so scared or horrified in her life. Holding Greg's limp body, she'd waited for the sound of a bullet to end her life, too, but Boyd had had other plans.

He'd also learned of her thesis work and had taken the disks from her computer, telling her she was about to get a real first-hand look at a stripper's life. She'd said she would never strip. He'd laughed, and put a knife to her throat, and said she had a choice—death or stripping.

She'd kept thinking that if she could stay alive, she might manage to get away and go to the police to tell them what had happened to Greg. As days turned into weeks, she hadn't known how much longer she'd be able to continue to do something so humiliating, so repulsive. It had taken all her strength to go on, but that strength eventually waned. Then a miracle happened.

Ethan Ramsey had come to the club. Seeing how nervous she was on stage, he'd sensed something was wrong, though he hadn't thought much about it at the time. The very next day he'd met Serena in Fort Worth. Looking suave, polished and beautiful, he couldn't help but recall the familiar, distraught face of the woman of the night before. He'd given Serena his card, telling her that if she needed help, to just call him.

Serena had thought it a come-on line. But Ethan's story about the stripper that looked just like her, had haunted Serena's mind. She'd eventually hired Ethan to find the stripper—and he had. Serena and Sarah had found each other, too, learning they'd been deceived by the people who'd raised them.

In the end it had all worked out. Sarah now lived with her grandmother, Aurora Farrell, forming a relationship they should have had years ago. Sarah finished her degree and Rudy Boyd

had been convicted of capital murder. The best part was that Serena and Ethan had fallen in love, gotten married and now had a three-year-old daughter, Jassy, named after Jasmine, their mother.

The connection between her and Serena was unlike anything Sarah had ever experienced. They were identical—looking at Serena was like looking in a mirror. It was as though they were the same person, yet different. At times, they could read each other's minds, which was scary to Sarah, who had always been a private person. It was also wonderful to have someone who knew her so well. There wasn't anything she couldn't tell Serena and vice versa.

Sarah stood and brushed Brooke's hair back from her face. The medication had finally taken effect and Brooke would be out for a while. It was what she needed—lots of rest. Sarah picked up her purse and the chart, and made her way from the room.

She couldn't have made it through that terrible time in her life if it hadn't been for Serena. Daniel had been there, too. She brushed that thought away as she wrote in Brooke's chart. Handing the chart to the nurse, she walked to the doors and out into the night.

The cold wind blew against her and she shivered. She'd been in such a hurry to get to the hospital that she'd forgotten her coat. She ran to her car and quickly started the engine, hoping it would warm up quickly.

It was late so there wasn't much traffic. Stopping for a light,

she thought back to the day Ethan and Daniel had pulled her out of Boyd's closet, where she'd been hiding from her captor. She had passed out, but had come to as Daniel checked to see if she was still breathing. All she'd had on was a robe and a pair of bikini panties... His head was on her chest... Her robe was open, her breasts exposed. Every time she'd seen Daniel after that day, she'd remember his face against her naked skin and it filled her with shame and embarrassment.

She'd taken off her clothes in front of men. It was hard for her to believe that now, but she had done what she'd had to do to stay alive. It was a debilitating memory forever etched in her mind. The reality of what had happened to her was still hard to understand. And Daniel was part of that reality. He'd seen her at her worst. She didn't like being reminded of that.

Her hand went to the silk blouse buttoned at her neck. She never let anyone see her body anymore. After all this time, she still didn't want a man to see her, to touch her. Maybe that part of her life was over.

The thought upset her. She didn't want to be this repressed for the rest of her life. As a professional, Sarah recognized that her behavior wasn't healthy.

She had the urge to talk to Serena, but it was too late to call so she would wait until the morning. She also had to tell Serena and Ethan about Daniel—that he was quitting. Then maybe she'd lose these guilty feelings.

Again, she knew that wasn't going to happen until she faced

whatever was between her and Daniel; guilt, blame, irritation or something deeper. There was an undeniable tension between them and until it was resolved, she'd have no peace.

CHAPTER THREE

THE NEXT MORNING Daniel rolled out of bed feeling good and he knew he'd made the right decision. He put on a pot of coffee and after his shower, wrapped a towel around his waist, grabbed a cup and went back to the bathroom to shave.

He rubbed shaving cream over his rough stubble then looked at himself closely in the mirror. There were lines around his eyes that he hadn't noticed before. Worry lines—that's what they were called. Well, he had plenty of worry in his type of work so he wasn't surprised, nor did it bother him.

He wondered how Brooke Wallace was this morning. It was only five, so he hoped she was sleeping, getting some rest, because she had a rough road ahead of her. As he scraped the stubble away, he found himself unable to stop thinking about Sarah. She could help Brooke—Daniel knew that she would. But would it bring back painful memories for her? He threw his towel on the bathroom vanity. No, he wasn't going to do this. He wasn't worrying about Sarah Welch anymore. Her life was none of his business.

In the bedroom, he saw that his answering machine light was blinking. He listened to several messages before his mother's voice came on. "Daniel, we're still in Paris and having a great time. Your father is enjoying seeing his old friend, Jon Paul. His daughter, Yvette, is asking about you. She remembers you from

her visit to America. She likes you a lot and she's so beautiful. Wish you were here. Please think about your father's offer. You work too hard and your job is so dangerous. Not sure when we'll return. Don't forget to check on Drew. Goodbye."

Turning off the machine, he sat for a moment and stared into space. His father had been trying for years to place him at the helm of Garrett Enterprises. His grandfather had started a construction company then expanded the business to erecting shopping malls in Texas, eventually venturing in to other states and to Europe. Recently the company had scaled back on construction projects, but his father still managed extensive interests all over the country.

Daniel had always felt he wasn't cut out to be a businessman. Ever since he was small, when people would ask what he wanted to be when he grew up, he'd always say, "A policeman." His parents thought he'd outgrow this particular ambition, but he hadn't. After getting a degree in criminal justice, he'd entered the police academy, much to his parent's dismay. Then something happened that had changed his life forever.

Growing up, Daniel had spent a lot of time watching out for his brother, Drew, who was five years younger. But in college Drew got in with a bad crowd and started to do drugs. For a long time, Drew hid this from Daniel and their parents. One night at a party, Drew overdosed on heroin and almost died. He'd been in a coma for days. When he'd finally come out of it, his brain had been affected and he'd ended up with the mental capacity of a

ten-year-old. He still had a problem putting words together and he stuttered until he could form the thought in his head. Those first years had been difficult as Drew had struggled to find a way to express himself. They'd all been very patient and grateful he was alive.

That had been fifteen years ago and not much had changed. Drew would be a child for the rest of his life. For Daniel, a lot of things had changed. He'd gone into narcotics and spent the past fifteen years trying to take down the big drug dealers. Every time one was put in prison, though, another popped up. It was a losing battle, but Daniel had fought tirelessly—until now. Was he giving up? No, he needed a break from that world.

And Sarah didn't want him around.

For a moment he let himself feel just how much that hurt. How much it had influenced his decision. How much he'd been hoping that, last night, she'd reach out to him. But he knew he was the last person she'd turn to for anything.

He ran his hands over his face as thoughts of her did their usual number on his control. The day they'd rescued her, Daniel's only thought was to make sure she was alive. He'd laid his ear against her chest—not even aware her robe was open. Now, sometimes, late at night, when he was tired and drained, he could actually feel her satiny skin and the softness of her breasts. And he knew Sarah had made a profound effect on him. Serena had, too, but not in the same way.

Serena was soft-spoken and had a sweetness that went all the

way to her soul. They were identical in looks, both beauties, but not in personality. Sarah had a coolness, a reserve about her that was intriguing, mystifying and sometimes intimidating. He knew it was only a facade she'd acquired over the years to protect herself from life and its disappointments.

That facade was firmly in place, though, and no man was getting behind it. Greg had, but he'd been killed. Now, Sarah didn't want to feel any more pain.

He had to stop thinking about her. The only way to do that was to start seeing other women—women who actually liked him.

His mother had said that Yvette was asking about him. She was blond and blue-eyed and had an incredibly sexy voice. Muriel had been distressed for years about his single status and he'd avoided her matchmaking efforts at all costs. Her taste in women wasn't the same as his. Yvette just might be what he needed, though. Maybe he'd buy a plane ticket, pick up Drew, and surprise their parents.

The more he thought about it, the more he liked the plan. He'd talk to the lieutenant about his decision on Monday. Since this was Saturday, Daniel didn't want to bother him. He'd type his letter of resignation tonight and have it ready. Then he'd fly away to France and Yvette.

First, he had to attend to a couple of things.

SARAH TRUDGED TO the kitchen for coffee. It was 5:00 a.m. and she'd only slept a couple of hours. She wanted to get to the hospital before Brooke woke up, though. Putting the coffee

on, she turned as her grandmother came into the kitchen.

Aurora Farrell wore a long, beige-silk robe and gown. Her white hair hung down her back and her posture and features were elegant, almost regal. It was hard to believe she was in her seventies.

“Morning, Gran,” Sarah said, kissing her cheek and grabbing the teakettle. Gran preferred tea while Sarah favored coffee in the mornings.

“Morning, darling.” Aurora took a seat at the kitchen table. “What are you doing up so early? It’s Saturday. Surely you’re not starting to clean the house at this hour of the morning.”

“Partly. I’ve stripped my bed and have a load of laundry going, but I have to run to the hospital for a bit. I have a patient to see.”

Saturday was her cleaning day. It was the only time she had to do housework and she couldn’t afford a cleaning lady. The house was so big and Sarah was finding it difficult to maintain the house on her salary and with her busy schedule. This had been Gran’s home since she’d married Henry Farrell and Sarah wanted her to stay here as long as she could. Sarah wanted to be here, too. It’s where she should have been raised as a child with Serena. Staying here wasn’t going to bring her childhood back, though. Serena wanted her to sell the house, but how would she tell Gran? Over the past five years they’d formed a good relationship and Sarah couldn’t see changing any part of their lives.

At times, she felt as if she’d stepped into Serena’s place—worrying about Gran, taking care of her. When she and her sister

had met, Serena had been at her wit's end trying to pay the note and bills on the house. Before his death, her grandfather had borrowed a lot of money he couldn't pay back and, unfortunately, Gran was used to a certain lifestyle. She was a compulsive shopper and spender. The situation had come to a head with the bank threatening to foreclose on their home.

Then Sarah found out that Greg had left half his life insurance to her. At first she hadn't wanted to accept it, then she and Serena had a long talk. Greg wanted her to have the money, to have a better life, and Serena'd thought Sarah should spend the windfall on herself. Sarah had other plans. She took the money and paid off the note on the house and all the bills, with Serena protesting the whole time. It had felt good to be able to help Gran and Serena, but she was still struggling to stay afloat with the upkeep of such a large house. In the summer, it was worse with the pool and yard to maintain.

"I'll strip my bed and finish the laundry while you're gone," Gran said.

Sarah placed a cup of tea in front of her. "Thanks, Gran. That would help a great deal."

"As you know, I'm not fond of housework, but I'll help all I can." Aurora stirred honey and lemon into her cup.

Sarah knew that. Gran had lived a life of privilege and it was difficult for her to adjust to a different lifestyle. But these days she stuck to a budget that Sarah planned for them. It was the only way they could manage, so Sarah was grateful for Gran's

cooperation.

“Just don’t tell any of my friends.”

“I promise.” Sarah smiled. “You’re up early. Do you have plans?”

“No.” Aurora took a sip. “The older I get, the less I sleep.” Gran wasn’t known to be an early riser. Sarah wasn’t, either, but she rarely got to sleep in. Her life demanded early hours and long days but she wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Well, I’d better run,” Sarah said as she noticed it was almost five-thirty. “I’ll drink my coffee while I dress.”

“Sarah?”

“Yes?” She stopped in the doorway.

“Have you heard from Serena?”

“Not for a couple of days.”

“It’s been three days since I’ve heard from her. I hope nothing’s wrong.”

“I’m sure there isn’t,” Sarah assured her. “But I’ll call her tonight and we’ll have a long chat and find out all Jassy’s latest antics.” At Gran’s somber expression, she added, “That phoning thing—it works both ways.”

“I know,” Gran replied. “I called last night and I even called this morning, trying to catch them, and there wasn’t an answer. I just can’t imagine where they’d be at this hour. Ethan’s father didn’t even answer.”

So that’s why Gran was up early. She was worried about Serena. Now Sarah was, too. “I’ll call as soon as I get back,”

Sarah promised and rushed back to kiss Aurora. “Stop thinking bad things. They’re fine.”

Aurora hugged Sarah. “I’m so lucky to have you.”

“We’re both lucky. Now I have to go.”

THIRTY MINUTES LATER Sarah was on the way to the hospital. She didn’t worry too much about Serena because she didn’t have a sense that something was wrong. Even though they hadn’t been raised together, they still had that connection, that special bond that existed between twins. It was one of the perks that delighted Sarah about being a twin. It was almost surreal at times—like when Jassy was born.

Sarah had woken up in the middle of the night and sensed that Serena needed her. The baby wasn’t due for two weeks, but Sarah had immediately called the airport and booked a flight for her and Gran to San Antonio. Serena had gone into labor at the same time that Sarah had woken up in Dallas. They’d arrived there in time to watch Jassy make her appearance into the world.

They’d laughed about it afterward. Ethan had said he hadn’t needed to call because Sarah and Serena had a physic connection. And they did.

So she wasn’t really worried now. She felt that Serena and Ethan had probably taken a weekend away together and left Jassy with Molly, Ethan’s sister. Molly had a little girl six months older than Jassy and they loved to play together. But Serena always called when they were going away and that was what was niggling at her. Still, she didn’t let herself get paranoid. She had to put her

personal life aside and concentrate on Brooke.

BROOKE WAS NOW IN A room upstairs and Sarah went to the nurses' station to get her chart. Reading through the contents, she asked the nurse on duty, "What kind of night has she had?"

"They brought her up about 4:00 a.m. and she never woke up, and I haven't heard a peep out of her."

"Are her parents here?"

"No, but Detective Garrett went in to see her a few minutes ago."

"What! The police are not allowed to question her without supervision." She was trying to control her anger.

The nurse held up a hand. "Hold on, Ms. Welch. I didn't say anything about someone questioning her."

"Why else would he be here?"

The nurse frowned. "You don't know Daniel very well, do you?"

"What?"

"I've worked for over thirty years in this hospital and I know Daniel Garrett. He often comes by to check on a patient—overdoses, victims of shootings and the like. That's the type of person he is. I can assure you he's not questioning Brooke Wallace."

Sarah took the chart and walked toward Brooke's room feeling duly chastised. The nurse was right—Daniel was always there for the victim. He'd been there for her during Boyd's arrest, his trial and the appeal. Through it all Daniel had been unflinching in

his support, as he was with everyone. She'd admitted as much to herself yesterday, so why had she felt a flash of anger when the nurse had mentioned his name?

What was really bothering her? Did she want to be more than a woman in an endless line of victims to Daniel? Of course not. She just didn't want him to see her as a helpless female—that's all. She didn't want anything else from a man ever again—including Daniel.

She was lying.

She groaned inwardly at the war going on inside her. Her emotions were like a tennis ball being constantly batted back and forth until she was exhausted from the struggle. She had to decide what she wanted from Daniel, what she expected from him. Because, like it or not, he was in her life. Their jobs threw them together and she had no right to tell him to stay away from her. She had to apologize. Of that she was very certain.

Just as she reached the door, Daniel came out. He stopped short when he saw her then walked on without a word.

She hurried after him. "Daniel."

He halted and slowly turned around. "I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd be here this early. I only stopped by to see how Brooke was doing. She's awake and I didn't ask her any questions about the rape. I only reassured her that we'd catch this guy."

"You won't, though."

He blinked. "What?"

"You're quitting the force. If you do that, you won't catch

him.”

He was watching her closely. “Russ has a good team and they’ll find him.”

“Russ is a macho idiot,” she blurted before she could stop herself.

“He’s also a good cop.”

“No, he isn’t, but you are.” It came out almost as a whisper.

His dark eyes narrowed. “What is this, Sarah? Last night you told me to stay away from you in a voice that could cut glass and this morning you’re saying I’m a good cop in a voice I don’t recognize. To say I’m confused is putting it mildly.”

“Could we talk for a minute?”

Daniel held up both hands. “I don’t think so. We said all we had to say last night. You’re right, I’ve worried about you too much and it’s time for me to back away. Time for me to do a lot of things and some of them have nothing to do with you.” He took a deep breath. “With Serena and Ethan being so far away, I wanted to be there if you needed someone. But you’ve made it plain on more than one occasion that you’re fine and don’t need anyone. You see—” he glanced down the hall “—I have this flaw—I want to help everyone. I’ve finally recognized that that’s not always possible.”

“Daniel—”

He cut her off. “If you have a problem with Russ, just call Lieutenant Bauer and he’ll take care of him.”

“Daniel...”

“Goodbye, Sarah. After today you won’t see me again. I’ll be flying to Paris on Monday and I’m not sure when I’ll be back.” He turned and strolled toward the elevators.

She watched until he disappeared behind the closing doors. She let out a long breath, not even realizing that she hadn’t been breathing. For a moment she didn’t know what to do. All she could think was that she hadn’t had a chance to apologize. Daniel hadn’t wanted to hear anything she’d had to say. She deserved that. She had been cruel last night, hurting him when he’d been nothing but kind to her.

At Boyd’s trial, Serena had sat on one side of her and Daniel on the other, encouraging her and letting her know she had the strength to face Boyd and to describe in open court what he’d done to Greg and to her. She wondered now if she could have done it without him.

She moved toward Brooke’s room. He’d said he was going to Paris. Did he have family there? Or was he taking a special woman? She suddenly realized that she didn’t know anything about Daniel or his life. Did he have a family? He wasn’t married, she knew, because Serena had mentioned it. Who was Daniel Garrett?

She shook her head as she entered the room. It really didn’t matter. She had just severed all ties to the man and she felt an emptiness in her stomach at her thoughtless actions.

BROOKE WAS LYING on her side, staring at the wall. The IV was still in her arm.

“Good morning,” Sarah said as she took a seat.

“Morning, Ms. Welch,” Brooke responded.

“How are you feeling?”

“Sore, and my neck and throat hurts.”

“That will heal with time.”

“And the nightmare, the shame and horror—does it go away, too?”

No. It will be with you the rest of your life.

She should have been able to say yes with confidence, but she couldn't. The truth of that hit her like a slap in the face, the sting creeping into tiny crevices in her mind that she had boarded up against the pain. She hadn't dealt with what had happened to her. She could see that now. Daniel had seen it, but she hadn't.

She gathered her thoughts, her knowledge. “It will be hard.” She spoke the truth and more truths followed. “You have to make a concentrated effort to move on with your life. You have to talk to people, especially when you're hurting, and don't shut people out.” Like I did. “People want to help you.” Daniel did. “It will take a lot of love and support, but eventually you will be able to put it behind you.” Like I have to do now.

“I don't like talking about it.”

“A good counselor or therapist will help you with that and you don't have to talk until you're ready.”

“I like talking to you.”

Sarah reached into her purse and pulled out a card. She wrote a number on the back. “This is my cell phone. You can reach me

today or tomorrow, any time you want to talk. On Monday make an appointment at the office. Dr. Mason usually handles these cases for the hospital. She's very good and you'll like her."

"Can I talk to you?"

"Sure." Somehow Sarah was hoping she'd say that. For so long she'd refused to open those doors that were so painful, but by helping Brooke she could also help herself.

"I remember you talking about your family last night," Brooke said. "Are you close to your twin now?"

"Yes, we are."

"I have two sisters younger than me and I don't know what to say to them."

"I think you'll find that you won't have to say much. They'll just want to comfort you."

"Yeah. People have been real nice. Detective Garrett was here earlier and he's so nice and good-looking. I just thought that cops in the movies were that handsome."

Was Daniel handsome? Of course he was. He was tall, lean, with dark eyes and hair. At times his hair curled into his collar. His features were strong and chiseled, his nose straight and his lips... Oh, my. She touched her warm cheek. She'd noticed Daniel more than she'd ever thought. Denial—she'd been firmly in denial. But not anymore.

She was going to take her own advice and make an effort to move on with her life. She couldn't remember the last time she had actually laughed, felt silly or giddy. It was time for a change.

Brooke's parents entered and Sarah stood. Lois ran to her daughter and hugged her. Her father did the same.

"The doctor said you can go home soon." Bob Wallace wiped away an errant tear.

"I don't know."

Brooke seemed afraid and before Sarah could say anything Bob added, "Don't worry. No one's ever gonna hurt you again. Not as long as I'm around."

Brooke's fears eased and Sarah knew she was going to be okay with the love and support of her family.

"I'll go," she said. "If you need anything, just call."

"Thank you, Ms. Welch," Brooke replied. "Will the police still be questioning me?"

"Yes." Sarah glanced at Bob. "Call if you need me, but I feel your father can handle them."

"Yeah." Brooke nodded confidently and Sarah slipped out of the room.

WHEN SARAH GOT IN her car, she grabbed her cell phone. She had to talk to Serena. Serena, please, please, be home. The phone rang and rang then the answering machine came on. She clicked off, wondering where Serena could be. This wasn't like her. But Sarah still wasn't worried.

She drove toward Fort Worth and home, and realized it was almost noon. She had the house to clean and laundry to do yet. But the emotional tennis ball in her head kept bouncing back and forth with a ferocity she couldn't ignore, couldn't deny any longer.

She had to sort through what she was feeling, about Daniel, about her life, and the only way to do that was to talk, as she'd told Brooke. She could talk to Karen—she had many times—but she didn't open up to her colleague the way she did with Serena. She had to talk to her sister. Where are you, Serena?

She drove into the garage and smiled. Ethan's truck was parked to the side. Serena was home. Sarah jumped out and ran to the house. The door burst open and Jassy flew toward her, her red hair in a ponytail, bouncing.

“Sari, Sari, Sari, it's me,” she shouted.

Sarah dropped her purse and caught Jassy, swinging her around and into her arms, then she just held her tight.

“Look at me, look at me.” Jassy wriggled and leaned away from Sarah. “Look how big I get. Daddy says I grow like a weed. Daddy says he's gonna put a rock on my head. Daddy says I getting too big for my britches.”

Sarah kissed her cheek. “Daddy says a lot.”

“Yeah. Daddy knows everything.”

Jasmine Marie was the light in her father's eyes and she worshiped him. Serena taught school and Ethan kept Jassy while Serena was at work. Ethan had retired from the FBI and he occasionally did P.I. work, but since Jassy's birth he only took care of his daughter. He'd been married before and had lost a son, so he tended to be overprotective. That's why Serena made him go away for the odd weekend. She wanted Jassy to be around other people.

“Where’s Daddy Says?” She teased her little niece, using the name that Sarah called Ethan because every other word out of Jassy’s mouth was “Daddy says.”

“In the house with Mommy and Gran. Mommy said I could watch for you and I saw you first.”

The door opened again and Serena came toward them.

“I gonna go tell Daddy you’re here.” She slipped from Sarah’s arms, ran around her mother and back into the house.

The sisters embraced. Two identical young women—same red hair, same blue eyes, same height and body shape and weight, except Serena’s hair was now shorter and hung in a natural style past her shoulders. Sarah’s was still long and wound into a knot at her nape.

Sarah clung to her sister, then she did something out of character. She burst into tears.

Serena just held her.

Finally, Sarah pulled away and brushed away tears. “I’m sorry. I guess I’m a little emotional or I’m just really glad to see you.”

Serena looked into her eyes. “Sarah, what is it?”

Sarah blinked and admitted something that she hadn’t been able to before. “I need to talk. I need help.”

CHAPTER FOUR

SARAH QUICKLY GOT HERSELF under control. “I don’t want Jassy to see me crying. We’ll talk later.”

“Are you sure?” Serena asked with a worried frown. “Ethan’s an expert at taking care of our daughter.”

“Yes. Right now I just want to enjoy my family.”

Arm-in-arm they walked into the house. Ethan immediately got up and hugged Sarah. Tall and lanky, with dark good looks, Ethan was one of a kind. He’d been shot in the hip while working for the FBI and now walked with a slight limp, but since he was in such good shape it was hardly noticeable. If she had to use a word to describe Ethan, it would be honorable.

Daniel was a lot like that. Where did that thought come from?

“See, Daddy,” Jassy said, crawling into Ethan’s lap. “I told you Sari was here. I saw her first.”

Ethan pulled her ponytail. “Yes, you did.”

“Were you surprised to see me, Sari?” Jassy asked.

“Yes.”

“Mommy said we were going to surprise you.”

“You certainly did that. Gran and I were concerned. We both tried calling and got no answer.”

“I called last night and before six this morning,” Gran told them.

Ethan looked lovingly at Serena. “Serena was feeling a little

down yesterday so I took her out to dinner last night. That didn't help a whole lot and I knew it was time for a visit. We were on the road at three this morning."

"Isn't he wonderful?" Serena asked of no one in particular, her eyes on her husband.

"Daddy Says gets my vote for wonderful," Sarah teased.

"We love Daddy," Jassy chirped in. "Daddy says he put me in the truck, but I don't 'member. Daddy says I was sleeping like a log."

"I'm just so glad you're here. I was feeling a little down, too, and I needed this. But I haven't had a chance to do the housework or anything."

"It's all done." Serena smiled.

"What?"

"Gran was doing laundry when we got here so I helped her finish, then I made the beds and put linens in our room. I dusted, mopped and vacuumed. Ethan took out the trash and swept outside."

"You didn't have to do that."

"I wanted us to have a chance to visit and now we do." Serena linked an arm through Sarah's.

Almost on cue, Ethan stood. "I'll take Jassy and see if I can track down Daniel. I haven't talked to him in a while."

Sarah's heart skipped a beat. Should she tell Ethan that Daniel was quitting his job? No. She'd let Daniel do that.

"What about lunch?"

Jassy clapped her hands. "I'm gonna get a Happy Meal. Mommy said I could."

Ethan grimaced. "Daddy's really looking forward to this."

Jassy heard the displeasure in Ethan's voice. Her bottom lip dropped. "Mommy said I could."

Serena quickly took her out of Ethan's arms and kissed her. "Yes, my baby. Since you did so well in your gymnastics class I said you could have a treat."

"I jump real high, don't I, Mommy?"

"Higher than anyone else."

"And I can turn a flip, too." She looked at Sarah. "Wanna see?"

Serena held her tighter to keep her from getting down. "You can put your shorts on tonight and show Sari and Gran everything you can do. I think Daddy's ready to go." Serena kissed her again. "Have a good time."

Ethan took Jassy from Serena, giving his wife a lingering kiss in the process. "See you later," he whispered to Serena, then walked out the door with Jassy talking non-stop.

Sarah opened the refrigerator. "I made chicken salad last night so I wouldn't have to cook today. I'll cut up some fruit and we'll have lunch."

"I'll make the tea," Serena offered.

For the next thirty minutes they were busy preparing and eating the meal. Gran sat back and smiled.

"It's so good to have my girls together, but now I'm going to

take a nap. I haven't worked this hard in ages."

After Gran left, they cleaned the kitchen. Sarah poured more tea into their cups. "Let's go into the den."

Serena curled up in a comfortable chair and Sarah sat on the sofa. She kicked off her shoes and drew up her knees.

Serena sipped her tea and waited.

"How are things in Junction Flat?" Sarah asked, unable to say the words she wanted to, had to, say.

"Great. I love the peace and quiet and I love teaching."

"I don't have to ask how you and Ethan are doing. You're still so in love."

"Yes." Serena grinned. "That will never change, but no marriage is perfect. We have problems, too."

"Ethan's overprotectiveness with Jassy?"

Serena brushed back her hair. "It was such a battle to let her take gymnastics and it all stems from his fear of losing her like he lost Ryan. His son was about Jassy's age when he fell off those boxes and died from the injuries to his head."

"It has to be devastating to lose a child."

"Yes, and Ethan knows he goes overboard. He's just so afraid, but I've told him that we can't keep her locked up away from the world. We have to let her grow."

"What did he say?"

"He understands, but it's difficult for him to do. I explained the running and jumping would be good for her. She'd learn how to fall."

“Did he agree?”

“Not for an instant and he was so nervous watching her I thought I’d have to tie him to his seat.”

“He just loves her,” Sarah said.

“Yes. Ethan loves very deeply. That’s one of the things I love most about him.”

“You’re very lucky.”

“Hmm.” Serena’s eyes grew dreamy. “And I have a solution to our problem.”

“What?”

“Another baby.”

Sarah raised an eyebrow. “Does Ethan agree?” Ethan had gone through such pain over losing his son that he’d never wanted to have another child. It had taken Serena a year before she was convinced that he was ready.

“Let’s just say I’m working on him. He spends all day with Jassy and when she starts school, he’s going to be lost without her. Another child would definitely divide his attention and worry.”

As Sarah listened, she wished her life was that simple, her problems so easy to solve. Serena and Ethan loved each other and they would work out their differences, but Sarah feared her pain was too deep to ever assuage. She had to try, though. She couldn’t stay in denial forever.

Serena watched her for a moment. “My life’s not what you wanted to talk about. What’s wrong, Sarah?”

Sarah rested her chin on her knees and stared down at her toes.

She used to paint her nails, but she hadn't done that in years.

"Sarah—" Serena prompted.

She took a long breath. "I've told you so many times that I'm fine. I realized today that I'm not."

"What happened?"

Sarah told her about Brooke Wallace.

"How awful."

"It is," Sarah agreed. "When she asked me if the shame and horror would ever go away, I should have been able to say yes. But I couldn't honestly say that, and it shook me."

"What did you say?"

"I told her that in time with a concentrated effort she could put it behind her and that she had to talk to people." She shook her head. "I haven't done any of that. I pushed what happened to me to the back of my mind and I've never really faced it or conquered all those bad feelings. Instead I've burrowed further and further inside myself until..." She stopped. "Do you know what the cops call me?"

"No."

"Colder Than Ice. And it's true. I'm frozen inside and I can't feel anymore. I won't allow myself to feel. I can't...I..."

"Oh, Sarah." Serena jumped up and went to her, holding her tight. "I think you've done remarkably well considering all you've been through."

"No. I just did what I had to—going through the motions of living."

Serena leaned back. “You saw your fiancé killed then you were brutalized by a drug lord and forced to strip in a disgusting club. After that you found out you had an identical twin sister and a grandmother you knew nothing about—and Celia, the woman who raised you, who you thought was your grandmother, was really your father’s wife. That’s a tremendous amount of trauma for anyone to deal with.”

When Sarah didn’t speak, Serena added, “I’m so proud of you and I’m sure listening to that young girl’s terrifying story brought back a lot of painful memories.”

“It didn’t bring them back—that’s what I’m trying to tell you. I’ve never let go of them. I haven’t dealt with my past. I help other people, but I can’t help myself. Even Daniel knows that.”

“Daniel?”

“I see him occasionally when I’m working and when I do, he looks at me with such concern and empathy. That irritates me. He always asks how I am. That irritates me more. I’ve tried to understand why that is, but I’ve never found an answer. Last night he was at the hospital and after everyone had left he asked why I resented him so much. Words spilled out before I could stop them and I said some hurtful things.”

“Like what?”

“Like I blame him for Greg’s death and I don’t appreciate him always looking over my shoulder to make sure I’m okay. I don’t need his help or concern and I told him to stay away from me.”

“Oh, Sarah.”

“I know. He’s been nothing but kind and helpful. He saw something, though, that I couldn’t—that I’m falling apart. I lashed out because...”

“Because what?”

Sarah swallowed hard. “Because it goes much deeper. I realized that today, too.” She stared off past Serena’s shoulder. “Remember that day Ethan and Daniel rescued us from Boyd’s apartment?”

“I’m not likely to ever forget it.”

“I was so afraid Boyd was going to kill you and Ethan like he killed Greg. I passed out and when I came to, I was lying on the floor and Daniel had his ear against my breasts. At first I didn’t know what was going on, then I realized my robe was open and I didn’t have anything on but a pair of bikini panties. I knew he was a policeman and I was so embarrassed.”

Serena rubbed her arm. “You shouldn’t be. We were all very worried about you. Daniel was just trying to see if you were still breathing. I don’t think he even noticed you were almost naked.”

“But I noticed.” She blinked back a tear. “Sometimes I dream I’m on that stage, taking off my clothes, and I hear the men hollering and whistling. I didn’t want Daniel to see me like that.”

“Are you saying you have feelings for Daniel?”

“No, but I don’t want him to see me that way.”

“What way?”

“Like a slut.”

Serena caught Sarah’s face and turned it so she could look

into her eyes. “Listen to me. You’re not a slut. No one, including Daniel, sees you that way. You’re a beautiful, talented, courageous young woman. And you’re strong—stronger than I ever could be. I love you and I’m so glad you’re my sister.”

Sarah wrapped her arms around Serena and rested her head on her shoulder. “Help me, Serena. I don’t want to feel like this anymore. I want the pain and nightmares to stop. I know all the textbook stuff, but it’s hard to apply that to myself.”

“Okay, then, let’s do something different.”

Sarah pulled back. “Like what?”

Serena became thoughtful. “Well, you say you’re cold, so let’s warm you up.”

“Do you have something in mind?”

“Yes, and of course this is a lay person’s point of view—to make a woman feel better about herself, it helps to make her look great on the outside. Once you gain some confidence in your femininity again, I think the rest will follow. As a counselor you’ll have to sort through all the debris that’s making you feel this way and I’ll be here to help you any way I can.”

“Thank you,” Sarah replied, gaining confidence from her sister. “True healing comes from here—” she placed a hand over her heart “—and here.” She pointed to her head. “But in my case, working on the exterior couldn’t hurt and I know exactly where to start.” Excitement bubbled inside her. She had to change herself outwardly before her emotions ever had a chance to heal. She unbuttoned the top two buttons on her blouse, then thought, What

the hell? and undid another.

Serena jumped up. “And the hair. We need to do something with the hair.” Her eyes grew bright. “Let’s do a complete makeover. We have the whole afternoon to create a lot of warmth.”

Sarah got to her feet. “What about Ethan, Jassy and Gran?”

“I’ll call Ethan on his cell phone. He’s been wanting to visit a ranching supply place here and Jassy’s happy as long as she’s with her daddy. I’ll leave Gran a note. After the busy morning, she’ll be glad for a break.”

“Then let’s do it,” Sarah said with gusto.

“Okay.” Serena studied Sarah. “I’m thinking shorter hair. What are you thinking?”

Sarah smiled. “I’m thinking I’m so glad you’re home.”

DANIEL WALKED INTO the police station and found Russ Devers slipping on his jacket, ready to go out. Russ was, as Sarah had said, a macho cop. Daniel and Russ had clashed many times, mainly about correct police procedure, which Russ tended to ignore. He broke the rules constantly and his lieutenant had a list of complaints about the methods he used to get the job done. There were complaints about his appearance, too. His hair was pulled back into a ponytail and his clothes looked as if he’d gotten them out of the hamper. He chewed constantly on a toothpick, fighting a smoking habit. But Russ was good at solving crimes, so the grievances were filed away.

“What’s the matter, Daniel?” Russ spouted off. “Didn’t you

get the message last night? I don't require your help anymore."

Daniel clenched his jaw at Russ's attempt to assert his authority. But he'd come here for a reason.

"I didn't come to argue with you, Russ. I came to apologize."

Russ stopped stuffing papers into his pocket and looked up. "Well, I'll be damned. You're actually admitting you were wrong."

"Yes. I stepped over the line last night and I apologize for that."

Russ shrugged. "What am I supposed to say? That I won't report you?"

"Do whatever you feel you have to. Just go easy on the girl. She's just a kid."

"Don't tell me how to do my job," Russ spat, biting down on the toothpick. "That girl knows something and I'll get it out of her as long as Ms. Welch stays out of my way."

Daniel sighed heavily. "If she knows something, which I doubt, you'll never get it out of her by using heavy-handed tactics."

"You really piss me off with that 'good cop' attitude."

"Well, Russ, you catch this guy and I'll stay the hell out of your way forever."

Russ was ready to say more, but Joel walked up. "Ready, Russ?"

"Yeah." Russ picked up his cell phone and attached it to his belt. "We're meeting with the kid who threw the party to get the

names of everyone who was there. Then we'll have the name of the rapist and Miss Wallace will help to finger him."

"I hope you catch him," was all Daniel said.

Russ brushed past him. "I will, and I don't need your help."

Daniel didn't respond. He didn't feel he had to.

Russ stopped and turned back. "Thanks for the apology."

Daniel nodded and watched in silence as Russ and Joel walked away. He hadn't mentioned that he was quitting the force. It wasn't any of Russ's business. He was quitting. For the first time, the word played in his mind. He'd never quit anything in his life and the words suddenly stuck in his throat. He was quitting.

His phone buzzed and he wiped the thought away.

"Daniel, it's Ethan."

"Hey, Ethan, how the hell are you?" He'd never felt so glad to hear his old friend's voice.

"Fine. I was hoping you had time for lunch."

"Sure. I'm free."

"You might change your mind when I tell you where I'm at."

"Try me."

"McDonald's."

Daniel laughed. "You have Jassy with you."

"Yeah."

"Tell me which one and I'll be there as fast as I can."

Within ten minutes he was pulling up at a McDonald's. He found Ethan in the kid's area watching Jassy on a slide.

He shook Ethan's hand. "It's good to see you. Let me get some

coffee and I'll be right back."

He returned with a steaming cup in his hand. Sitting, he pulled his coat tighter around him. "It's cold out here."

"Try telling that to my daughter."

Daniel watched Jassy as she played with another little girl. "Man, she looks just like Serena." And Sarah. Don't think about her.

"Yeah. Isn't she beautiful?"

Daniel shook his head in amusement. "You still have that lovesick quality in your voice just talking about Serena."

"Life's been pretty wonderful lately," Ethan admitted.

Daniel took a sip of the hot coffee. "So how's the rest of the family?"

"Fine. Molly's happy being a wife and mother again. Travis is in Nashville and it looks like he's finally going to get a record deal."

"Last time I saw him he was singing with this woman who had an awesome voice. They were getting a lot of attention here in Dallas."

"It was like a domino effect. Someone saw them and told this guy from a record company, then he came down and invited them to Nashville. They've been there about six months."

"Hope it works out for him."

"Me, too. He's been dreaming about this since he was fifteen."

"And Walt? How's he?"

Ethan leaned back. "Now that's a whole other story. My father

has been seeing Mrs. Alma Ferguson about five years now. The other night I caught him sneaking in at five in the morning. I told him I didn't understand why he didn't just spend the whole night. He's in his seventies and as long as he practices safe sex I was okay with it. He did not appreciate my sense of humor and he had a few choice words to say about respecting my elders. So I'm just letting Pop do his thing. He's happy. Mrs. Alma's happy. And I'm staying out of it."

Daniel twisted his cup. "I hope when I'm that age, I'll still be thinking about women."

"Anyone in particular?"

Suddenly Daniel saw blue eyes and red hair.

"Daniel?"

"What?"

Ethan raised an eyebrow. "You seem a bit out of it today."

Daniel ran both hands through his hair. "I'm quitting the force."

"What!"

"I'm tired, Ethan. Tired of crime. Tired of the bad guys always getting the best of us. I lock a bastard up for selling drugs to kids and he's back on the street within a week doing the same thing. The revolving door never stops and I've had it."

"I hate to hear that. You're one of the best cops I've ever worked with."

"Your sister-in-law has a different opinion." He shouldn't have said that, but it seemed to slip out. Stop thinking about her.

“Sarah?”

“I guess it all comes back to Rudy Boyd and all the lives he’s destroyed.”

“But you got him, Daniel. He’s on death row waiting for an execution date.”

“That won’t change things for Sarah or Greg.”

“You can’t blame yourself.”

“I do, though. I should have been aware of what Greg was doing.”

“You trusted him—like I’ve trusted men under me. Greg broke that trust, not you.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t help me to sleep better at night.”

“Daniel...”

“Daddy, Daddy.” Jassy crawled into Ethan’s lap. “Did you watch me, Daddy?”

“I’m always watching you.” He wrapped his arms around her. “Do you remember Daniel?”

Jassy nodded and said, “Hi.”

“You have the most beautiful blue eyes,” Daniel said, mesmerized by their brightness.

“I got my mommy’s eyes,” she told him.

“Sarah has them, too.” He didn’t even realize he’d spoken the words out loud until he saw Ethan’s face.

“Mommy and Sari are just alike, but Daddy and me can tell them apart. We know Mommy, don’t we, Daddy?”

“You bet we know Mommy.”

Daniel stood. "I'd better go."

"Why don't you come back to the house with us? Serena would love to see you."

Daniel shook his head. "Thanks, but I've been working on a case and I have some loose ends to tie up. After I see the lieutenant on Monday, I'm flying to France to see my parents."

"Sarah will be there," Ethan added with a sheepish grin as if he knew exactly what was on Daniel's mind—a woman he couldn't get out of his head.

"Ah, Ethan, I think you're reading me like a book."

"I recognize the signs." Ethan got to his feet with Jassy in his arms. "Take some time. Don't give up a career you love out of guilt, and stop blaming yourself for things you have no control over. Most important, talk to Sarah."

Daniel didn't tell Ethan he already had. He didn't want his friend caught in the middle. He'd deal with the situation in his own way.

"I'll think about it," he said, reaching over to kiss Jassy's cheek. "Kiss your mom for me."

"No." Jassy frowned. "You can't kiss my mommy. Only Daddy kisses Mommy."

"Jasmine Marie," Ethan scolded gently. "That's not nice."

"I'm sorry." Jassy hung her head.

Daniel touched her soft cheek. "It's okay and I promise to never kiss your mommy."

"Okay." Jassy glanced up at him, her eyes bright again. "I kiss

Sari for you. Sari needs lots of kisses.”

Daniel’s stomach tightened at the innocent words, but he felt the simple truth in them, too. How nice it would be to kiss Sarah Welch. He shook Ethan’s hand and strolled away, a slight curve to his mouth.

Only in my dreams, Jassy. Only in my dreams.

CHAPTER FIVE

SARAH HAD A GREAT TIME. She relaxed and enjoyed her afternoon with her twin. They talked, shopped, laughed and made fun of each other with sisterly love. In the mall, they ordered a decadent chocolate-fudge sundae then spent two hours in a beauty salon getting a pedicure and a manicure. Sarah also had her long hair cut into a casual style that hung around her shoulders.

They ignored the many stares and glances they received, but they were secretly amused. Two identical redheads were an eye-catcher.

Since she was on call, she had to take a couple of phone calls, but other than that they had the afternoon to themselves. Later, she went by the hospital to check on Brooke. Her family was there, so Sarah knew she was okay.

They picked up food to cook on the grill for dinner and Ethan played chef, then Jassy put on a show with her jumping and flipping. Sarah and Serena talked until after midnight and Sarah felt herself opening up, confiding and exposing the destructive emotions inside her. All this time and she'd thought she was fine. It took Daniel's words and Brooke's question to make her realize she was far from a full recovery.

She'd made a start with her sister's help and she intended to go forward now. Sarah felt as if she'd been living in a darkened room

and someone had suddenly opened a door, letting in the fresh air and sunshine. She could feel its warmth slowly seeping into the coldest part of her. The feeling was liberating. She realized it was only a small step and she had a long way to go, but she was ready to face life again with Serena and her family behind her.

All too soon, they were saying goodbye and Sarah experienced a moment of sadness for all the years she and Serena had missed. But they had each other now and that's what counted.

She held Jassy close, not wanting to let her go.

"Oh, I forget," Jassy said, planting a big kiss on Sarah's cheek. "That's from Daniel."

Sarah felt the blood draining from her face. It was one of those unexpected moments that left her vulnerable and speechless. Ethan hadn't said anything about his visit with Daniel. Evidently she'd been mentioned.

"He wanted me to give Mommy a kiss, but I said no, that only Daddy kisses Mommy. I tell him I kiss you."

"Oh, I see," Sarah murmured in a low voice. Daniel really wanted to kiss Serena. Who wouldn't?

Ethan took Jassy out of her arms. "Come here, munchkin, before you get yourself in a lot of trouble." Ethan hugged Sarah. "Call Daniel," he whispered, and took Jassy to the truck.

Serena was talking to Gran and Sarah was only vaguely aware of their voices. Call Daniel. What had Daniel told Ethan?

"I enjoyed this surprise visit," Gran was saying.

Serena kissed Gran. "Remember you and Sarah are coming

to spend the week during spring break.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Serena hugged Sarah and they held on tight. “I’m a phone call away,” Serena said.

“I know, and thanks.”

Serena leaned back. “You’re going to be fine and you look marvelous.”

Sarah curtsied. “Thank you. I look like my sister.”

They laughed and it felt so good to have that happy feeling again. Serena ran to the truck and Jassy waved frantically.

Sarah waved until they were out of sight. Linking her arm with Gran’s, they went back into the house.

“I thought I’d go to Hazel’s,” Gran said. “They’re playing bridge at her house.” Gran was an avid bridge player and she tried to never miss a game.

“Sure, Gran,” Sarah replied. “Go ahead. I’ve got a lot of work to catch up on.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want you to be lonely.”

“I’m fine, Gran.”

“I do love your new hairstyle.”

“Thanks. Now go have fun and—” Her phone rang, cutting her off. “See, I’ll be busy.”

“Bye, darling.”

“Bye, Gran,” Sarah called after her, and clicked on her cell phone.

It was Brooke and she was upset because the police were

waiting to question her again and she wanted Sarah there. Sarah grabbed her purse and jacket and headed for the hospital.

She hurried down the corridor to Brooke's room, hoping Daniel would be there. Ethan was right. She had to talk to him. She didn't blame him for Greg's death and she had to tell him that.

She turned a corner and saw Russ and the other detective, Joel, standing outside Brooke's door. Daniel wasn't here. Her heart sank.

Russ had his back to her, but Joel saw her. He nudged Russ. "Ms. Welch is here."

Russ swung around, ready to unload on her, but his jaw dropped and no words came out. His narrowed eyes slid over her, taking in the cobweb of glistening copper hair that hung around her face and shoulders. She had on a white V-necked sweater, tan slacks and a dark suede jacket. Russ's eyes seemed glued to her cleavage.

She felt a moment of panic, but only for a moment. Up until now Russ had only seen her in blouses buttoned to her throat. His stare didn't make her angry and she didn't feel herself shriveling up inside because a man was looking at her. She knew that was a good sign. Finally she was letting herself mend.

Russ recovered quickly. "We've been waiting for almost an hour. It's good of you to show up."

"I got the call less than thirty minutes ago and I came immediately."

“Then let’s see her because I don’t have any more time to waste.”

Sarah and the detectives walked into the room and Brooke’s parents quietly slipped out. Brooke was sitting up in bed and Sarah went to her side.

“Are you ready?” Sarah asked.

“Yes. Now that you’re here.”

Sarah nodded to Russ and he laid some papers in Brooke’s lap. “Those are names of everyone at the party. Take a good look, Miss Wallace, and tell me if you recognize any of them.”

For the next thirty minutes Russ questioned Brooke about every male on the paper, but she didn’t have any answers, or at least not the ones Russ wanted.

Brooke held up well and Sarah admired her strength. Russ didn’t pressure her or use his usual macho tactics and Sarah was grateful for that. Afterward Sarah sat with Brooke until her parents returned. She left the hospital wondering where Daniel was. She didn’t think he’d quit in the middle of an investigation—that wouldn’t be like him at all. But what did she know about Daniel? That he was reliable, compassionate, loyal, supportive, kind and the list went on. She knew nothing about his personal life or his family and she’d never heard Ethan say anything about them, either.

That’s probably the way it should stay, she decided as she pulled into her garage. Still she didn’t want to be part of the reason he’d quit his job. She’d rectify that the next time she saw

him. She just didn't know exactly when that would be.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.