



***A Runaway's
Reunion***

E. J. Anderson

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BY

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ONE

With a tired sigh, Deirdre Ingstrom clicked the cursor pointing to the printer icon on her computer screen. Anxious, she ran her fingers through her hair. How could she reunite this runaway teenager with her uncle who had filed her name with Missing and Exploited Children? It had taken several visits to the teen before Deirdre finally learned that Bobbie Thomas's real name was Robin Colter. Deirdre had tried to convince the sixteen-year-old that Adam Colter wanted her home, but she had failed.

Although, that wasn't unexpected. Reunions were often difficult to arrange, as one would be in Robin's case. That was why Deirdre and her late husband had opened the halfway house for runaways. The setting gave teens time to prepare themselves, both emotionally and psychologically, for going home to their families. Many youngsters were either afraid of their parents or guardians, or the teen wanted nothing to do with them.

If only that were the pretty young waitress's problem. Deirdre could understand fear or hatred. Home situations often contributed to teens running away in the first place. But how did she deal with someone who adored her guardian like Robin so obviously did Adam? Granted, Robin hadn't said the words, but Deirdre could feel the emotional turmoil in Robin at the mere mention of Adam Colter's name. She could see how much Robin loved him in her expression. Still, Robin had run away, and Deirdre was determined to solve the mystery as to why.

Their conversation had also brought back painful memories for Deirdre, and tears stung her eyes as she reflected on one of her meetings with the girl. Getting Robin to admit her true identity had been the most difficult part; but once she did, Deirdre found the girl outgoing and quite willing to talk.

Leaning on her desk, she thought back to their last conversation.

"How did you know my real name?" Robin asked as she accepted the business card Deirdre extended toward her.

"I run a halfway house for runaways," Deirdre explained. "I have an old picture of you hanging on a bulletin board in my office, as well as a computerized age progression picture of what you could look like now. The picture is a very close resemblance, and my ward—Jared Ellis—recognized you when he was in here. Your uncle loves you very much if he's been searching for you all these years."

"I know he loves me," she admitted as she flopped her long, dark blonde ponytail behind her shoulder, "but I can't go back."

"Of course, you can—if you want to badly enough. And I'm here to help you make the transition. You can live at the house while you emotionally prepare yourself to go home. I'm a psychotherapist, and we'll talk any time you want—for as long as you want. I'll even work with you

and your family to make sure all the problems that made you run away in the first place are resolved. That will give you a good start to a successful reunion."

"I can't go back, Mrs. Ingstrom," Robin insisted, glancing at the card. "Besides, the Thomases have been good to me. I even went to school until I turned sixteen a couple weeks ago. Then Glenn—that's Mr. Thomas—got me this job here in the coffee shop."

"Did you want to quit school?"

Robin answered without hesitation. "Oh, no! I always liked school. I had really good grades, too. I always brought home As and high Bs. My counselor even tried to talk Glenn into letting me stay."

"Then at least come to the home, Robin. We'll get you right back into school, while you can still make up what you've missed."

"I wish I could," Robin said. "But I can't."

Deirdre laid her hand on the teenager's forearm to reassure her. "Don't worry, Robin. I'm not going to force you to come. Will you at least let me call your uncle and tell him that you're alive and well?"

Robin drew in a deep breath and shook her head. "I don't think that's a good idea. He'll come looking for me, and I can't go back."

"I won't tell him where you are—just that I talked to you and you're doing fine. Remember something while you're thinking about this, would you? I understand how you feel because I ran away myself when I was your age."

"No kidding!" After a brief pause, she asked, "You promise that you won't tell Uncle Adam where I am?"

"I won't even give him a hint." Deirdre's heart ached with renewed memories of her own father. She'd loved him, but she'd refused to go home because she loathed her mother. Quite obviously, Robin had the same kind of love for her uncle. Deirdre could hear it in the girl's voice. "All I'll tell him is that you're fine."

"All right then—as long as you promise."

When the laser printer stopped, Deirdre took the paper then rolled her chair back to her desk. Poor Robin. The tone of her voice had spoken louder than the actual words. Robin wanted to reunite with her uncle, but something was holding her back. And Deirdre could think of only one thing that could be.

With a sigh, Deirdre turned to the seventeen-year-old boy across from her then sipped her coffee while examining the information about Robin.

"Well, Jared," she said, "according to what Robin told me last night, she's the same Robin Colter. I don't like you being in that area of town, but in this case, I have to forgive your disobedience. In fact, I have to let you go back. I left my card with her, but I don't think she'll contact me. When you get off work tonight, go to the diner and let her know that I called her uncle. I'd do it myself, but I want to give her a little time to think about our discussion. You know how I hate to pressure you kids."

"Okay, Mrs. Ingstrom," he said. "Do you think she'll go home?"

"At the moment, no. We'll have to convince her that everything will be all right."

"But you don't know it will be."

"If Mr. Colter submitted her name to the national database and had someone do an age progression from 12 until now, he loves his niece. I'll call him now and tell him that we located her." Beside her the large black Labrador retriever she kept for protection nudged her

arm, and Deirdre stroked his head. "Would you please let Shadow out for me? And check his water, please?"

"Sure. Come on, Shadow," the tall, lanky redhead said as he left the room. "I'll be back around seven, Mrs. Ingstrom."

Deirdre picked up the telephone handset and dialed the business number for Adam Colter. It only rang twice before the woman on the other end answered, "A. L. C. Industries. Joyce speaking. May I help you?"

"Yes, ma'am," she replied. "My name is Deirdre Ingstrom, and I'm the director of Mackenzie's Halfway House for Runaways. I'd like to speak with Mr. Adam Colter—if he isn't busy."

"Halfway house?" the woman repeated. "For runaways? He's in a meeting, but I'll get him out. I don't know how long this will take, so don't hang up, okay?"

Before Deirdre could reply, the soft, melodic strains of Beethoven came over the receiver. In only a couple of minutes, it was interrupted by a man's frantic voice. "Did you say you run a halfway house for runaways? Are you calling about my niece? Is she with you now?"

Deirdre's heart went out to the man. Like Robin, he very obviously wanted this reunion. It was a shame that she couldn't promote it yet. Forcing an official tone to her voice, she said, "No, sir, but I do know where she is."

"Where? I'll be there as soon as I can."

Deirdre sighed. This wouldn't be easy on him, so she needed to stay as calm as possible. "Please give me time to explain, Mr. Colter. My name is Deirdre Ingstrom. And as your secretary obviously informed you, I'm the director of Mackenzie's Halfway House for Runaways. Late last night I met with a teenager named Robin Colter. When I spoke with her, I got permission to call and let you know that she's alive and well. Unfortunately, that's the only permission I have. I can't tell you where she is without breaking a confidence, which would completely destroy any faith she has in me at the moment."

"What kind of faith do you expect *me* to have in you if you don't tell me?" he demanded.

She struggled to maintain her calm. Verbally jousting with Robin's uncle would only antagonize him. "At the moment, I don't care whether you have faith in me or not. My priority is convincing *Robin* that I can be trusted. If you don't let me handle this my way, you may never see her again."

"The hell I won't!"

"Mr. Colter, please," she said through gritted teeth. She had to avoid a confrontation—for Robin's sake.

"I've spent tens of thousands of dollars trying to find my niece, lady. And I want an answer! Now where is she?"

Deirdre answered with unemotional words. "I can't even tell you what city she's in. I spent about twenty minutes with her last night, Mr. Colter. She loves you, but if you want to be reunited with her, you're going to have to let me handle it my way. I assure you that it will be best for everybody concerned."

"How would *you* know what's best for us?" he snapped.

"I've been in this business for seven years. I also have a masters in psychology. Lastly, I've reunited eighty-four families, which averages to one family a month, so I know what I'm doing. My instincts are finely honed, Mr. Colter. Ninety-five percent of the time, I understand these kids. I'd say that gives me plenty of expertise in determining the appropriate time for

a reunion. In your case, now isn't the time. You could destroy everything just by pushing things too fast for Robin."

"Look, Miss ..." After a brief pause, he asked, "What was your name again?"

"Mrs. Deirdre Ingstrom."

"I don't care about your instincts. All I care about is getting my niece back."

"And you will if you give me time to work with her, to gain not only her trust but her respect."

"I've had it up to my neck with you, Mrs. Deirdre Ingstrom. If you don't tell me where she is right this second, I'll report you to ... to ... whoever it is I report your actions to. And believe me, I'll find out exactly what organization that is. Now where is Robin?" He put emphasis on the last three words.

No longer able to control her temper, Deirdre let her irritation show in her voice. "I won't divulge that information, Mr. Colter. So go ahead and report me. I've told you everything I intend to. Now I have a lot of other work to do. Good-bye, Mr. Colter. I'll contact you again when Robin gives permission for me to do so."

To still her growing anger, Deirdre breathed through clenched teeth as she hung up the phone. Thank goodness she'd stifled her rage throughout most of their conversation. If she hadn't, she might have let Robin being in Orlando, Florida, slip in the middle of an argument. Still, she felt sorry for him. People who acted like Adam Colter were also people desperate for a reunion, and she really didn't blame him for his attitude. She was the only person he'd been in contact with who could bring his niece back. Knowing that could only increase his frustration.

Her heart went out to the man. As he had pointed out, he was desperate enough to spend thousands of dollars trying to find her. At least, he didn't know where she was so he could show up and make the same demands that he had over the phone. She wasn't sure she could handle him as well in person. Then again, maybe she could. He'd been rude, obnoxious, and overbearing on the telephone. He would probably have those same qualities in her presence. And if there was any type of person she refused to tolerate, it was a man like Adam Colter.

Deirdre slid the printout into a file folder then put the folder into the file drawer labeled C. Returning to the desk, she sank wearily onto her chair and combed her fingers through her long, dark bangs. As she did, her gaze fell upon the newspaper clipping that had come in the mail the previous day. The envelope had been marked personal, so her teenage secretary hadn't seen the contents. It was a good thing, too. The girl would have been terrified.

Picking up the article, she scanned it. A young boy she'd contacted had been killed by a hit and run driver. The only name on his body was hers—from her business card. Of course, she'd known about the boy's death before the story appeared in the paper. The police had already talked to her. Unfortunately, she hadn't been able to help locate his next of kin because he wasn't listed in the national database. Nor had he revealed his parents' names to her.

Then the clipping had arrived in the mail with her address typed on the envelope. There was no note with it and no return address. The postmark was from Winter Garden, a small town outside Orlando. Deirdre had kept the clipping but had automatically shredded it. With a cross-cut shredder, there was no way she could piece it back together.

Now that she'd had time to think about it, she regretted disposing of the envelope. She sensed that the clipping was some sort of message. Otherwise, why would anybody send it

to her? But what type of message could it be? Had the boy been in trouble because of her? If so, she would never be able to live with herself?

Sighing, Deirdre laid the article down and put her magnifying paperweight on top of it. She had more important things to do than dream up preposterous theories to fulfill some deep-seeded need for adventure in her life. She had families to reunite. That should be adventure enough.

"I don't know, Mrs. Ingstrom," Jared told her that evening. "Robin sure didn't seem very happy that you told her uncle we found her. She knows she said it was okay, but she says she's afraid he'll try to find her."

Deirdre didn't want to think about Adam Colter, let alone talk about him. But she needed to consult with Jared on the case. With a grimace, she explained, "After talking to her uncle, I can understand why. Did you tell her that I would never divulge the information unless she agreed to it?"

"Sure, but she's still scared."

Tapping her pen on her desk blotter, she contemplated her next move. She really didn't like going to that part of town, but she didn't know how else she could resolve the matter. "I'd better go out there myself and reassure her. I don't want her to think that I'll betray her confidence. And I certainly don't want her to distrust me—not even for some reason she's built up in her mind."

"You don't say it, Mrs. Ingstrom," Jared observed, "but I think you're already more involved in this case than you are in the rest of them. How come?"

Studying the teen for several moments, Deirdre considered his statement. He was right, but her feeling of kinship with Robin wasn't something she could put into words. The emotional pain she had suffered after running away from her father was still too strong.

"You're right, Jared, but don't ask me to explain. Why don't you go get some ..."

The office door slammed open, and Deirdre stared in shock at the sandy-haired man looming in the portal. Behind the reddish, neatly trimmed beard, his rage showed on his tanned face. The muscles in his powerful arms twitched as he clenched his hands into tight fists. Beside her Shadow growled deep in his throat.

Stunned, Adam Colter gazed at the brunette with bouncy curled hair. She certainly wasn't the matronly woman he'd expected to encounter. She was young and beautiful, with wide blue eyes that sparkled. At the moment, she used them to scan his frame, as if sizing him up for battle. That was exactly why he'd flown to Orlando—a battle of wills if she forced the issue. At least, that would happen if he could keep his hands to himself.

He didn't know why he had such an instantaneous reaction to her. Yes, she was very pretty, very petite, but she wasn't knock-dead gorgeous. Maybe it was because of the argument they'd had on the phone; maybe it was because of her determination to do things *her* way. Or maybe, and much more likely, it was his shock at not seeing the middle-aged woman he'd expected to see.

To regain his anger, he reminded himself of his mission.

Deirdre didn't like the look in this man's face. He was furious about something, but his brown eyes also carried an underlying hint of seduction. The contradiction set off her internal alarm. Could this man be the person who'd sent her that note? No, that was ludicrous. She had no reason to believe that the person who'd sent it would come to her home and confront her. But she had no reason to believe that he wouldn't, either!

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Ingstrom," a teenage girl apologized as she peered into the room from behind the man. "He wouldn't listen to me."

"It's all right, Stephanie. You can leave us alone now. I'll be fine." Deirdre couldn't take her eyes off the ruggedly built man. His tight, faded blue jeans and short-sleeved Polo shirt showed every muscle. The mere sight of him sent long-forgotten feelings of excitement coursing through her. But she couldn't think of such things when it was obvious that she was about to have a confrontation with him. Drawing in a deep, faltering breath, she said, "Jared, take Shadow and go get something to eat."

"Are you sure, Mrs. Ingstrom?" Jared asked with an anxious tone in his voice. "He's awfully big—awfully mad, too."

"I'm positive," she replied. "Now go on."

"Okay." Grabbing the dog's collar, Jared steered him to the door, but he paused a moment to stare up at the intruder before he passed the man and closed the door behind him.

"Now that we're face to face," the man insisted, "you're going to give me some answers."

Deirdre struggled to maintain her composure. Getting angry would be counterproductive at this point. "I don't even know who you are, so don't expect my cooperation."

"I'm Adam Colter, and you'll give me all the answers I want. Is that understood?"

Stifling a sigh of relief, Deirdre held her ground. Even though she'd sent Jared away with her only protection, she'd expected to be attacked. But the man was only Robin's uncle. Although, that knowledge did little to alleviate her anxiety.

Putting on a bravado she didn't feel, she replied, "All I understand at the moment is that I'm dealing with a self-centered, overbearing man who knows nothing about promises."

"Nothing about promises?" he raged. "Look, lady. The reason I'm here is because I promised my brother I'd take care of his little girl if anything happened to him and his wife. Well, it did, and I fully intend to *keep* my promise, with or without your help."

"And I'm going to keep my promise to Robin by refusing to tell you where she is." No longer in control of her temper, Deirdre strode to stand before Adam, staring up at him as she straightened her shoulders. She wanted to give the impression that she was unafraid of the man towering over her, but an impression was the best she could do. "I refuse to tell you where Robin is unless she says I can. Right now, she's a scared kid who needs compassion from somebody who can be objective. That obviously isn't you."

"You know nothing about ..."

"Shut up and listen to me for a change."

"In case you've forgotten, that's all I've done," he countered. "I haven't had my say yet, damn it, and I'm going to whether you like it or not."

"I'm not interested in anything you have to say, unless it's that you're getting on the next plane and going back where you came from. I don't like your attitude, Mr. Colter, and I won't tolerate it. There's simply no room in the way I reunite families for someone like you. If you don't like it, just leave."

“Well, I *don't* like it, and I don't like you not telling me where my niece is. But that *doesn't* mean I have any intention of leaving. I won't—not until I get answers. Now let's start with why you hung up on me this morning.”

Deirdre glared at him. Never in her life had she met such an infuriating, obstinate man. “You know why I hung up. You were acting just like you are now. You wouldn't listen to reason. I don't know who you think you are, but this isn't just my business establishment. It's also my home. I don't like people coming in uninvited.”

“You had no intention of inviting me, so I *had* to barge in. If you'd told me over the phone where I could find Robin, ...”

Her eyes narrowed in rage. He had no right to put the blame on her when she was trying to help his niece. “I'm not in the wrong here! *You* are! I could have you arrested if I wanted to—for harassment and trespassing.”

“And I could have *you* arrested for contributing to the delinquency of a minor,” he countered.

“I'm *helping* her—by protecting her rights. She's not ready to see you, so leave us alone. I'll more than happily tell you where she is when *she* says it's okay and not before. Without her permission, I won't betray her confidence. My late husband and I both worked with these kids. When he died, I took over everything. I've been working with them for a long time, Mr. Colter. I know how they feel and how to interact with them. Can you say the same thing?”

“I know my niece, and that's all I care about.”

“You may have known her when she left four years ago,” Deirdre declared, “but you sure don't know her now. A girl of twelve and a young woman of sixteen are two entirely different personalities, even if they are the same person.”

Adam listened to her furious words, several times attempting to interject his own opinions despite her nonstop lecture. If she would just shut up long enough to listen to his side, maybe she'd reconsider and give him Robin's location. Unfortunately, her full lips continued to move; her bright blue eyes remained fixed on his face. If she wouldn't stop talking, he would just have to silence her the only way he could think of at the moment.

What had gotten into him? He wasn't this kind of man. But Deirdre Ingstrom had sparked something in him during their first conversation. That was why he'd been so desperate to find out where she was—that and his imminent reunion with his niece. Now, though, he realized meeting the woman standing before him, chastising him for being there, had always lurked in the back of his mind.

If she would stop talking for even a second, he would apologize for barging in like he had. But she just kept scolding him for his inappropriate behavior. Inappropriate behavior, huh? Well, he would show her inappropriate behavior. No! He couldn't. He had strict no-harassment rules in his business, and this would be nothing short of that. Don't do it, he chastised himself. Don't even consider it.

Before he realized what was in his mind, he grabbed her upper arms in a firm grip. Even though she stopped talking and stared up at him with startled blue eyes, even though he knew he had made his point and could release her now, he *couldn't* let go. Instead, he bent and captured her lips with his.

Several seconds later, he jerked his head back, unable to believe his own actions. He stared down at her in amazement. He'd never treated a woman like that before! But he wasn't

a bit sorry that he'd kissed her, either. It was one of the most satisfying moments of his life, but he had no idea why. And that frightened him more than he wanted to admit.

Inhaling, he gazed over at her before he calmed and said, "I apologize for my behavior, but you wouldn't shut up."

"That doesn't matter. You're still in the wrong here. How did you find me, anyway? I didn't tell you where I lived."

"You sure as hell *didn't*," he snapped. He was angry again, this time at himself for his more than inappropriate behavior. "I had my secretary google you, not that I didn't already know what part of the country you were in. I know the Orlando area code, and I have caller ID on my business phones. You didn't even stop to think about that when you were reaming me out. Then, just to be sure, I called the place where I registered Robin's name and had them double check, so I'd know if this was the right place. I couldn't remember the name, and I figured they could refresh my memory."

"You're blaming *me* for your intrusion?"

"You're the one with the big mouth, Mrs. Ingstrom."

"And speaking of mouths," she chastised, "how *dare* you kiss me like that! You had no right to even touch me."

Stunned by how deeply her words cut into his heart, Adam stared at her for a moment. His heart broke at his treatment of her. This wasn't the man he was. He was kind and loving toward women. He'd never done such a thing before. To hide his disappointment in himself, he replied in a cool tone. "Don't worry, lady. I wouldn't *dream* of repeating my actions."

"You'd better not." Striding to the door, she yanked it open then faced him again. "Now if you'd leave ..."

"Not until you answer my questions."

She answered in an even tone that belied the anger in her eyes.

"I don't blame you for being frustrated or angry, Mr. Colter. But I do resent you not listening to me. You don't know what to expect of Robin, and she doesn't know what to expect of you. Give me some time to gain her confidence and try to talk her into a reunion. These things don't just happen. It takes a lot of work and even more patience."

"How much time?" he asked, again surprising himself with the quiet curiosity in his tone.

"I don't know. It could be tomorrow or the next day, but it could also be next week or even next month. Whenever it is, I'll notify you immediately—despite the animosity I feel toward you. I'm trying to help these kids and their families, Mr. Colter. The only way I can do it effectively is with everybody's cooperation. That includes yours."

"I'll give you a week. If she isn't ready for a reunion by then, I'm taking matters to the police."

"And if I want more than a week," she insisted, "I'll take it no matter what you say. Now good-bye, Mr. Colter. I have work to do."

"I'll leave your business, but I won't leave town. As soon as I find a place to stay, I'll call you and let you know where I am." Although he started through the door, Adam halted beside her, reached into his pocket, and handed her a business card. "Here's my number. My niece means everything to me, Mrs. Ingstrom. I won't give up until I get her back, especially now that I'm so close after years of false leads."

She didn't know how she could keep herself so calm, but she did. Her body reeled with excitement that she'd never before felt. She'd been so startled by his unexpected, grinding kiss that she hadn't been able to react. Despite her anger at the time, she hadn't even been able to think. Her mind had gone blank. But the pounding of her heart had been even more unexpected. It had been almost as though she'd never been kissed by a man in her life. Maybe the unexpectedness of it is what kept her from slapping him the moment he pulled back. To do so now would be ludicrous, not to mention far too delayed.

Shaking the thought from her head, she returned her gaze to the deep brown eyes. He really was handsome, even with the scar he sported across his forehead. No! She had to quit thinking that way. He was someone she needed to work with in close alliance to reunite him with Robin. He was also an egotistical man who would intrude into another's business without so much as a warning.

As much as she hated to admit it, she *should* let Adam stay and have his say, and then she could explain her manner of conducting business calmly so he could understand. But she was afraid that they wouldn't be able to remain rational, given their kiss a few minutes ago, not to mention her reaction to it. The best thing she could do was explain and get him out of there.

Uncertain how to react to his final declaration, she stared after the departing man. She should reassure him, but she couldn't find the words. One minute he infuriated her with his actions; the next, he touched her heart with mere words. She did know one thing, though. He loved Robin. That could only lead to a successful reunion—if he could be patient long enough for her to pave the way.

Actually, Deirdre felt a little sorry for the man. From the way he talked, he'd had more than his share of heartache over Robin's disappearance. With perseverance, she could get the girl back in the right home, the home where she would be unconditionally loved. And the sooner she did it, the better off Robin would be. The better off she herself would be, too, because she wouldn't have to deal with that arrogant idiot anymore.

All she had to do was wait at least a half an hour before leaving the house to make sure that Adam was really gone. If she learned anything that day, it was that she couldn't trust him not to take matters into his own hands. And if he did, he could spoil everything.

Deirdre rolled her driver's side window down about four inches before she closed the minivan door, then she locked it by pushing the button on her keychain.

"Stay, Shadow," she said as the large dog hopped onto the driver's seat. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

After cautiously making her way down the street crowded with men and women in their late teens and early twenties, Deirdre walked into the coffee shop on the corner. She hated this part of town and was glad to be out of the midst of the seedier members of Orlando's citizenry. Sitting down at a table in the nearly empty building, she smiled as Robin approached her and took a seat across the table.

"Something I didn't expect happened this evening, Robin," Deirdre explained.

"What's that?" Robin asked.

"Your uncle stormed into my office a while ago. He knew by the Orlando area code where where you were. Then he googled me. Believe me, I had no idea he'd do something like that, so I didn't even consider it when I talked to him this morning."

"That's okay, Mrs. Ingstrom. You couldn't help it."

"I can't guarantee that he won't find you, Robin," Deirdre warned. "He was furious when I refused to tell him where you were. Would you like to reunite with him now and get it over with? My being there might make things easier for you."

"No," Robin said frantically. "No, we can't do that. Not yet."

Concerned with the teen's reaction, Deirdre grasped Robin's hands to comfort her. "What's wrong, honey? Why are you so worried about seeing your uncle again? You seem to love him, but you also seem to be afraid of him."

"I'm not afraid of Uncle Adam, but I am afraid. I'm ... I'm not ready to see him again. Please don't make me, Mrs. Ingstrom."

"I'm not going to make you do anything, but don't you think you'd be happier with your blood relatives instead of the Thomases?"

"Glenn and Bonnie have never hurt me."

"Has your uncle?" Deirdre asked, recalling Adam's temper.

"Oh, no! He would *never* hurt me—not in a million years."

"Then why not go live with him? I know he wants you back. Actually, I'd say the man's desperate to have you back. He wants to take care of you like he should have since your parents died."

"I know, but Aunt Natalie doesn't want me."

"Who's that?"

"His wife."

"His wife!" Deirdre exclaimed in surprise. The scene in her office and her startling physical reaction to Adam Colter's kiss flashed across her mind. How could he do such a thing when he had a wife? To conceal her growing anger, Deirdre said, "He didn't tell me he was married, but it's not surprising."

"I never liked her," Robin admitted. "And I don't think she liked me."

"Is that why you don't want to go back?"

Pulling away, Robin bowed her head and admitted, "I don't even want to *see* Aunt Natalie."

"She wasn't with him when he came to the office, so you wouldn't have to see her yet if you didn't want to."

"It doesn't matter."

"All right then," Deirdre agreed, not wanting to pressure the youth. "I'll tell Mr. Colter that you're not quite ready."

"Thanks a lot, Mrs. Ingstrom."

Deirdre smiled to reassure her. "That's why I'm here, Robin, to make the transition easier for everybody. And by the way, call me Deirdre. I'd better go now. I have a feeling your uncle will call me tonight, and I want to be home to talk to him."

Adam collapsed onto the bed in his motel room. It wasn't a great place, but it would be quieter than a hotel. What a day! As glad as he was that Robin had turned up, he was more

distressed now than he had been when he'd learned that she'd disappeared. For some reason, she didn't want to see him, which he simply couldn't understand. He and Robin had always been close. They'd played together, gone to movies together, read together, watched TV together. They'd laughed and cried together. He'd even told her many times that he couldn't love her anymore if she'd been his daughter instead of his niece. So why didn't she want to see him *now*?

Turning his head on the pillow, he stared at his cellphone on the nightstand. Maybe Deirdre could explain it to him. No, she'd already admitted that she didn't understand. But he had told her that he would call and tell her where he was staying. If nothing else, that gave him an excuse to talk to her again—and apologize again.

Adam picked up his phone, stared at it a moment, and then put it back on the nightstand. All of a sudden, he didn't know what to say to Deirdre. He'd treated her like an uncouth cad, and his actions embarrassed him. What had gotten into him, anyway? He'd *never* treated a woman like he had Deirdre. Why had he not been able to control his actions with her? It just didn't make sense.

Sighing, Adam stared at the ceiling. He needed to collect himself before he called Deirdre. He needed to think of the most appropriate words to apologize.

TWO

Deirdre returned home and headed straight to bed. Normally, she didn't have much trouble convincing a parent or guardian that a reunion can take time, but Adam Colter had shown her that some people refused to listen to reason. If he kept pushing the way he was, he'd never get to see his niece again, and Deirdre hated the thought of the separation being permanent. If any two family members belonged together, it was Adam and Robin Colter. She ought to know; she'd been in a similar situation—loving one parent yet hating the other so much she couldn't go home.

Somehow she had to cajole Adam into relenting in his demand. Beneath his gruff exterior, a compassionate man must exist. But where? And how far down did she have to dig to find him? He was there, though. She could feel it. If she could just stay calm when he became angry, maybe then she could bring that compassionate guy to the surface. But Adam Colter was such an aggravating man!

The cellphone beside her bed buzzed, startling her so badly that she jumped and stared at it while it buzzed twice times. When she answered the call, she didn't even have time to put the phone to her ear before a deep, enraged voice shouted at her.

"Where the blazes have you been for the last hour and a half?"

"What?" she responded in astonishment. "Who is this?"

"You know damned good and well who this is. I told you I was going to call as soon as I found a place to stay, but you left. Don't you even have a business card? I had to call all over the place trying to find out your phone number. Why the hell don't you have it in a phonebook or even on your website?"

All of a sudden, Deirdre recognized the voice. She didn't like people talking to her like this, and she refused to put up with his constant barrage of demands. "Look, Mr. Colter, I don't owe you explanations. I had work to do, and I won't stop just because you try to dictate my life. As for my cell number, I don't know how you got it, but I don't appreciate you calling. I only give it to select people."

"I don't like your attitude, lady," he snapped. "What kind of business are you running, anyway, that you won't give your number to your clients?"

"Did you ever stop to think that I don't care for *your* attitude, either? So far, you haven't said one nice word to me. *That's* why I didn't want you to have my number."

Actually, that wasn't true. She had just been so angry that she'd forgotten to give him her business card, but she had no intention of telling him that. Still, this number wouldn't have been on it, because she only gave it to runaways that she knew were close to a reunion.

"Can I help it if I'm worried sick about my niece?" he asked irately, bringing her back to their conversation. "Can I help it if you're too stubborn to be reasonable?"

Oh, how she hated this side of Adam Colter. Maybe if she could calm down a little, he would, too, and show her the side that she knew was in him. But when she spoke, her voice remained as angry as her spirit.

"You're the one who's being unreasonable, Mr. Colter. As I've said before, I've been doing this job for a long time. You could at least give me credit for knowing how to handle your situation. Robin isn't ready to see you. Accept that, and we'll get along fine; deny it, and we'll probably have a lot more run-ins like this. So back off. When I can persuade her that she has nothing to be afraid of, I'll let you know. Until then, stop bothering me—either at home or at the office."

"I have a right to know where she is, Mrs. Ingstrom," he proclaimed. "If you won't tell me willingly, I'll ..."

"You can't force information from me. It's not because I'm stubborn, either. I care about Robin, probably as much as you do. I want to see you two back together. The only way I can accomplish that is if you don't push."

The anger in his voice disappeared, he questioned her in a less irritated tone. "What's she afraid of, anyway? She knows I'd never hurt her."

Deirdre smiled when she heard the change in his voice. Maybe she could finally draw out the compassionate man inside. "Of course, she knows that. And I don't know what she's afraid of. She wouldn't say. I'll tell you one thing, though. She acted very strange when I asked her, almost like something other than you was bothering her. I didn't let her see my suspicions because I didn't think the time was right. But I definitely think something's wrong."

"She's living with a pimp, isn't she. I'll find them both and kill him."

"Don't you dare!" she exclaimed, horrified that he would even threaten such a thing. "Please believe me, Mr. Colter. She's not living with a pimp, and she's not into prostitution."

"That's what happens to young girls on the streets. I've read articles, both in newspapers and on the internet. And I've watched the news magazine shows just like other people. You're treating me like a damned fool when it comes to runaways. Well, I'm not. I've done a lot of research on the subject."

"I'm not treating you like a fool," she responded, her ire once more rising. "You know nothing when it comes to reuniting runaways with their families. You don't know the emotions kids go through when they go back to their families."

"And I suppose you *do*."

"Yes, I do. I ran away when I was sixteen—only I never had the joy of a reunion because my parents died before it happened. That's why I want to put as many kids back with their families as I can." When Deirdre finished her explanation, she met with silence. Assuming he was still there, although she couldn't even hear him breathing, she questioned him in her most sarcastic tone. "What's the matter, Mr. Colter? Did I finally say something that would shut you up? Don't you know how to respond to somebody who knows what she's talking about?"

"I didn't know." He paused then added, "But that doesn't mean I think you're going about this right. All it means is that you've been there, which is probably good for the kids. But what about the adults? You don't know the hell we go through."

"I've seen a lot of families that have been split apart by children running away, and I've done a lot to bring them back together. So, yes, I do know. Unlike *some* people I can name, I'm a sensitive person who . . ."

"Are you insinuating that I'm insensitive?" he demanded.

"You know what they say about shoes fitting."

"Why you little . . ."

"You can call me any name you want to," she cut in, "because I don't care. I've probably

already been called it, anyway. A lot of people don't agree with my tactics, but not one of them has been as hardheaded as you are. You're the most aggravating, irrational man I've ever met. Good-bye."

Disconnecting the call, Deirdre stared at the phone, not at all surprised that it rang again within seconds. Even though she wanted to let it buzz all night, she answered.

"And you're the most aggravating, irrational woman I've ever met," Adam declared without waiting for her to say anything. "Unfortunately, we have to work together on this."

"I work alone, Mr. Colter," she explained with as much calm as she could muster, "at least in the initial stages. Now please give me some time to work with her. And don't call me again tonight. I need to do some more work on her case."

Again she disconnected him, and when the phone rang again, she answered immediately. She just didn't have any patience left for Adam Colter. "I thought I asked you to leave me alone."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Ingstrom," came a woman's voice, "but I thought we could call any time. This is Esther Wilder, and we really need to talk to you."

"Oh!" Deirdre's face heated in embarrassment. "I'm the one who's sorry, Mrs. Wilder. I've had a bad day, and some guy won't quit bothering me. Actually, I could use a different challenge right now. What's the problem?"

"Patty came to the hotel alone tonight," Mrs. Wilder explained. "We had another fight. Her father and I tried to stay calm, but it didn't work."

"Is she still there?"

"No. She left about twenty minutes ago. We kept trying to call you, but you didn't answer."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Wilder. I didn't hear the notification that I had another call. She probably came back here, but it would take at least forty-five minutes. I'll wait and see if she shows up. If she doesn't, I'll come over. We'll put our heads together and see if we can figure out where she might have gone."

When forty minutes passed without Patty returning to the mansion, once owned by Parker Ingstrom but converted into a home for runaways, Deirdre left with Shadow. At the motel, neither she nor the Wilders could think of where Patty might have gone. Deirdre decided to search the places the teenager frequented before coming to the halfway house.

Parking in the area where Patty had lived, Deirdre put Shadow's leash on him and locked her van. When she found out that Patty hadn't been to her former home in the rundown apartment building, Deirdre continued her search. The streets were darker than usual. Several streetlights had either worn out or been shot out. She hated this dingy area of Orlando, anyway, and the darkness made it even worse. She was terrified that somebody would jump out and grab her. But she wasn't sure if it was because of her overactive imagination concerning the newspaper clipping sent to her or pure fright.

Within ten minutes, she'd worked herself into such a state that she had an intense sensation of being followed. Gazing down at her dog, she noticed that he also seemed anxious and even glanced over his back at one point. Apparently, someone really was behind her. The safest thing to do was go directly home.

In the van, she discovered a car behind her. But was it following her or just going the same direction? Rather than go home as she'd planned, she drove toward the nearest police station. The car behind her went the same way. Even when she reached the parking lot, the car continued to tail her. Why hadn't that person shied away the second she came near police

headquarters? Now she wasn't sure what to do.

Relying on instinct, she parked her van, got out, and locked the door. When the car behind her also parked, she strode as casually as she could toward the police station door. But she stopped instantly when she heard a familiar male voice call her name. With her face set in rage, she spun to face him.

"Just a minute, Mrs. Ingstrom!" Adam called as he raced up to her.

"What's *wrong* with you, Colter?" she demanded. "Do you dislike me so much that you have to scare the heck out of me by following me around? I thought some *nut-job* was after me. Come to think of it, I was right."

"If you think a man desperate to get his niece back is a nut-job, I plead guilty," he replied. "Did you come here to bail out Robin?"

"I came here because I was scared I'd show some lunatic where I live. I wanted him off my tail. You just don't get the message, though, do you?"

"Then this has nothing to do with Robin?"

"There are other runaways in Orlando, Mr. Colter. Many other runaways."

"Since we're going to be talking a lot, you can call me Adam."

"I address all parents and guardians formally," she told him. "My motives for being out for you to follow had nothing whatsoever to do with Robin. Another young lady ran away from her parents a second time but didn't come back to the halfway house. I was trying to find her when I was so rudely interrupted."

"Let me help you."

"What?" she asked, stunned by his suggestion.

"You heard me. You shouldn't be roaming the streets at this time of night without an escort, and even more especially not in that seedy neighborhood."

"I have an escort, thank you." She spoke dryly, to hide the slight deterioration of her emotional distance. The concern in his voice was so strong that she wasn't sure how to react. "Shadow was trained to protect me, and I'd prefer that he earn his keep. Now if you'll excuse me, I still have work to do. Thanks to you making a nuisance of yourself earlier this evening, that girl's parents couldn't contact me and now she has an even greater head start."

"Fine," he snapped, startling her with his abrupt change of attitude. "Go alone. Get yourself killed—your dog, too. I try to be a gentleman after the things that were said tonight, and this is how I'm treated. Don't you *ever* come down on me again for not saying something nice to you."

Deirdre waited until he got into the rental car and drove away before she got in her van. Maybe he was right. Maybe she had been too hard on him. But she was still furious that he'd followed her. If he didn't stop fooling around, he was going to find out exactly how hot her temper could get.

Instead of going home, Deirdre returned to look for Patty. To keep her mind off her fear, she thought of Adam Colter. He was definitely a notable man, one who probably left an impression with every person he met. Then again, how could he do anything else when he treated people like he did? She could leave an impression on everybody, too, if she wanted to be nasty and hard to get along with. But she didn't want that kind of a reputation. She'd much rather be unknown than labeled difficult.

And to think that he had kissed her only minutes after they'd met! The meeting hadn't even been one that either of them was impressed about. How could he have done such a thing, especially since he was married? Maybe he'd already known she was a widow, but that

was beside the point.

“Stop thinking about that!” she scolded herself aloud. “He was angry, and so was I. The only reason he kissed me was because he couldn’t think of any other way to shut me up.”

A worse thought than his kiss was her reaction to it. Where had those unexpected feelings come from? She hadn’t felt like that in so many years that she’d lost track. If she wanted to be truthful with herself, though, she couldn’t remember *ever* reacting like that. If she had, it was long before Parker had gotten sick that was for sure. She’d had several dates after his death, but not one of those men had sent sensations like that through her. She had to be careful around Adam Colter. She didn’t even like the man, just like he’d claimed in front of the police station.

Still, he had tried to be nice to her then, while she had been the resistant party. And since he had tried, maybe she could cajole him after all. Maybe . . .

“Deirdre!” she heard a man shout. “Look out!”

Spinning around, she saw a large man racing away from her. Adam chased him across the street and into an alley. An instant later Shadow bolted in the men’s direction, nearly dragging Deirdre along behind him. Too frightened to loosen her hold on the leash, she ran along with the dog as he barked wildly. When they reached the dark alley where the men had disappeared a few seconds before, she stopped and held Shadow back.

She struggled with both hands against the straining canine until he ripped the leash from her grasp and sped into the shadows. Fear engulfed her, freezing her in place. She stared wide-eyed into the blackness. Things were happening too fast. A man uttered an enraged profanity. Shadow growled viciously then released a yelp. Another man ran toward her, knocking her to the ground before she could step out of his way. Then there was silence.

Unable to move or think, Deirdre sat where she had fallen, her gaze trained on the alley. What was happening? Why wasn’t Adam coming? Was he dead? Was Shadow? Dear Lord, they *had* to be all right. She should go into the alley and see if they were alive, but she couldn’t move. All she could do was sit there and stare numbly into the black void before her.

Then Adam emerged from the darkness with Shadow draped across his arms. Gently laying the dog down, he knelt beside her.

“Are you okay, Deirdre?” he asked in concern.

Deirdre stared up at him, not knowing whether to thank him for following her or berate him for it. Unable to decide, she spoke in a harsh tone to conceal her fear. “Where did you come from? Were you following me again?”

“It’s a good thing I was, too,” he replied. “No matter how ungrateful you are, I just saved your hide. But if we don’t get your dog to the vet, he may not make it. Let’s find a phonebook so I can call him and have him meet us at the office.”

She studied him. Why was he being so nice when she’d been rude to him? He should be as angry as she was making herself sound. She sighed indecisively. Who cared if he was being nice. She had too much pride to let him see how terrified she was. Adam would just have to accept her attitude because she wasn’t about to relent.

“How badly is Shadow hurt?” she demanded.

“Bad. But from the way you’re acting, you’re all right. Let’s just take care of the dog.”

As Adam helped her to her feet, Deirdre realized how shaken she was. Her body trembled so severely that she couldn’t stand erect. He supported her against his hard body, and she absently noted how good his presence felt. Within seconds, though, she regained her balance and pushed away from him.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Adam asked.

"I'm fine. Let's just get Shadow to the vet. I have her number on my phone, so I'll call her when we're on the road. We can put Shadow in the back of my van."

Once Deirdre's dog was in the back of her car, Adam took the keys from her and headed toward the driver's door. Irritated by the way he was taking over, she ripped them out of his hand and opened the door. As she stepped up to get in, he grabbed her around the waist and swung her to the ground.

"Give me the keys," he ordered.

"Forget it," she said. "This is my car, and I'll drive."

"You won't drive anything in your state—not as long as I'm around. Now give me the keys." When she refused again, he grabbed her wrist and held her hand in front of her face. "If you think I'm going to let anybody who's as shaky as you are drive, you're crazy. I have no desire to end up in a ditch just because you're too upset to stay on the road. Now give me the keys."

Staring in shock at her hand, Deirdre relinquished her keys. She couldn't believe she was in such bad shape. While he escorted her to the passenger's side, the enormity of her actions slowly became reality. But it wasn't until she was in the seat and he closed the door behind her that total comprehension returned. Adam was right. She was in no condition to drive so much as a toy car across the playroom floor. If he hadn't insisted on driving, she really could have run them off the road. And there was no telling how serious the accident could have been.

Other words he'd said echoed through her numbed brain. He had saved her life. Why he had followed her suddenly didn't matter now that she realized she would probably be dead if he hadn't. Despite her desire to thank him, she could say nothing. The words in her mind couldn't even make the journey to her vocal cords. The incident was behind her, but she was still paralyzed with a fear unlike any she'd ever known.

"Deirdre?" he asked, bringing her to her senses. "Are you planning to sit there all night, or are you going to call your vet?"

"What?" she asked absently.

"Get out your phone and call the damned vet so we can save your dog."

Moving automatically, Deirdre dug her cell from her large purse and placed the call. The call to the office went to another number, and when the veterinarian asked where she was, she glanced around the area. She didn't know. Apparently, she hadn't even been aware that Adam had driven her away from the scene. Reading the street sign nearby, she answered the doctor and agreed to meet her in fifteen minutes.

Deirdre directed Adam to the veterinarian's office in a daze. She didn't even realize they had arrived until Adam put Shadow on the table and the doctor sent both of them into the waiting room.

"You look terrible, Deirdre," Adam said. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes." Gazing into his dark eyes, she continued in an apologetic tone. "I don't know why you were still following me, Mr. Colter . . ."

She stopped when he smiled, an unexpectedly sexy half-smile that made her believe he wanted nothing more than to relieve some of her tension. Then he spoke in a low, casual voice that reinforced her opinion. "Because I didn't believe you. I wanted to make sure you weren't headed to find Robin."

Deirdre stared at him in amazement. "You didn't believe me? I told you what I was doing

even though I didn't think you needed to know, and you still thought I was lying? I'm glad you were there when I needed you, but I don't like people not believing what I tell them, especially when I've given them no reason for distrust."

"You gave me plenty of reason, Mrs. Ingstrom," he reminded her, resuming the formality she insisted on. "You weren't telling me what I wanted to know, and I wanted answers."

"Listen, Mr. Colter, I appreciate your coming here, but I'm not up to another round with you right now. Why don't we wait quietly to see what Dr. Jamison says?"

"Good idea," he returned, "because I'm not interested in another round, either."

Unable to sit still, Deirdre paced the waiting room, praying that her beloved pet would pull through. What had happened, anyway? She'd been in such a state of shock that she hadn't even thought to ask. She hadn't heard a gunshot, so Shadow must have been injured with a knife. He'd probably lunged at the man who had nearly attacked her. Then another thought came to her mind. Why hadn't Shadow alerted her to danger? If he'd known, he should have at least watched out behind himself. That's what he was trained to do.

"Mr. Colter?" she asked as she leaned against the counter where pet owners paid. "You saw what happened. Why didn't Shadow warn me of trouble?"

Adam shot his startled gaze to her face, obviously startled by her question. "He did. I heard him growling myself. You just didn't pay attention. Then that guy came out of the alley like a bat out of hell, and he was headed straight for *you*. I didn't even know he had a knife at the time. I didn't find out about that until he stuck me."

"*Stuck* you?" she exclaimed in shock. "Why didn't you say something?"

"It isn't that bad. I just wrapped my handkerchief around it and went on my way."

"How do you know it isn't bad?" Scanning his body for the bloody handkerchief, she found it tied around his upper arm. Suddenly, she noticed that he no longer wore a shirt. Apparently, she'd been in a deeper state of shock than she'd thought. She hadn't even realized that a man built like Adam Colter was naked from the waist up. And did he ever look good that way! The hair across his chest was thick, his muscles well-defined without being overly prominent. Oh, no, not again! Why did she continually find herself attracted to this married man when she didn't even like him? To take her mind off her daydreams, she asked, "Where's your shirt?"

"If you'd been paying attention, you would have realized that I used it on your dog. He was stabbed, too, you know. How long have you been a widow, anyway?"

"That's none of your business," she replied, her voice filled with agitation.

"Well, it must be a hell of a long time, because the only thing you think about is those kids. It's almost like they fill some kind of void in your life."

"Mrs. Ingstrom?" Dr. Jamison interrupted from behind her. Deirdre turned toward the vet. "Shadow will be fine. I want to keep him here for a couple days to make sure he doesn't get an infection, but it's only precautionary. The stab wound looked a lot worse than it was. You'd better take your friend to the hospital now, then go home and get some sleep."

"All right. When should I pay you?"

"Call me tomorrow, and we'll discuss that. From the amount of blood on that handkerchief, I'd say your friend could use a few stitches, too."

At the hospital, Adam explained that he'd received the injury by accident when he was

horsing around while helping Deirdre with the dishes. It was the only plausible explanation he could think of to keep the doctor from reporting the stabbing. He didn't think Deirdre was in any condition for making a report so he wanted to do everything he could to avoid that tonight. The morning would be soon enough for statements.

By the time the doctor finished stitching Adam's wound and gave him a tetanus shot, it was nearly one in the morning. When Deirdre suggested that he spend the night in the spare bedroom in her private wing of the mansion, Adam agreed without hesitation. He didn't want her out where the attack had happened again, anyway. If the rental car got stripped, that was too bad. This lovely brunette's safety was much more important than a car.

The entire trip back to the mansion, neither spoke. Adam could only think of how he had probably saved her life without any consideration to what could happen to him. And that kiss he'd given her had unnerved him so much that he wasn't sure he could constrain his anger over her distant attitude, especially since he could have been killed saving her life. Why had he done something so foolhardy for somebody he knew wouldn't appreciate it in the end?

After parking the car in the garage, Deirdre led Adam to the guest bedroom, then turned and stared up at him without a word. Not knowing what to say, Adam stared back at her. Oh, how he wished he could kiss her good night, but he knew it wouldn't be appropriate *or* appreciated.

Then she spoke, surprising him with words that came out in a soft, husky whisper. "This is your room."

With a gasp of surprise, she laid her fingers over her gaping mouth and stared up at him. Adam offered her a brief smile. She was so pretty that he was having a hard time saying good night. He wanted to speak, but his chest was so tight at being separated from her, even by a few walls, that words simply couldn't pass the constriction. In all of his life, he'd never felt like this, had never wanted a woman so much—had never had such a distant chance of having her.

Reaching out, he grasped her wrist and pulled her hand from her face. As he rubbed the underside of her wrist with his thumb, he asked, "Are you going to be all right?"

Deirdre moved her jaw, but nothing came out. She returned his unfaltering stare as though she was overwhelmed by the same sensations he was. His gaze dropped to her slender throat, and she swallowed. Then she licked her lips slowly, drawing his attention to them, and she nodded silently.

What a tantalizing gesture! he thought, his mind reliving their first caress. And now he knew it wouldn't be their last. For a woman of many words, she was suddenly speechless, and he liked the notion that he could unnerve her so.

Moving slowly so he didn't startle her, he lowered his head toward hers. His lips met hers tenderly, briefly, like a butterfly that had landed then quickly changed its mind. He backed up just as slowly, taking his time to release her wrist, and saw that she still stared up at him. He flashed her another smile then said, "Good night, Deirdre."

Turning from her, he went into the room and closed the door behind him. As much as he liked looking at the bright-eyed, curly-haired beauty, as much as he adored kissing her, Adam could hardly bear the thought of holding a conversation with her. She was a pretty woman but someone he could do without once he was reunited with his niece. Hopefully, that would happen soon. Then he could go home and forget Deirdre Ingstrom forever.

After a heavy sigh, he popped the painkiller the doctor had given him into his mouth and swallowed it without water. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't even have bothered

with it. But the ache was growing into a stabbing sensation. Since he was so tired, it was probably best to follow doctor's orders this time and get some much-needed sleep.

Unable to move, she stared at the door that closed him into the guestroom. He'd kissed her again, fleetingly, almost tentatively. And she hadn't done anything to stop him. This whole night had been one of the craziest of her life, and she didn't know what to make of it. Maybe in the morning, after a good night's sleep, she would have regained her senses. Yeah, that was it. She would go to her room and sleep—*maybe*. She turned away and strolled to the next door down the hall.

But sleep eluded her for at least two hours. Her thoughts flowed from her first conversation with Adam on the phone, to their first meeting, to their first kiss. Finally, her mind settled on his proclamation that he had saved her life. Then her mind flashed back to the news clipping she'd received in the mail. Had that night produced yet another first for them? The first time Adam would save her life?

Unwilling to dwell on the it, she forced her mind back to the hall outside the guestroom—and his sweet, unobtrusive kiss in the hallway.

THREE

As Deirdre poured over Robin's file, a knock on her office door interrupted her. Slipping the folder into her top drawer in case it was Adam, she bade the person to enter. To her unexpected dismay, Jared came into the room with a concerned expression.

"What's wrong, Jared?" she asked.

"I think Shadow ran away. I can't find him anywhere."

"He's at the vet," she explained with a smile. "He was stabbed last night, and Dr. Jamison wanted to keep him a couple of days for observation, just to make sure no infection sets in."

"Then he's going to be all right?"

"Just fine." Glancing at her watch, she saw that it was nearly nine a.m. "Aren't you supposed to be at Sea World by now? I thought you were working longer hours during spring break."

"I am, but I traded shifts with one of the girls. Her brother's coming home after a year overseas later today, and the family's having a big party. She didn't want to miss it." Jared paused while he sat down opposite her. "Mrs. Ingstrom, I know it's none of my business, but I thought you threw that guy out of here last night."

"What guy?"

"The one who practically broke your door down when we were talking about Robin."

"What's that no-good crazy person up to now?" Deidre asked in exasperation.

"Probably taking a bath or shower. He stopped me upstairs and asked where he could find a towel. I didn't think you'd mind since he was wandering around without a shirt, so I told him. But maybe I shouldn't have. I mean, I thought you two had ... Well, I thought it would be okay, anyway. Don't you like him?"

"Not in the least," she insisted. "He doesn't even know how to be nice."

"He was nice to me—real polite. Maybe you two just got off to a bad start."

"We got off to a *terrible* start. The rest of it hasn't been so great, either. Did he introduce himself to you?" Jared nodded, but Deirdre continued as though he hadn't responded. "He's Adam Colter, Robin's uncle. I told him that she didn't want him to know where she is, so what does he do? He comes here and makes a nuisance of himself. He even followed me around last night—because he didn't believe me when I told him that I wasn't looking for Robin. And he practically scared the liver out of me because I didn't know he was doing it."

"Is that how he got hurt? I saw the bandage on his arm and wondered what happened, but I didn't think I should ask. Did Shadow attack him?"

"No, he saved *me* from being attacked. I was looking for Patty, and some guy came at me out of nowhere. Both Shadow and Mr. Colter were stabbed by the guy. I suppose we should report what happened to the police. I was so shaken last night that I didn't even think of it. Apparently, Mr. Colter didn't, either, because he didn't mention it. By the way, did Patty come home last night?"

"Not that I know of. You're really lucky he followed you, Mrs. Ingstrom. You should be grateful instead of mad."

"I'd better ask the others and check her room myself," she said, ignoring Jared's remark. "Why don't you find Mr. Colter and tell him to have Greg fix him something for breakfast. If he wants to be a chef, he's going to have to get used to cooking in shifts." As she opened her top drawer to get Robin's file, Jared started from the room. But Deirdre stopped him with an afterthought. "Oh, and one more thing. Tell Mr. Colter I want to see him here when he's done eating."

"Will do, Mrs. Ingstrom. In case I don't see you again before I have to go to work, I'll be leaving around noon, and I won't be done until Sea World closes. Is that okay?"

"You know it is. It's your job, and you're going to need it when you turn eighteen and have to leave the halfway house."

Since the door to the office was open, Adam wandered in to await Deirdre's return. When he saw the folder on her desk, he glanced over his shoulder before he picked it up. CONFIDENTIAL was stamped in red across the top and bottom. He checked behind him again to see if anybody was watching. Going through the file was wrong, but he didn't care. Besides, this file was on Patricia Wilder, not Robin. All he wanted to know was what kind of information Deirdre kept on the runaways.

Then he glanced at the desk and noticed the article under the paperweight. The magnified words *Deirdre Ingstrom, director of* blared at him like a loud trumpet. Curious, he picked up the clipping and read it. She must have been awfully close to the dead boy if she'd saved the story. If she'd just met him in passing, she wouldn't have any use for the article. Suddenly, he heard Deirdre's voice behind him.

"I'm not stupid enough to leave Robin's file lying around when I know you're in the building, Mr. Colter," she worded icily. As he spun to face her, she strode up beside him. In one hand she carried some mail; the other hand she held out palm up. "Fork it over right now. That's a confidential file, and I won't have you intruding on my business with other families."

"I wouldn't have to snoop," he returned, relinquishing the folder but not the article, "if you'd tell me where Robin is. I'd be out of your hair in a second because I'd be out there getting her and taking her home."

Rounding the desk, Deirdre dropped the folder onto it then sank down into her chair. What a wonderful thought! Adam Colter out of her hair just because she broke a confidence to a girl who would undoubtedly reunite with him later, anyway. Not only would she never have to see Adam again, she wouldn't even have to face Robin afterward. The suggestion was tempting—except she still had to face herself if she broke her promise. That was something she couldn't do.

"As perfect a solution as that sounds," she replied, "I can't do it. I still have to live with myself when you're gone, and I couldn't if I let Robin down. You'll just have to wait like the other parents and guardians."

With a groan, he dropped onto the chair opposite hers. "You're sure an obstinate woman."

"Only when it comes to these kids."

"They're all you have in life, aren't they," Adam observed. "I'll bet you haven't even had a date since your husband died."

"Whether I have or not is none of your business. And yes, these kids *are* my life."

Adam held the article toward her and questioned her with only a slight note of irritation. "So much so that you save everything you see concerning them?"

An instinctive gasp escaped from deep in her chest when she saw the article. How had he known she had it? Or was *he* the anonymous person who'd sent it to her? There she went again—off on another ridiculous fantasy! She knew Adam hadn't sent it. She had talked to him in San Francisco just yesterday. But she couldn't stop her mind from making up incredible theories. She didn't like getting anonymous mail with no return address.

Across from her, Adam narrowed his eyes as though he was suspicious. Deirdre grabbed for the clipping, but Adam jerked it out of her reach so fast she only caught air.

"Give me that!" she demanded.

"Judging from your response, *you* didn't clip this article. Where did you get it?"

"That's none of your business."

Rounding her desk, she tried a second time to retrieve the paper. Again, he was too fast for her. He moved his hand behind him as he turned his back to the desk.

She stood about three feet from him and stared at his muscular torso. She wasn't about to take one step closer, and he clearly knew it. So how would she get back the clipping? Her eyes darted to his when he spoke as though he'd read her mind.

"Tell me where it came from, Deirdre," he insisted, "and it's all yours."

Deirdre stared up at him. She wasn't going to tell this nosy, arrogant man *anything*. Why couldn't he get that through his thick head? He had barged into her life with demands and accusations, and now he expected her to pour her heart out to him. Didn't the ignoramus realize that she wouldn't confide in him? After all, she didn't know him from Adam.

Deirdre stifled a laugh at the thought. Actually, he *was* Adam. But she couldn't let him see that she found her mental ramblings amusing. If she did, he might try to kiss her again, and she had to avoid *that* at all cost, or she would surely lose her detachment.

Adam cocked his head to one side and gazed at her, his dark eyes filled with curiosity. Then he questioned her in a deep, throaty voice. "What's so funny?"

She stared up at him, startled. He sounded almost like he had last night when he'd kissed her outside the guest room door. Was he going to do it again? Somehow she had to keep that from happening, even if she would like nothing more at the moment. To still her thoughts, she replied in a flat tone. "Nothing. Now give me the article."

Stepping back twice, he said, "First answer one question for me. Does this article have anything to do with last night?"

Deirdre hesitated. The fact that he was backing away from her was fleeting. Her mind suddenly centered on his words. She hadn't even considered that theory before, but it was certainly a possibility. She didn't know of anybody who would want to hurt her, but she couldn't be sure, either. Meeting his gaze, she answered him in a faltering voice. "Not that I know of."

"Yeah, right," he said sarcastically as he handed her the paper. "And I have as much money as Elon Musk. I don't like it, Deirdre, because I'm involved in this now, too. But I'm a man of my word and I said one question. Why don't you tell me about your kids instead?"

Glad for the reprieve, Deirdre explained, "Many of them are unhappy after running away. Many want to go home but are afraid to—like Robin. I give them a room and help them adjust

to their return. Most of them do go back, too. Some of them—like Jared, who was here when you barged in last night—stay with me. Things were so bad at *his* house that his mother and stepfather let me become his legal guardian. He'll be eighteen in a few months, though, and he'll have to go."

"Where to?"

"College probably. He's a bright young man. He has a good chance of winning the scholarship Parker set up for runaways who want to improve themselves."

"You're really proud of him, aren't you?"

"I'm proud of all the kids who come through here, because they all had the courage to take that first step home. It isn't an easy step, either. A lot of these kids have been abused—physically, emotionally, sexually—and going back could mean a repeat of what happened before. You can hardly blame them for being afraid."

"But Robin wasn't one of those kids," he insisted with a hint of distress in his voice. "She doesn't have anything to be afraid of, and I can't understand why she thinks she does. I'm her godfather as well as her uncle, Deirdre. I love her like she was my own daughter, and I've told her that many times."

"I don't understand why, either, *Mr. Colter*." She placed emphasis on his name to remind him that they were business acquaintances, despite the intense sexual energy they seemed to instill in each other. "I'll find out, though. I can promise you that much. Once I do, we'll know the best way to proceed with a reunion. Now let's discuss why I asked you to come here."

"You *asked* me to come?" he asked in surprise. "I didn't know that. I cleaned up and wandered around lost until I stumbled on the kitchen. Some kid offered to cook me breakfast, but I settled for toast and coffee. That's about all I can stomach in the mornings. By the way, he makes a mean cup of coffee, and I sure could use another one. Mind if I ask for more?"

Without answering, she pushed a button on her intercom and waited for Greg to reply. After requesting that he bring two cups of coffee, she returned her attention to Adam. "He'll only be a couple of minutes. The reason I asked you here was because we forgot to do something last night. We should have reported what happened to the police, but I was so upset I didn't think of it. I assume you forgot as well."

"No, I didn't. I just didn't think you were up to it. Rescuing damsels in distress isn't exactly my vocation, so I didn't know if I should haul you to headquarters or not. You didn't look like you'd hold up under questioning."

His dark gaze took a long, leisurely trek from her head to her feet and back to her face. And his expression told Deirdre everything she needed to know—he liked what he saw. In fact, she found the idea a bit of an ego boost. Maybe after she finally reunited him with Robin, she and Adam could relieve the sexual tension that seemed to be building between them. But was even that advisable?

Determined to regain her emotional distance, she responded in a flat tone. "I'm perfectly fine this morning."

"You sure *are* perfect," he breathed. With a gasp, he returned his gaze to her eyes and apologized. "That didn't come out quite the way it should have, Deirdre. What I meant ..."

"It doesn't matter what you meant. I'll drive you to your motel so you can get presentable. Then we'll go to the police station and make our reports. After that, I still have a teenage girl to find."

"Oh, by all means. Let's not forget your obsession," he said while Greg set a tray

containing two mugs of coffee, sugar, and cream on the desk. "Thanks, kid."

When Greg stared at Adam in astonishment, Deirdre apologized for her guest's behavior. "I'm sorry, Greg, but that's just the way he is. He doesn't seem to know about things such as manners."

"Don't apologize for me, lady. I can do it myself," Adam said before addressing the teen. "I am sorry, too, Greg. Your benefactor here has a tendency to set me off, so I'd suggest you stay away from me when I'm near her. I might take it out on anybody in the area—including her. And it wouldn't hurt for you to spread the word, because I'll probably be around a lot."

"Yes, sir," Greg agreed, hurrying from the room.

"Let's get out of here, Deirdre," Adam suggested. "The sooner we get this over with, the sooner we can temporarily part company and I can come back down to earth. Mind if I take the coffee with?"

"I doubt I have a choice," she grumbled as she headed toward the door, ignoring his attempt to charm her until she passed him. Then a soft smile of acknowledgment crossed her mouth. Ah-ha! Adam Colter *could* be polite.

"Excuse me," Adam said to the desk sergeant who just hung up the phone. "We'd like to report a crime."

"Homicide?" the young, dark-haired man asked as he examined Deirdre. "Robbery? Narcotics?"

Adam slid his arm around her shoulders, so Deirdre looked up at him. His actions didn't appear to be a show of support, but more of a means of pointing out the inappropriate behavior of the sergeant.

Then Adam's expression changed, and he gazed down at her fondly, answering the officer with so much concern in his voice that she momentarily thought he was telling the truth. "I had to ward off an attack on my girlfriend."

"Could the person have been trying for murder?"

"What the hell difference does it make?" Adam asked. "We were attacked, and we want to report it. Where do we go?"

The sergeant looked at a paper on his desk then said, "Third floor. Ask for Detective Markey." The young man nodded toward his right. "Elevators are over there."

"Thanks," Adam said as he escorted Deirdre away. "Come on, honey. Let's get this over with."

Deirdre didn't like the game he was playing, but she said nothing as they wandered toward the elevators. He was taking advantage of the situation to touch her, and the thought enraged her. She didn't like familiarity from a man she didn't know. But it felt so good to have him hold her close like this! How could she ever keep a professional relationship with him if she melted inside every time he touched her? It didn't matter *how*; she had to *do* it, even if she had to force herself.

As soon as they turned the corner so the sergeant couldn't see, she shrugged out of his hold and glanced at three officers nearby. Whispering, she chastised him. "Keep your hands to yourself."

"Chill out, Deirdre," he returned in a hushed voice. "I'm not going to bite you."

"*That's* not what I'm worried about," she said as he pushed the up button on the wall.

"I get it now," he taunted with a grin. "You're more worried that I'll warm up the Ice Lady." Her glare turned his voice hard. "Well, have no fear. I have no intention of even trying."

"You'd better not," she warned, stepping onto the elevator when the door opened.

On the third floor, Adam asked the first person they saw where they could find Markley. The female officer pointed toward a desk near the back of the room. Thanking her, Adam led Deirdre through the maze of desks and chairs until they reached the one where a man sat hunched over some paperwork. On the front of the desk was a nameplate reading *DET. PAUL MARKLEY*.

"Excuse me," Adam said. "Det. Markley?"

The blond man glanced up and rose when he saw Deirdre. He was so tall that even Adam, who was quite tall himself, had to tilt his head back slightly to meet the detective's gaze.

"May I help you?" Markley asked, studying Deirdre.

Adam averted his gaze from the policeman to Deirdre. "The desk sergeant told us to talk to you. My lady friend and I were attacked last night."

Markley looked over at him in surprise. "Last night? Why didn't you report it then?"

"She was pretty shaken up. I just wanted to get her home." Adam motioned for Deirdre to sit down in one of the three chairs positioned before the desk. As he and Deirdre sat down, Markley sank into the chair across from them.

"My name is Adam Colter, and this is Mrs. Deirdre Ingstrom." Pulling his wallet from his back jeans pocket, he withdrew a business card and his driver's license, and slapped them on the desk face up. "Here's all the information. Better give him your license, too, Dee, and your business card if you have one on you."

Deirdre shot him a warning glance as she removed her license and card from the special compartment in her purse and laid them on the desk. She hated that nickname, and she had only let two men call her that—her father and her brother. If any other man had called her Dee, she'd always put a quick stop to it. Unfortunately, now wasn't the time to scold Adam for his use of the name.

Markley accepted the cards and began entering the information on his computer. After several minutes to input their addresses and phone numbers, Markley returned their licenses but kept their cards. Then he asked them to give an account of the attack.

Deirdre was glad that Adam was there because he was able to relate almost the entire incident, whereas she herself could only remember bits and pieces. Unfortunately, even Adam hadn't seen their assailant clearly, so the only description they could offer was vague.

At the end of their report, Markley asked them to join him at the crime scene and show him exact locations. As much as she hated to go back, Deirdre cooperated, walking through her actions while Adam watched. Then she waited for Adam to give his own account of what had happened.

While the officer looked for clues in the alley where Adam and Shadow were stabbed, Deirdre leaned wearily against the building. Beside her, Adam stood mutely, his arms folded across his chest like he was subconsciously shielding himself from something. When the officer finished studying the fight scene, they all headed toward the alley where the attacker had run toward Deirdre.

But she couldn't go near it again. The memory of the terror that had engulfed her at that spot was still too vivid in her mind. Instead, she stayed in the squad car while Adam went with the policeman. Within minutes, Markley returned and used the radio to request a backup and an ambulance.

“What’s going on, Det. Markley?” she asked. “Did something happen down there?”

“It looks like an attempted murder,” the policeman announced. “The girl’s in bad shape, so your boyfriend stayed with her. I’ve got to get back.”

Deirdre stifled a gasp of shock. Could the girl be Patty Wilder? Despite the ache in her heart, she maintained control of her emotions. If she didn’t, she wouldn’t be any help. After a moment of hesitation, she asked, “Is there anything I can do?”

“Yeah. Wait at the entrance of the alley, and let the paramedics know where we are.” Taking a blanket and first aid kit from the trunk of his squad car, Markley raced back toward the alley, calling over his shoulder, “Oh, and flip the switch that says emergency lights.”

After turning on the flashing red and blue lights atop the car, Deirdre followed the officer’s directions, anxiously praying that the girl wasn’t Patricia Wilder. When the attendants and other policemen arrived, she sent them down the alley but remained where she was until Adam exited with the attendants.

Moving toward the stretcher was one of the hardest things she’d ever done, but she had to know if the girl was Patty. To Deirdre’s relief, the girl had brown hair. Patty was a blonde.

“That must not have been the girl you were looking for,” Adam observed as the ambulance sped away. “Otherwise, you would have gone with her.”

“As a matter of fact, she wasn’t.”

“She probably isn’t even one of the runaways you deal with, right? That’s all you really care about, isn’t it. That girl could die, and you’re standing here acting like she’s nothing. You didn’t even come down there to find out who it was.”

“I would have been in the way, Mr. Colter,” she replied, offended by his remark. “If you’d taken a second to think, you would have realized that. Now if you’ll excuse me, I still have to find Patty.”

“Mrs. Ingstrom?” Markley said as he approached the pair. “Do you know that girl?”

“Know her?” she repeated. “Of course not. I would have gone with her if I did. Why do you ask?”

“I found this knapsack in the alley. Your business card was in it. Are you sure you’ve never seen her before?”

For several seconds, Deirdre stared at the small white card in his outstretched hand. Suddenly, she felt as though her knees would give out on her. Beside her, Adam slid his arm around her shoulders. She gazed up at him. That teenager had her business card, but as desperately as she wanted to, she couldn’t place the girl.

Turning her gaze back to the officer, Deirdre forced determination into her voice, afraid that if she didn’t she would lose control. “Her face was bruised and bandaged, so I can’t be positive. But, no, I don’t think I’ve ever seen her.”

“How did she get your card?”

“Probably from another runaway. I’ll ask around my home to see if any of them gave it to her. Who is she?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t have any identification.”

Deirdre gasped. The boy who’d been killed by the hit-and-run driver hadn’t had any identification, either—just her card. She didn’t like the way events were coming together.

Beside her, Adam squeezed her shoulder then entwined his free fingers with hers. What was happening? Deirdre wondered. Vaguely aware of what she was doing, she tightened her hold on his hand as she stared at them. She didn’t like Adam very much, but she was sure glad he was there right now. She’d always been a headstrong, independent woman. Learning

that danger made her vulnerable was quite a shock. Even the notion that Adam could see that vulnerability wasn't as bad as she would have expected under normal circumstances. Then again, circumstances hadn't been normal since the first time she'd spoken to Adam Colter.

Deirdre let her gaze wander from their hands to Adam's face. His genuine smile melted a small hole in the ice deep within her. His words from earlier echoed through her brain. *I'm involved in this now, too.* Dear Lord, he was right! They'd gotten stranded in a horrible nightmare from which she saw no escape. And Adam hadn't even done anything. The only way to protect him was to avoid him.

"I don't like the looks in your eyes," Markley announced, dragging Deirdre from her thoughts. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," she said.

"Nothing hell!" Adam proclaimed. "Tell him, Deirdre, or I will."

"Why?" she replied, forcing anger she didn't feel into her voice. Hopefully, he would tire of her nastiness and leave her alone—for his *own* sake. "I think I know what you mean. And if I'm right, it's not important."

"Let the cops decide that," he insisted.

"Decide what?" Markley asked.

Turning his gaze to the detective, Adam said, "If there's a connection between a boy who died in a hit-and-run and the girl in the alley. Neither of them had any identification on them. They only had Deirdre's business card."

"There are a lot of runaways in Orlando," Deirdre insisted. "And I've probably talked to most of them. I give them all a business card, too. Two teenagers with my card on them is nothing more than a coincidence."

"That's highly likely, Mr. Colter," Markley agreed.

Adam glared at him. "I can't believe you said that. I stopped somebody from attacking her last night. How can you take her side?"

"He might have thought Mrs. Ingstrom saw what he was doing," Markley explained. "But we'll investigate a possible connection to be safe. How's that?"

"*That's* the best you can do?" Adam demanded. "Aren't you even going to give her protection?"

"From whom?" Markley countered. "Her alleged assailant? You admitted yourself that you only *thought* he was running toward Mrs. Ingstrom. He might have gone right past her if you hadn't scared him. Now I'd better get moving. If you remember that girl, Mrs. Ingstrom, call headquarters and let me know."

"All right." Waiting until Markley was gone, Deirdre sighed then turned to face Adam. "Well, I'd better get moving, too. I still have to look for Patty."

"Are you crazy, woman?" he asked in shock. "Markley thinks that guy might have gone after you because he thought you saw something. And they found your card in the victim's knapsack. You can't roam around now."

Unwilling to admit that Markley could be right, Deirdre wandered away several steps. When Adam caught her by the upper arm to stop her, she spun toward him, ready to demand that he stop interfering in her work. But when she saw the expression of true concern in his eyes, she couldn't do it. Her heart went out to him. He was only trying to help her, and she was being a monster. But what recourse did she have if she wanted to protect him?

Instead of snapping at him like she'd intended, she spoke in a calm, patient tone. "Mr.

Colter, please. I have to do this. I promised Patty's parents. Don't you understand? My life isn't nearly as important as hers. She has a family who wants her back; all I have is a brother who doesn't want anything to do with me."

He held her shoulders at arms' length. "Then think of your obsession, Deirdre. Think about all those kids at the halfway house who need you. Are you willing to desert them for the promise you made to one family? Are you willing to break your promises to all of *them*? That's exactly what you'll be doing if you go out there and get yourself killed. That nut is probably out to get rid of a witness."

"I guess you're right," she acquiesced with a mumble, ignoring the loud sigh he released when she agreed. "I'll go back to the mansion—maybe contact Robin again. Just don't go following me this time. You did give me a week, you know."

"Okay. I don't feel like running around after you today, anyway. I'm tired, and I'm achy. That painkiller I took last night didn't do much good, and I didn't get any rest until about four this morning. I could use some real sleep. Besides, I have work to do myself today."

"Thank you," she said, turning her back on him to leave.

But Adam grabbed her arm before she could take two steps and spun her back toward him so hard that she bumped against his body. His arms encircled her. He held her securely as he stared down at her.

She stared back. His dark eyes were filled with the same desirous look that he'd had when he'd kissed her good night last night. She should move away, break his embrace, run from him as fast as she could. But she could do nothing, not even think, as his head came closer to hers. His whiskers brushed against her cheek then her lips in a gentle kiss.

An unrestrainable moan drifted from deep in her throat. Oh, but his kiss was wonderful, not demanding, just a reminder that someone thought she was attractive. No! She couldn't think like that. She had to get away from him so he would be safe. Forcing herself to act, she slid her arms between them and pushed away from him.

Her heart constricted at the action. She hated not staying where she was, but she had no choice. Gazing up into his sorrow-filled dark eyes, she spoke frantically. "You've *got* to stop doing that if we're going to be working together. Now I've got to go." Then she raced away before he could stop her again.

His voice rang in her ears. "I'll try Deirdre, but no guarantees."

Frowning, Adam watched her leave. He'd given her a kiss that he'd *hoped* she would find irresistible, but she had resisted, seemingly without any regret. She'd even run away from him. And he hadn't gotten her vow to be extra careful before she could.

He'd been half-stunned and half-angered by Det. Markley's claim that he couldn't put a tail on Deirdre to keep her safe. She'd nearly been attacked the night before, and the police were doing nothing to protect her. Before he'd kissed her, he'd nearly proclaimed that he didn't want her to get killed. He'd longed to explain that he wanted to find out why he was so attracted to her, and that was why she needed to stay safe. But the timing was all wrong for that, so he'd kissed her instead, hoping to get his message across that way.

Unfortunately, she'd left before he could get her promise to be careful. She was so dedicated to keeping her promises, he believed that was the only way he could be sure she would do it. There was only one thing he could do now, and he hoped she would understand.

Four

Deirdre returned to the mansion in case Adam followed her then went back to search for Patty. When she had no success, she drove to the diner where Robin worked. After ordering a late lunch, she asked the manager to let Robin join her while she ate.

Maybe she could get some information about Adam from Robin so she would know how to combat the only man. As soon as Robin dropped onto the chair across from her, Deirdre asked, "Has your uncle always been so aggravating? Or is it just a charming little trait he's picked up since you disappeared on him?"

"He isn't aggravating, Mrs. Ingstrom," Robin said, the pride in her voice obvious. "He's one of the nicest guys you'd ever want to know."

Deirdre shook her head. A nice guy didn't go around forcing kisses on unsuspecting women. Although, she wasn't really unsuspecting, was she? Except for the first time, she could tell what he was thinking before he kissed her, and she didn't stop him. Straightening her shoulders, she vowed never to let it happen again. If she wanted to be honest with herself, though, she had suspected it was coming the first time, too. She'd seen it in his eyes and done nothing then, either.

"You sure couldn't prove it by me," she replied. "And I thought I told you to call me Deirdre. Are you sure you don't want to reunite with him right away? From the sound of your voice, you're crazy about him."

"From the sound of *your* voice," Robin said, her pale blue eyes sparkling in merriment, "you're not."

"Good observation. So far, he's been overpowering, demanding, and hardly a gentleman. He refuses listen to reason. Robin, honey, you told me that you were afraid to go back, but you didn't say why. It would be much easier on him ..." *And me*, Deirdre thought. "... if I could at least give him an explanation. You obviously adore him. Why don't you want to live with him again?"

"I never did live with him," Robin admitted. "I ran away even before I spent one night in his house."

"You did?" Deirdre asked, startled. "You didn't even give him a chance to show you how much he cares about you?"

"He didn't have to show me. I already knew. That's why I left. I love Uncle Adam almost as much as I loved Daddy, and I didn't want him to be unhappy."

Deirdre studied the teen. "Why do you think he would have been unhappy?"

"Aunt Natalie said she didn't want me. I heard her. She told Uncle Adam that she never wanted children and her opinion hadn't changed just because Mom and Dad died. That's when Uncle Adam told her that if he had to choose, it would be me over Aunt Natalie. I didn't want to break up his marriage, so I left."

"Do you think Mr. Colter would be angry because you wanted him to be happy?" Deirdre

asked, unable to comprehend the teenager's reasoning. "Is that why you're so reluctant to reunite with him?"

"Of course not. He'd understand completely."

"Well, I don't. Why are you so afraid to go back if you believe he would understand? Because of your aunt? Do you still think she'd be angry about having a child after all these years that her husband has been trying to find you?"

"I don't know. If he had to choose between us back then, he might still have to. I don't want to take that chance. I don't want to make him unhappy."

"You made him unhappy the second you ran away, Robin."

"Gee," she admitted, "I didn't think of that. All I could think of was keeping his marriage together—because they were so happy. I didn't think he'd miss me since I never lived with him."

"Then you'll agree to a reunion? You'll let him take you home to live?"

"No," Robin denied, her voice filled with determination. "I can't go home with him. I'm afraid to."

"Afraid of what?"

"I can't explain."

Offering the teen a reassuring smile, Deirdre patted Robin's hand. "All right. I won't pressure you, but you're going to have to get over your fear. And I'll listen whenever you're ready to talk about it. Mr. Colter wants you back, and you obviously want to be with him. The longer you postpone it the more both of you are going to suffer."

"I can't yet." At that moment, another patron entered the diner, Robin said, "I'd better get back to work."

When Adam appeared at the mansion around dinnertime, Deirdre invited him to eat with them. This time when she explained that Robin wasn't ready for a reunion, he reacted calmly, and her startled expression caused him to laugh.

"Don't look so shocked, Deirdre," he said. "I promised you a week, and I plan to keep that promise. How did your search for Patty go today?"

Her jaw dropped, and she stared at him in amazement. "How did you know about that?"

"I'm no fool, Deirdre. I know when somebody's conning me. You may have come here to divert me, but I know you went back. Did you find her?"

She sighed. "No. And now I have to tell her parents."

He'd spent a good deal of the afternoon trying to think of a way to stay with her. After everything that had happened since he'd met her, he didn't like the thought of her being unprotected. Maybe their present conversation would accomplish his mission. With a sudden idea, he asked, "Mind if I join you?"

"What difference would it make? You'd just follow me if I did, wouldn't you?"

"Probably," he admitted grimace, "only this time I'm interested in seeing how you handle other families. I beginning to think that maybe it was just me you treat like a complete idiot."

"It's just you who *acts* like one," she retaliated. "I want to do this alone, Mr. Colter, because it's a very private matter. How would you like it if somebody invited himself along when I discuss Robin with you—in essence, to observe how I work."

Adam shrugged. He was already losing this battle of wills, but he didn't want Deirdre to

know it. "Can I help it if I'm interested?"

"In what?" she snapped. "You verbally attack me every time we're together, so it can't be me. You think I do everything wrong where my job is concerned, so it can't be *that*. The only interest you have is finding out where your niece is—no matter who you step on in the process."

Adam glanced around the large dining room table and noticed that the seven teenagers stared at Deirdre in amazement. Obviously, she didn't act or speak to other people the way she did him, and if that were the case, he didn't like it that she wouldn't even give him a chance.

Throwing his fork onto his plate, he exclaimed, "That does it!" He rounded the table, grabbed Deirdre's upper arm and pulled her up. "Come on."

"What do you think you're doing?" she shrieked. "Let go of me."

"I won't sit here and argue in front of the kids. If we're going to have another fight, we're having it in your office. Now come on."

Glancing around the table, Deirdre blushed at the sight of all the teens' eyes trained on them. Maybe leaving was a good idea, but the way in which they left was embarrassing. She didn't want her boarders to think she couldn't get along with this man as well as she did the other families. Returning her gaze to Adam's face, she saw that him staring down at her, but his expression didn't show the agitation that had been in his voice. Instead, the crooked smirk on his lips showed her that he was enjoying himself.

Although she willingly let him steer her to the office, she had mixed feelings about going. Being alone with him wouldn't be easy. They couldn't seem to get along together, yet the first thing that came to her mind once they were alone was Adam kissing her. If only she could forget that!

When the door closed behind them, Deirdre sank onto a chair before her desk and buried her head in her hands. Then she felt his hands on her shoulders, a tender caress that had nothing to do with an impending argument. Oh, no! She couldn't let him do this to her again. She had to keep her distance no matter how nice it felt to have him touch her. Breaking contact, she scrambled to the locked file cabinet.

"I embarrassed myself in there, Mr. Colter," she admitted, "so if you don't mind, I'd rather be alone."

"Then I was right," he replied in a tone as quiet as hers. "You *don't* treat other families like you do me."

"As a matter of fact, I don't. But you can hardly blame me for not having much patience with you. You came charging in here yesterday with demands and accusations and threats. Then last night you followed me around and nearly scared me to death. Not to mention you can't seem to keep your hands—or your lips—off me."

He looked as though her angry words had stung him somewhere deep in his soul. She hadn't intended to hurt him, only remind him that he continually stepped over the line into something far from professional. Now she felt bad about what she'd said, and the crazy thing was, she didn't know why because he certainly deserved her reminder.

Then a sly grin came to his lips, and he said, "I also saved your life."

"I already told you that I'm grateful," she replied in a calmer tone. "Or are you planning to hold that over my head so you can get your information?"

"Just stating a fact, ma'am."

"The same fact you've been stating off and on all day. Now would you please leave me alone? I want to collect myself and make a few phone calls. Go ahead and finish your dinner, but I doubt I'll be back."

Without another word, Adam left the office, closing the door behind him. First she called the Wilders at the motel and told them she would drop by later. Next she called the police station to find out if they had learned the identity of the girl in the alley. Apparently, she had regained consciousness briefly but hadn't spoken to anyone. Deirdre suggested that she try the next morning. After hanging up, she wrote a note telling everyone where she had gone. Then left the house via the side door so Adam wouldn't see her.

Jared hurried into the diner where Robin worked and took a seat at the counter while she waited on a customer nearby. When she finished, she poured Jared a cup of cocoa, and set it before him with a wide, flirtatious smile.

"Hi, Jared," she greeted. "You're in early today."

"Mrs. Ingstrom sent me. Your uncle followed her around all day yesterday, and she wanted you to know why she couldn't come last night. I'm her liaison until she can lose him long enough to get here." After pausing to sip his cocoa, he studied his friend. Her blue eyes sparkled with interest, and a soft smile still lit her face. If it hadn't been for her hair color, he never would have guessed that she was related to Adam Colter. He was a large man; Robin was small, almost delicate in stature. Jared took another sip of his drink then set it on the saucer. "I don't think Mrs. Ingstrom knows what to do about him."

"Maybe he likes her," Robin suggested. "Maybe he just wants to watch her."

Jared frowned. "I doubt it. They really don't have much use for each other. They can't even talk to each other without getting into a fight."

"Uncle Adam *fights* with her?" she asked incredulously. "Why? He never used to fight with anybody. He was always happy, and everybody used to say how easy he was to get along with. I've never heard him yell at anybody but Aunt Natalie. That's why I ran away in the first place—because he and Aunt Natalie were arguing. When I found out it was about me, I took off so they could be happy again."

"Mrs. Ingstrom is the same way. She gets along with everybody but him. I can't understand why, either. But I do know one thing. Your uncle was wandering all over the mansion with no shirt on the day before yesterday—first thing in the morning. He was in Mrs. Ingstrom's private wing, and she admitted that he'd spent the night."

"But they're married," Robin said, shocked by the news.

"Mrs. Ingstrom's a widow. Besides, how do you know your uncle's still married? It's been four years since you last saw him, and his wife could have died. He might even have gotten a divorce. Things like that happen, you know."

"Yeah, I guess they do. If they don't like each other, though, how come he spent the night?"

"She was probably grateful to him. He'd saved her life the night before, so she probably felt she should be extra nice to him or something. Who knows? I could be way off base, too. I've never pretended to understand adults."

"If Uncle Adam isn't married anymore," Robin said thoughtfully, "I wouldn't mind going back. Do you think you could find out for me?"

“Sure. He comes to the mansion to get progress reports. I should be able to talk to him without Mrs. Ingstrom finding out. But I’ll warn you, she doesn’t like residents getting involved in her cases. She’s afraid things might get worse. We can talk to the runaways but not the parents.” He paused then continued enthusiastically. “I’ve got an idea! You can come live at the mansion. You wouldn’t even run into him if you’re careful. You could watch for him and stay in your room during the five minutes he’s there.”

“If he’s only there for about five minutes, why doesn’t he just call her?”

“I wasn’t supposed to hear this,” Jared admitted with a grin, “but I did. He doesn’t like it because she keeps hanging up when they argue. She can’t do that if he’s with her—just like she can’t stop him from following her, even when she walks out in the middle of a fight. She’s done it, too.”

“Jared,” Robin said, her voice filled with excitement, “you don’t think they like each other too much, do you? If Uncle Adam is still married and he spent the night with Deirdre, maybe he feels guilty and he’s taking it out on her.”

“No way! They got into it on the phone when she called to tell him that she’d found you. And she was furious when ...” Gasping in astonishment, Jared stared at her. Maybe Robin was right. “... when he kissed her a few minutes after they met.”

“He *kissed* her?”

“And Mrs. Ingstrom was furious. I don’t know what happened before that because I wasn’t around. But when I came back to give Mrs. Ingstrom a message, I heard them talking about it. Maybe you’re right about them liking each other too much—as ridiculous as it sounds.”

“Oh, Jared,” she pleaded as she grasped his wrist, “would you find that out, too? I love to hear good gossip. I don’t even care if it’s about Uncle Adam being unfaithful. I never liked Aunt Natalie, anyway. It would serve her right for being so domineering.”

“Okay, but only because I think Mrs. Ingstrom needs a love life. As far as I know, she hasn’t even had a date in years. Maybe an affair would remind her that she’s a woman and not just a den mother for a bunch of runaways.”

Parking her van in the hospital lot, Deirdre went inside to see if the girl who had been assaulted was conscious. Unlike on Deirdre’s previous visits, the hospital’s Jane Doe was awake and apparently coherent when she arrived.

Sitting down on the chair beside the bed where the youngster lay hooked up to machines which registered her vital signs, Deirdre greeted her cheerfully to put her at ease. “Hello there. I see you’re finally awake. Did you know I’ve been to see you several times?”

“No,” the girl replied, her voice quite weak.

“I’ve been worried about you. The doctors and nurses say you haven’t even told them your name yet. Don’t you have anybody who would want to know you’re here?”

“Nobody cares.”

“Of course, they do. It just doesn’t seem like it when you’re a teenager. Let me see if I can guess how old you are.” Studying the girl, Deirdre tried to envision what she would like without all the bruises and bandages. But as hard as she tried, she couldn’t tell if she had a photograph of the teen on file. “I figure you’re, what, fifteen? Am I close?”

“How did you know?”

Deirdre grinned. "Just smart, I guess. Are you up to hearing a little story about my past?"
"You don't want to ask more questions?"

"Not right now. I want to tell you about me. Will you listen?" When the teen nodded, Deirdre said, "I ran away from home, too—when I was a little older than you. I left because I hated my mother. There was this guy I liked—eighteen, a college freshman, looked like a Greek god. He did our gardening that summer, and I thought I'd never seen anybody as handsome as he was.

"I had everything I could ever want. We lived in a large house with both a swimming pool and a tennis court, tons of acreage so we even had horses. But I took all those things, and the lessons and competitions that went with them, for granted. I figured I'd never want anything more than that gardener. But he didn't even know I existed because I was too shy to stay around him more than a couple of minutes at a time.

"One day I came home from a jumping competition and found Mom and Jeff making love in the stable. I was devastated—for me and my father, too. I left home that night, and I stayed away for years. By the time I decided to go back, I'd found a man who took pity on me and kept me in his home, sent me to college, and married me. I was lucky. He was about twenty years older than I and didn't even try to seduce me until our wedding night. I missed all the horrors of prostitution that most girls go through when they run away."

"It is horrible," the girl admitted.

Deirdre smiled again and stroked the teen's feverish forehead. "Yes, I know. I've seen it many times in my work."

"Are you a cop?"

"No, I'm Deirdre Ingstrom. You had my card in your belongings. Anyway, I have an BS in sociology and psychology and an MS in psychology. When my husband found out he had cancer, I convinced him to convert our mansion into a halfway house for runaways. I wanted to help other runaways before they went through what I did."

"But you said you didn't do prostitution."

"I didn't. I was talking about what happened when I decided to call my parents just before my wedding. Do you know what I found out? They'd both died. Mom committed suicide exactly a year after I ran away. She left a note saying that my leaving was the reason. Dad died of a heart attack just a few weeks before my call. They died never knowing if I was alive or not. Even for somebody with all my education, it was a huge guilt trip, especially because of that note."

"You running away hurt her?"

Deirdre fought back the tears that always accompanied the recounting of her story. This was the hardest part of her job, but she'd learned that it was also one of the most essential. When teens learned that she had lived in their shoes, they were more willing to listen to her.

After a deep breath, she explained, "Of course. Mothers love their children whether they say the words or not. That's why they're so hard on teenagers sometimes, because they want their kids to grow up right, or the way the parents *believe* is right. But even parents make mistakes; even they don't have all the answers."

"Ma'am?" the teenager asked as her tears flowed.

"What is it, honey?" Draping her arm on the pillow, Deirdre wiped away some of the tears with her thumb.

"I want my mom."

"I know," Deirdre said, "but we can't get her for you unless you tell us your name."

“Mandy Reagan. Mom’s name is Jennifer Blackwell.”

“All right, Mandy. Let me get a paper and pencil to write all this down.” Taking the items from her purse, Deirdre wrote down the name, the address and phone number where Mandy expected her mother to be at that time of day. Once that was done, she kissed the girl on the forehead and stood to leave. “Don’t worry, honey. I’ll have your mother here as soon as possible. What about your father? Do you want me to call him, too?”

“I don’t know his number. Have Mom call, okay?”

“I will. You try and get some rest now. I’ll be back to see you again as soon as I can.”

Adam closed the door silently. If he’d known Deirdre would be there, he never would have gone to the hospital at that time. Now he had to hide because, if she saw him, she would undoubtedly accuse him of following her again, which wasn’t the case. Their simultaneous visits were just a coincidence, but Deirdre would never believe that after he’d frightened her so badly his first night in town.

Unfortunately, he had another reason to hide. If he didn’t, she would see that her words had touched his heart, flooding his eyes with tears. He couldn’t let Deirdre see that he had suddenly turned into a sentimental fool, unable to control his emotions.

Spotting a men’s room across the hall, he dashed through the door as Deirdre came out of the room.

She noticed a movement across the hall but gave it only a fleeting thought. Her mind was centered on Mandy and her next of kin. After giving the nurse on duty Mandy’s name, Deirdre rushed to her car. There she could cry in private. She could never let anyone know how deep the pain of losing her parents before they could all reunite still ran. Recounting her story always produced guilt; it always brought back memories of the happy times the family had had before she’d left.

Family! Now she didn’t even have that because Brandon wanted nothing to do with her. Her only sibling hated her because she’d explained why she ran away in the first place. He didn’t believe that their mother would do such a thing. Now he blamed her for both their parents’ deaths. Their grandparents were all gone; and although they had aunts and uncles as well as cousins, Deirdre never really knew them because she’d always lived in another part of the country. So, what family did she have? None, and no hope for any in the future.

Adam was right. The runaways were all she had. What he didn’t realize, though, was that every one of them left sooner or later. And she seldom heard from them again after her customary follow-up calls.

An unexpected emptiness ripped through her. She was alone. She had no husband, no children, no brother, no parents, no relatives of any kind. She didn’t even have friends, only people who passed through her life. She’d never realized it before, but she was lonely. Or did she only feel that way because Adam had unwittingly alerted her to her solitary existence?

Blowing her nose, she forced the idea from her mind. There was no place in anybody’s life for self-pity. People could change their lives if they wanted to badly enough. And she would do just that. Somehow she would find a way to make a future that included people who would stay in her life for as long as she lived.

Filled with a determination, Deirdre continued through her day, keeping busier than usual to stop herself from giving in to the void that crept into her heart.

Aggravated, Adam exited Deirdre's office. If he had one more run-in with that woman, he was going to either scream or kiss her with all the passion he felt whenever they argued. No other woman had ever affected him like Deirdre Ingstrom. Why did their arguments unfailingly arouse him? And *why* did he always end up kissing her to shut her up? He'd done it yet again just a few minutes ago.

As Adam strode toward the front door, Jared raced up to him. "Mr. Colter?"

Adam turned and responded pleasantly. "Yes?"

"Could I talk to you alone for a few minutes?" Jared asked. "It's really important."

"Of course. Here or outside?"

"We'd better go outside. If Mrs. Ingstrom hears us, she'll be madder than she has been today."

"She does seem a little more on edge than usual," Adam said as they strode through the foyer toward the front door. "You don't know what set her off this time, do you?"

"Nope. All I know is that she's been jumping on everybody. She's never done that before." Closing the door behind them, Jared sank onto a bench near the entrance and watched while Adam sat down next to him. "I don't know what's gotten into her since you came here, but I have a feeling it has something to do with you spending the night with her."

Adam stared at the youth in shock. "What are you talking about?"

"You know. The night you got here. You kissed her, Mr. Colter, and don't deny it because I heard you two fighting about it. Then you saved her life, and *then* you spent the night with her. Don't you remember asking me for a towel the next morning?"

Adam laughed. He loved the way teenagers always made simple everyday events into melodramatic incidences. "I see teenage boys haven't changed since I was there. Not only do the hormones run rampant, so does the imagination. I spent the night in her spare room, Jared, not her bed. As for the kiss, if you'd overheard everything, you'd know that I only did it because she wouldn't quit talking long enough for me to speak in my own defense."

"Oh! Well, Robin and I thought ..."

"Robin!" Adam interrupted. "You know Robin?"

Jared nodded. "I'm the one who told Mrs. Ingstrom where to find her. She's really pretty, and I wanted to date her. When we were talking, I found out everything. We really get along well."

Adam chuckled. "Apparently, I've been following the wrong person. Where is she?"

"Oh, no!" Jared denied. "If I tell you that, Mrs. Ingstrom will have my neck in a noose. Anyway, Robin wants to know if you're still married."

"I kicked Natalie out house about a week after Robin left and got a divorce about a month after that. I was too busy trying to find Robin to find a new wife—not that I particularly wanted one after I got a taste of bachelorhood again. Is Natalie the reason Robin ran away?"

"Kind of. She heard you two arguing about her and didn't want you to be unhappy."

Confused, Adam toyed with his beard. "If she feels like that, why doesn't she want to come home now that I've found her?"

"All I know is that she's afraid of something. She won't say what, but I don't think it has anything to do with your ex-wife."

"Do you think you could get her to open up to you?"

"She hasn't so far. You won't start following me now, will you? If I lead you to Robin, I'll

be in big trouble. We kids aren't supposed to get involved with reuniting runaways and their families."

"Don't worry. I gave Deirdre a week to try for a reunion, and she hasn't had it yet." Rubbing the bandage over his stitches to relieve some of the itching, Adam considered the wording of his next question. Before he could ask it, Jared spoke again.

"Why don't you like Mrs. Ingstrom?"

Startled, Adam asked, "What makes you think I don't like her?"

"You're always fighting with her."

Adam shook his head, glad that he didn't have to explain that he liked Deirdre *too* much. "That's because she's by far the most obstinate woman I've ever run across. She doesn't give an inch on anything. Haven't you noticed?"

"She's not obstinate with us kids. We compromise all the time. Did she tell you that she's my legal guardian? She didn't really want to do it in the beginning. I think she was kind of afraid of getting involved. That's why I don't call her Deirdre like she asked me to. I like her a lot, and I'd love to call her by her first name. I know she loves me just like she would one of her own kids, too. But she's ... I don't know. I guess you could call it distant. We both know I'll have to leave, so I suppose she doesn't want to get hurt when I do. Hell, I don't want it, either. She really gets emotional every time she gets a successful reunion, too. She always goes off alone afterward and cries—for hours sometimes. I know how hard she'll take it when I leave. That's why I try to keep it easy for her by calling her Mrs. Ingstrom, kind of to remind her that it's only temporary."

Adam couldn't believe what he was hearing. Deirdre was pushing away the one constant person in her life, probably without even realizing it. Maybe he could do something to keep Jared with her longer than she expected. "You don't have to stop seeing each other just because you leave. You can still be close. Besides, I think Deirdre needs somebody constant in her life. You fill that need perfectly." Adam paused to glance at his watch. Seven o'clock, and he still had some phone calls to make. "As much as I'd like to discuss this further, I can't. I have something to do tonight. Would you do me a favor the next time you see Robin?"

"What's that?" Jared asked.

"Tell her that I love her and want her to live with me just like she was supposed to when her folks died. And think about sticking by Deirdre, Jared. You're the closest thing to family she has."

Deirdre turned the corner then accelerated in a desperate attempt to lose the car behind her. She glanced in her rearview mirror. Darn! The headlights were still there. Tired of Adam's constant pursuit, she drove toward his motel so he would realize that she was on to him and go away. But it did no good. He continued to tail her. He didn't even take a different route when the motel came into view. If he was going to play it to the end, so would she. Turning into the motel lot, she drove around the building to the room where she'd taken him the morning after he arrived.

Suddenly fear gripped her. Her headlights illuminated the small red car he'd been driving the first night he followed her. And the light in the motel room was on! Now what was she supposed to do? Adam hadn't been following her like she'd thought. Someone else had been!

Acting instinctively, she slammed on her brakes, causing her tires to squeal. She jammed the heel of her hand against the horn on the steering wheel. If Adam didn't hear the noise, somebody would. Then the person behind her would leave her alone. When she stopped behind Adam's rental car, more tires squealed to a crash. Motel room doors opened, Adam's as well as others. The car in her rearview mirror backed up and tore out of the parking lot.

She was safe again, but she couldn't move. Her car horn continued to blare. Her driver's door flew open and a strong hand grabbed her wrist to pull her hand off the steering wheel. Turning her head toward the person, she saw Adam standing outside her car. Somewhere in the dense fog of fear she saw him gazing at her with more concern than she had ever seen in his expression.

He was talking to her, too, telling her something about turning off the van. Didn't he know that she would—if she could move. But she couldn't move because she was immobile with fear. In her daze, she saw him follow his own directions then felt his strong grip on her upper arms. This time his hold was different. He held her as though he cared about her. Obviously, he couldn't tell that she was fine. She would have to tell him—as soon as her mouth and mind were coordinated again.

Five

Frantic voices called to each other, but all Deirdre could comprehend was Adam's arm around her as he tried to pry her hand from the steering wheel.

"Did anybody get the license number of that car?" a man nearby shouted. "He hit mine."

"All I saw was that it was a big yellow thing!" a woman returned.

"A Cadillac or Lincoln, I think," another man said.

"Hey, mister!" the first man called. "Is that lady okay? He didn't hit her, too, did he?"

"I don't know," Adam replied. "How about it, Deirdre? Are you all right?"

She wanted to answer while he helped her from her van, but she couldn't utter so much as one word. When she tried, nothing came out. Nodding, she gazed up at him, her heart pounding. Whoever had been tailing her was gone, but she felt no relief. Someone had been following her, watching everything she did, going everywhere behind her, not once stopping the unnatural pursuit or interfering in her life. She thought it was Adam because he hadn't bothered her. But if it hadn't been him, who *had* it been? And why had he been following her?

One minute she was standing beside her car, listening absently to the conversations around her. Her next thought was of how secure it felt to cling to Adam in his motel room while he smoothed down her hair with a caressing motion. Slowly, still a bit unsure of her surroundings, Deirdre pushed away from him just far enough to gaze into his dark eyes.

"Oh, Adam," she asked, "what have I done?"

"Hush now, honey," he whispered. "Just relax for a few minutes."

She reveled in the caressing hold he had on her head, on the basic internal rhythms of his heart and lungs. Why couldn't her involuntary functions be as calm as his? "I *can't* relax, Adam. I've never been so scared in my life. I did something really stupid."

"Your explanation can wait until you calm down a little."

"No!" she exclaimed. "I have to tell somebody, and you're here. Again. Thank you, Adam. Thank you for saving my life the other night. And thank you for being here now."

"Don't you ever stop talking, Deirdre?"

He lowered his head toward hers again, but she had no strength to stop his lips from meeting hers. His kiss was tender at first then the increasing passion sent flames of desire, dormant for years, coursing throughout her body. She clung to him, desperately needing this embrace, dreading the thought that it could end at any second.

It didn't matter when or how he kissed her, whether it was during an argument or on the spur of the moment or in the fury of fear, she always responded. She didn't want to; she just didn't have a choice. Her body took over and preempted every bit of common sense that she'd ever possessed. This time, though, despite his re-creation of long-forgotten excitement, she pushed away, breaking all contact.

She had to remain businesslike and detached. She had to let him see that she wasn't a whimpering woman who couldn't take care of herself, who feared every shadow in the night.

To hide her lust-crazed thoughts, she questioned him angrily. “*Why* do you keep doing that?”

Staring down at her, he asked, “Do you want the truth?”

“You know I do,” she snapped.

Striding to the dresser, Adam dropped several pieces of ice into a glass then poured some whiskey over it. Taking a sip, he went to the lavatory and returned with a can of Sierra Mist and another glass. He tore the paper off the glass on the way back to the dresser, then dropped ice into it as he looked at Deirdre in the mirror.

“Do you want this straight,” he asked, “with Sierra Mist, or with water?”

“I don’t drink that stuff,” she declared.

“Sierra Mist it is.” After splashing just a little liquor into the bottom of the glass, he filled it with soda then stirred it with his finger. When he held it out toward her, she refused to accept it. Shaking his head, he placed it in her hand. “I don’t care if you drink whiskey or not, Deirdre. You sit down on the bed and finish every drop of that. It will relax you. Besides, I didn’t put that booze much in it. Unless you’re a recovering alcoholic, that is. Are you?”

“No. If you don’t mind, I’d feel safer if I sat on the chair.”

“Suit yourself.” He dropped onto the edge of the bed with a heavy sigh while she sat on a chair by the round table across the room. “You don’t have to worry, you know. I’m not going to seduce you.”

“How can I be sure of that when you keep kissing me? *Why do* you do it, anyway?”

He another sip of his drink. “You probably won’t believe this, Deirdre, because even *I* find it hard to believe, but I really don’t know why I do it. The first time you wouldn’t shut up, but that was no excuse to kiss you. So were a couple of other times. And the time in the street? I wanted to make sure you would be careful. This time ... well, this time I just did it. You didn’t stop talking, but that had nothing to do with my kissing you. It just happened.”

“Well, don’t let it *just happen* again. Your wife would be either furious or devastated if she ever found out.”

“My wife?” he repeated. “Is that why you always get so bent out of shape when I kiss you?”

“I get bent out of shape because I don’t even know you, and you can’t seem to stop doing it.”

“If it’s any consolation, Deirdre, I haven’t had a wife since shortly after Robin left. I kicked her out because I thought she was the reason my niece ran away.”

“You were right about *that*, Mr. Colter.”

“Tell me what you were talking about earlier,” he suggested, “but first tell me why you’ve gone back to Mr. Colter. What happened to Adam?”

“I was still stunned when I called you Adam. I’m back in control now, and it isn’t appropriate for me to call you that.” Taking a sip of the drink in her hand, she grimaced with distaste then asked, “Have you been following me around again?”

“Of course not. I’ve been too busy doing Zoom meetings for work to follow you. Oh, I’ll admit that I considered it, but I told you I wouldn’t. I’d also told you that I’m a man of my word.” Adam paused and narrowed his dark eyes suspiciously. “Why are you asking?”

“If you weren’t, somebody else has been watching me since the night Mandy was attacked.”

“Mandy. The girl in the hospital?” he asked, his voice getting louder in his fury. “The same attack the police suspect that guy thinks you witnessed? The same girl who had only your card for identification like the boy in the article? *Why the hell* didn’t you tell somebody before

this?"

"I thought it was you because nothing else happened. That's why I came here tonight—to tell you to back off." Deirdre shuddered at the thought of what had happened then took another sip of her drink. "When I saw your rental car and your room light on, I knew I was wrong. But I didn't know what to do. I was scared stiff. All I could think of was making enough noise to scare him away."

Adam chuckled. "You sure succeeded. I thought I'd never get your hand off the horn. See the lights flashing out there, honey? I'll bet the guy who's car got hit called the cops. Let's go give him a statement, tell him everything that happened in the last few days."

"If you don't mind, I'd rather do it here. Would you ask them to come to your room?"

"All right. I'll be back in a few minutes."

When Adam was gone, Deirdre called Jared to let him know she would be home as soon as she could. Thankfully, Jared didn't question her further, except to ask permission to visit Robin, to which she agreed.

With that done, she placed a phone call. While she waited for the party to answer, Adam entered with a female police officer. Deirdre put the cell phone against her chest to block her words in case someone answered.

"I'll be with you in a few minutes. I've been trying to contact Mandy's mother ever since yesterday, and this is another try." At last, a woman answered. Deirdre returned her attention to her work. The other two made themselves comfortable in the conversational grouping. When a lady answered, Deirdre said, "Hello, ma'am. Is your name Jennifer Blackwell?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad I finally got hold of you. My name is Deirdre Ingstrom, and I run Mackenzie's Halfway House for Runaways. I've located your daughter Mandy, and ..."

"I don't have a daughter named Mandy," Mrs. Blackwell replied, "and she knows it. I told her I'd never take her back if she ran away again."

"But Mandy needs you. She's in crit. . ."

"I don't care anymore. She's already given me more trouble in her lifetime than I can take."

An ache came to her heart, but Deirdre couldn't let the woman hear it. She had to stay detached because that was the only way she could be rational. "If that's how you really feel, it would probably be better if you weren't here. She also asked that you contact her father. Would you be willing to do that much for her?"

"I don't talk to him unless he misses his child support payment three weeks in a row. If she wants him there, *you* call him."

"All right. Could I please have his area code and phone number?" After writing down the number and repeating it, Deirdre thanked the woman then hung up, facing Adam and the officer. "Poor kid. Her mother doesn't want a thing to do with her. Here she is in critical condition, and her mother doesn't even care. I sure hope her father does."

"I've heard a lot about you at headquarters, Mrs. Ingstrom," the officer said. "People say nobody can handle runaways and their families like you can. From what I hear, you've had more successful reunions than statistics on other workers and homes show. By about sixty percent, too. By the way, I'm Officer Drake."

"Thank you for waiting, Officer Drake. I'm just happy to be helping these kids. But your statistics give me hope that someday I'll be able to convince a *certain person* that I know what I'm doing," she said, glancing at Adam.

"I'm sure you will. Now why don't you tell me about this person who's been following you? Mr. Colter says it could be the same guy who almost attacked you the other night."

"For the first time, I think he's right." Deirdre explained that the man had followed her everywhere and that she'd seen the same car in the area on many occasions. Then she admitted that she hadn't said anything sooner because she'd thought that it was Adam.

"Did you see this guy so you can give me a description?"

"Never up close. He was always way behind me. And when he was parked, his face was always shaded."

"What was the make and color of the car?" Drake asked.

"I think I heard somebody say it was yellow. But if it was the same one, it was more of a cream color, maybe two or three years old. As for the make, I really couldn't say. I thought it was Mr. Colter, so I didn't pay that much attention. I'd forgotten that he drives a red rental until I saw it again tonight."

"And the driver made no advances toward you?"

"None. All he did was follow me."

"Don't forget to tell him about the clipping and Mandy," Adam advised.

Deirdre sighed then sipped her drink before she acquiesced. "I suppose you're right—but even you don't know it all. There was a clipping about Mandy in my mail today. That's how I came by the clipping you saw." Turning her gaze to Officer Drake, Deirdre explained. "Mandy was the girl attacked in the alley. As far as I know nobody's found out who the boy in the first article is, but he only had my card to give the police a clue, too. I spoke to him once, but he'd never told me his name, so I couldn't help."

"I think this is more than a coincidence," Adam insisted, "especially now that I know about the second clipping. It's a message to Dee. I *know* it is."

Deirdre cringed when Adam used that name again. After the officer left, she would have to tell him how much she hated it.

"You're probably right," Officer Drake agreed. "I'm glad you told us about it, ma'am."

"I don't think I had a choice, officer," Deirdre returned, glaring at Adam. "Mr. Colter probably would have forced me if I hadn't."

"You're lucky he likes you," Officer Drake said with a grin. "What happened isn't something you should keep from the police, especially since other things have happened, too."

"Yeah, real lucky." Deirdre took a deep breath to recover her calm. "So, Officer Drake, what's going to happen now? Will I have some kind of protection to make sure this guy doesn't try anything?"

"Unless he confronts you, there's nothing we can do."

"What do you mean there's nothing you can do?" Adam demanded. "There are laws against stalking, and that's what this guy is doing. You can't just let this nut follow her around all the time without so much as surveillance on her."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Colter, but there's nothing we can do yet. We don't even know for sure what color or make the car is. Let us know if anything else comes up. In the meantime, we'll look for a large cream-colored or yellow car with a dent in the left front end. We'll be checking car repair shops and the streets." Rising, Officer Drake headed toward the door while Adam hurried after her. "I'll write up my report tonight, Mrs. Ingstrom. You can come to headquarters and check it tomorrow."

"Okay. Good night," Deirdre agreed.

To her surprise, Adam announced that he would be back shortly and followed the

woman out the door. Alone again, she picked up her cell phone and placed another call.

All of a sudden, she was exhausted. Now that her adrenaline rush was behind her and the drink had soothed her nerves, she felt totally relaxed. With a long yawn, Deirdre sat back against the headboard and stretched out on the bed. When a woman answered, she was in the midst of yet another yawn and spoke upon completing it. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I'm really tired. Is this the Frank Reagan residence?"

"Yes," the woman replied suspiciously. "Who's this?"

"My name is Mrs. Deirdre Ingstrom. May I please speak with him? It's quite important."

"Just a minute."

While the line was quiet, Deirdre's eyes slid shut. She jerked them open again, keeping them wide as if that would help her stay awake. In only a minute, a man answered the phone. "Hello, Mr. Reagan. My name is Deirdre Ingstrom, and I'm the director of Mackenzie's Half-way House for Runaways. Do you have a daughter ..."

"Is this about Amanda?" he asked frantically. "Did she run away again? I told her mother the last time that I wouldn't stand for the way she treated our daughter."

"As a matter of fact, she did run away. I already talked to Mrs. Blackwell, but she wasn't interested in hearing the news. That's why I'm calling you." Deirdre struggled to stifle another yawn. "I'm sorry I keep yawning, Mr. Reagan. The last few hours have been exhausting for me. I'm practically falling asleep on the phone. Anyway, the reason I'm calling is because Mandy's in the hospital here in Orlando. She was attacked the other night and is in critical condition. She wanted both you and her mother here. Would you mind coming down?"

"Mind! I'd *love* to, but I don't know how I can. The only reason Amanda was with her mother is because her stepfather makes more money than I do. I can't afford the plane fare."

"I have a special fund for emergencies like this." Reaching into her purse, she withdrew her wallet and pulled out the charge card she reserved one for cases where parents of runaways couldn't afford the trip to reunite with them. After telling him that she would arrange for plane tickets and getting his required information, she offered to email him the flight information he would need and got his email address at work. Then she suggested that he call her at either her cell or office numbers when he landed in Orlando so she could pick him up. From there, they would arrange a rental car for him.

"I really appreciate this, Mrs. Ingstrom," he said. "Does Mandy know who did this to her?"

"If she does," Deirdre explained, "she isn't talking. At first, she didn't even want to tell anybody her name."

"Well, thanks for everything, Mrs. Ingstrom, but I'd better let you go. You really do sound tired. Good night."

"Good night, Mr. Reagan," she returned with a yawn.

Hanging up the phone, Deirdre took a sip of her drink then called the airline for reservations. Now if Adam would come back, she could listen to whatever he wanted to say then go home. Taking another sip of her drink, she held it on her slack-clad thigh and lay her head against the wall behind the headboard.

Opening the door, Adam saw that Deirdre had fallen asleep. With a soft smile, he strode to her side, took the glass from her hand, then tried to wake her. When she didn't respond, he tugged the covers from under her before removing her shoes, slacks and blouse so they wouldn't get wrinkled. He hung them in the small closet before laying her down. Gazing down at her, he sighed. She had such a well-proportioned body that it was hard to think about

sleeping beside her without touching her, but he had to leave her alone if he ever wanted to gain her trust. And he wanted to do that more than anything else right now.

Covering her up so he wouldn't be tempted by seeing her nearly naked, he went outside to park her van properly. Finally, he pulled a chair over by the bed and settled down with his drink to watch a late movie on cable television.

When Deidre's cellphone rang about midnight, he jumped in surprise then picked it up and whispered into it. "Colter here."

"Mr. Colter?" a male voice replied in amazement.

"That's right. Who's this?"

"Jared. Mrs. Ingstrom said she would be home as soon as she could, but I sure didn't expect her to be with *you*."

"She's here, all right—and sound asleep. Is it really so important that I have to wake her up? She's exhausted."

"She's *sleeping* there?" Jared exclaimed.

Adam chuckled. "Yes, Jared. She's sleeping here, and that's *all* she's doing. Do you need her for something important?"

"No. I was just worried because she hadn't come home yet. I'm supposed to be asleep, but I never can when she's not here."

"You two have quite a rapport, don't you."

"Sure. She's terrific. We really get along well. Everybody gets along with her—everybody but you, anyway. That's why I'm so surprised she's spending the night with you."

"It wasn't something she planned. After she talked to the cop, I went outside to talk to the officer privately. When I came back, Deirdre was out cold with an unfinished drink in her hand. Apparently, she crashed."

"Why was she talking to a cop?"

"I'll let her explain all that when she sees you. What did Robin say when you told her that I'm not married anymore?"

"Just that it didn't change anything. She's still not ready to see you, Mr. Colter. She's still afraid of something."

"All right. I'll give Deirdre a little more time to work with her. If she thought I was following her, she probably hasn't even gone near Robin."

"It's nice of you to be so understanding. Does Mrs. Ingstrom know?"

"I'll tell her tomorrow. Look, I'd better let you go now. I don't want to wake her up. She needs her sleep. Night."

Vaguely realizing that she was shivering, Deirdre curled up on the bed to get warmer. When that didn't help, she backed up and bumped into a warm body that could provide some heat. Rolling onto her other side, she draped her arm around the person and snuggled closer. She fell back into a deep slumber as a warm arm covered hers and linked their fingers together.

Oh, how she hated it when a man sweated in the night! Now she was all sweaty, too. Backing away from the hot body, she suddenly realized that she wasn't alone. With a start, Deirdre bolted upright in the bed. The covers fell to her lap, and she stared down at Adam while he rolled onto his back. An expression of awe instantly crossed his face. Letting her gaze follow his to her body, she saw that she wore only her brassiere and panties. Quickly grabbing the blankets, she clutched them against her chest.

He grinned up at her. "Aw, you spoiled my fun. There's nothing like waking up to see a gorgeous woman in your bed."

"How could you do that?" she demanded.

"Do what?"

"Take my clothes off me. What kind of man are you? And what kind of woman do you think I am?"

"Relax. The only reason I took off your clothes was to save you embarrassment. I didn't think you'd want Jared and the others to find out you'd spent the night sleeping in somebody's bed. I figured if your clothes weren't wrinkled, they'd ask fewer questions. Unfortunately, Jared already knows."

Her eyes widened, and she gasped in shock. "*What?* How did he find out?"

"He called your phone looking for you. He was worried when you didn't come home. He worries about you a lot, you know. Which reminds me, just because you're only his guardian, it doesn't mean you have to give up that emotional attachment when he turns eighteen. I told *him* that, too. Anyway, I didn't want to wake you if it wasn't important. Since it wasn't, I let you sleep." Pausing to examine her, he added with a grin, "You sleep nicely, too, especially when you get cold."

"You just forget this whole incident, Mr. Colter," she ordered to cover her embarrassment. "I don't want to hear another word about it."

"Don't you realize that you're obligated to call me Adam now?" Stunned by his remark, she stared at him in astonishment while he chuckled. "You spent the night with me, Deirdre. You even cuddled against me. That makes us almost intimate friends."

"Stop talking like that! It's not true."

"Oh, settle down," he grumbled. "I was just teasing. Don't you have a sense of humor?"

"Not when it comes to what you're talking about."

"Wouldn't it be more accurate to say not when it comes to *me*? Jared told me that I'm the only person you can't get along with."

"So what? That doesn't mean I don't have a sense of humor. Now if you'll go into the bathroom, I'll get dressed so I can go home. I'm expecting a call to pick up Mandy's father at the airport."

"Okay," he agreed, getting out of bed wearing only his jogging shorts. "Just don't take off before I change. I talked to Officer Drake last night, and we agreed that I should follow you to make sure nobody else does. If you want to talk to Robin, let me know. I'll back off for a while."

"I don't understand," she said, her tone of voice mellowing despite her desire to remain angry. How would she ever stay distant toward this ruggedly built man? Especially when he wore no shirt. His muscles were so prominent all she could think of was dragging him back to bed to find out what she'd been missing since Parker had become too ill to make love with her. But she couldn't think that way! She had to concentrate on work. "I thought you were so desperate to reunite with her."

"I am, but you haven't paved the way yet. I gave it a lot of thought last night and decided that you're right. I shouldn't push her."

Watching him head toward the bathroom, she added, "Mr. Colter?"

"Adam, or I don't answer any more questions."

"All right. Adam. Thank you for understanding."

He stopped in the doorway and faced her. "If it hadn't been for what Officer Drake said

last night, I probably wouldn't be so understanding. I don't know. Maybe I would. I heard some other things about you, too, and I can't say that I wasn't impressed. I'll give you a chance, Deirdre. Just don't expect my patience to last forever."

Although she expected to be, Deirdre wasn't uncomfortable with Adam following her—to her home, to the airport where she picked up Frank Reagan, to the hospital where she dropped him off because he hadn't wanted to use her money for a rental car. When she returned to the area where Adam had aborted her attack to search for Patty some more, however, he got out of his car.

"What the hell are you doing back here?" he asked in concern. "Trying to get yourself killed?"

At least, he'd finally stopped scolding her. Maybe now she could be civil as well. "I still haven't found Patty, Mr. Colter."

"Who?"

"Patty. Surely, you remember the name since my search for her started all of my problems."

"That's not what I meant. You're supposed to be calling me Adam now. Besides, this isn't just *your* problem. It's mine now, too. If that guy is behind those clippings, he's not going to let me go scot-free. I got a look at him. Granted, it wasn't a very good one because I was so busy fending off his blade. But I can tell you that he was about six-three, 250 pounds, with dark hair and a mustache." Grasping both of her hands, he gazed down at her with pleading dark eyes. "Can't you understand how dangerous it is for us to keep coming back here?"

Her eyes met his. Until the previous night, he'd been argumentative. Now he seemed almost protective. She didn't understand the change, but she was glad that it had taken place. After everything that had happened lately, she welcomed the support of a man. She just hadn't expected it to be someone she disliked so intensely.

"You do understand, don't you, Deirdre?" he asked. "We can't keep coming back here if we want to stay alive."

"I understand," she replied, "but you need to understand something, too. I called the Wilders from the hospital. Patty's still missing. *They* have no idea where to find her, so *I* have to try." Deirdre pointed to a dilapidated, three-story, brick building down the street. "She lived in that hotel, Adam. I want to see if she went back there. Don't you see? She *wants* to go home, and I'm the only person who can facilitate that."

"Then I'll just have to help you."

In an instant, Deirdre became defensive. "I told you not to interfere."

"I don't see it as interference. I see it as protection. That man is out there somewhere, Dee," he said with a wide sweep of his free arm. "We don't know when or where he'll strike again. I didn't see anybody following you today, but we can't be sure that *I* wasn't followed. I was too worried about *your* safety to think very much about mine. I checked in my rearview several times and didn't see any car more than once. But quite frankly, my mind was preoccupied with a few other things as well as your safety—like Robin and my business."

Pushing some hair out of her eyes, Deirdre studied him. From the look on his face, he was upset about something. What could it be? Robin? His business? Having to protect her? Whatever the cause, it was obvious that he would much rather be anywhere but on the street

corner with her.

Even though she was beginning to feel a kinship with Adam—or maybe *because* she was—Deirdre knew she must do what she could to limit any danger to him. To her surprise, her heart ached when she said the words. “You don’t have to stay with me.”

“I wish that were true,” he admitted with a slow shake of his head. “Unfortunately, if I want you to live, I have no choice. The cops won’t put protective surveillance on you.” With her hand still in his, he led her down the litter-laden street toward the hotel. “Let’s go check on Patty.”

Deirdre didn’t like Adam taking charge, but she didn’t know how to tell him to leave her alone other than what she’d already said. This whole thing was more dangerous than she cared to admit. Besides, he was right. She wasn’t alone in this; he was part of it, too, since he’d fought that man in the alley.

Adam paused at the hotel door and glanced in all directions. Although curious as to his actions, Deirdre said nothing as she followed him into the dark, dirty building. She shuddered at the words written on the entry walls—graffiti that was the most vile language she’d ever seen. Oh, how she hated this building! But she had to find Patty, and this was where she’d lived.

The boards creaked under their weight as they mounted the stairs. On the landing between the second and third floors, a large rat scampered through a hole in the corner. Deirdre stifled a scream and tightened her hold on Adam’s hand.

They reached the third floor, and Adam pushed open the door slowly. Adam poked his head inside as though he was inspecting the hallway for signs of life. He pushed the door completely open and stepped into the hallway, pulling Deirdre behind him.

“Which way?” he whispered.

“Left,” she replied. “Room 323.”

Again, neither spoke as they made their way to Patty’s room. Adam rapped on the door, but no one answered. Turning the doorknob, he hesitated before he pushed the door slowly, and Deirdre cringed at the sharp screech it made.

“I feel like I’m in an Alfred Hitchcock movie,” Deirdre whispered as they stole into the room.

Adam closed the door with only a slight click. “I know how you feel. Let’s search the room and vamoose. I’ve never been fond of Hitchcock movies.”

Finally releasing her hand, Adam strode toward the dresser and searched the drawers. “I thought you said this was Patty’s room, Deirdre. There’s nothing in this dresser but *men’s* clothes.”

“I can’t explain it, Adam. This is the same place I met her before.”

While Adam did his job, Deirdre stood where she was, unable to move. This was worse than she’d thought. Although she’d been to the hotel before, Patty had never invited her into the room. They’d always spoken in the hallway. Now Deirdre understood why. The room was filthy. Even in the dim light, she could see dirty dishes crusted with food in the small sink. The three throw rugs in the small sitting/sleeping area had spots and stains all over them. The bedspread, tossed carelessly over a chair, was also soiled, and the bed was unmade. How anybody could live like that was beyond her comprehension.

But standing there wasn’t helping. She had to search for clues as to what had happened to Patty. Forcing herself to move, Deirdre went to the tiny kitchen area. With one fingertip, she moved a bowl with old cereal and congealing milk aside. Three cockroaches scurried

across the counter and down beside the small refrigerator.

With a gasp of surprise, Deirdre jerked back her hand. Nothing there was going to give her any information, anyway. She moved on to the bathroom. It was no cleaner there. Dirty towels cluttered the floor, and the toilet hadn't been flushed after its last use. The rust-stained sink was covered with dirt and blood.

Six

Horrified at the thought, Deirdre shrieked then slapped her hand over her mouth. In an instant, Adam was at her side.

“Are you crazy, woman?” he whispered. “You’re going to get us arrested for breaking and entering.”

“Look,” she returned in a like tone as she pointed to the sink. “Blood.”

He bent closer to the cracked porcelain and examined it without touching it. “Looks like a handprint, too.”

“We have to call the police.”

“With what? Evidence that somebody cut himself and cleaned up in the bathroom? That ought to get us locked up in the funny farm real fast.”

“But we have ...”

A noise in the other room startled her into silence. Adam glanced over his shoulder then pushed Deirdre toward the tub. When he didn’t stop pushing, she stepped into the grungy tub and automatically recoiled into a corner. Taking one last glance around the bathroom, Adam grabbed the plunger then followed her. Finally, he pulled the shower curtain just far enough to conceal them.

He stepped back against Deirdre, shielding her from whatever might happen next, and then pointed the handle of the plunger toward the curtain. Deirdre was certain that it had taken several hours for the man to enter the bathroom, but in reality she knew it could only have been a few minutes. Then, to her horror, a man threw back the shower curtain to reveal them.

An instant later, Adam rammed the plunger into the man’s midsection, crying, “Hi-yah!” at the top of his lungs. The man doubled over in agony while Adam rolled his hand into a fist and delivered a blow up under the man’s chin. It was so loud Deirdre could have sworn somebody in the next room could hear it. The redhead flew backward and landed on his back in the middle of the bathroom. As Adam grabbed her hand, Deirdre numbly stepped out of the bathtub to follow him out of the building.

They raced from the hotel room with the sound of a man’s irate shout ringing in their ears. Deirdre could hardly keep up as Adam ran down the stairs. The last four she stumbled down when one broke under his weight. She scarcely had time to regain her balance when he opened the door and pushed her out.

Again, she stumbled, but he grabbed her around her waist and dragged her into a deep doorway in the alley beside them. This time he pinned her against the door. His back was so tight against her that her breasts ached. It was difficult to breathe—if she could have, in fact, drawn a breath with such terror coursing through her veins. Soon she heard running footsteps race by the alley, and Adam leaned forward.

“Come on,” he said, taking her hand again.

"Where are we going?" she asked when he went deeper into the alley.

"The long way around. Then we're going to wait to make sure it's safe to go home."

Dodging garbage, boxes and cans, the pair hurried about three blocks down the alley then slowed to a walk. Deirdre panted, but Adam didn't stop. Her heart pounded in her chest. Her lungs ached with each breath. But she had to keep moving. She had to let Adam do what he could to get them out of the area alive.

After they'd walked five blocks to their left, Adam stopped. Deirdre breathed a sigh of relief as she collapsed against a building. "That was close."

"Don't be so confident that it's over," he warned. "We were caught in that man's hotel room, and that's breaking and entering. We could be arrested for what we did. My assault and battery wouldn't help, either."

"Why would anybody who lives in that dump care enough to tell the police?"

"I don't have time to explain. Let's head back to the cars. We can probably make it safely now."

By the time they returned to the mansion, it was well after noon, so they went inside to discuss her morning over a late lunch.

"Tell me something, Deirdre," he said as he sat down on a bar stool at the island. "Do you have a death wish or something?"

"Of course not," she returned, taking some sandwich makings from the refrigerator and setting them on the counter. "I just want to find Patty."

"You're going to find a hell of a lot more than that if you don't stop this damned search."

She transferred everything to the island and sat down beside him. "Fix what you want." She began her own sandwich while he made his. "You don't understand, Adam. I *can't* stop the search."

"Call the cops and report her as a missing person."

"Be realistic, Adam. What kind of attention do you think they'll give her when they find out that she's a chronic runaway?"

"I suppose you have a point. But you're still going to get yourself killed if you do things like you did today. As far as I could see, Patty never lived there. Are you sure you had the right apartment?"

"Positive. I've been to it several times."

"*Alone?*" he asked in shock.

"Of course, alone. And I was perfectly fine—until *you* decided we needed to do a little cloak-and-dagger investigating."

"All right. I get your point. I got a little carried away. But by God, I feel like I had a right to be extra careful. So far I'm the only person following you—at least, that I know of. I assume that guy's laying low until the heat cools off. But it won't last forever. He'll come out of hiding eventually, and you'll be the first person he goes looking for."

Licking some mustard off her index finger, Deirdre looked over at him, and Adam stifled a smile. Judging from the look in her deep blue eyes, she found him attractive. Granted, he liked the idea, but he wasn't interested in romancing a woman he couldn't get along with, despite his attraction to her. As far as he was concerned, being attracted to a woman and wanting to date her were two entirely different things. And he wasn't about to get involved

with a woman when he couldn't even get along with her.

To avoid his thoughts, he concentrated on making his sandwich. Several more seconds passed before she questioned him. "Why are you so interested in what's happening to me, Adam? Because of last night? If so, you won't get any more from me now than you did then."

"I don't want any more," he lied, keeping his inflection flat to hide the desire that swept through him at the mere thought.

"Then why do you get so upset about me trying to find Patty?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe it's because I'm involved, too. More likely, though, it's for the same reason you feel like you have to go—out of a sense of duty. I was there to save your life once; I should be there in case you need it again. Besides," he added with a grin, "what kind of man would I be if I just let it drop?"

"Don't you have a job to do somewhere else in the country?" she asked.

He stared at her, startled by her changing the subject the second he tried to charm her with a little humor. After a momentary pause to regain his mental footing, he said, "I have a job. In fact, I own a business. But I'm not indispensable. I have perfectly responsible employees. Nobody is indispensable, Deirdre, despite how you feel about yourself. I delegate most of my authority, so I don't have to be there unless something important comes up. Besides, I have been working—right here in the area. I brought my laptop. Since I own the company, I can do things like that."

"I don't think it's fair of you to classify me as someone who feels she's indispensable, because I don't. I just feel a responsibility to these kids, and I want to see them reunited with their families. I ran away from home myself, so I understand what they're going through. That doesn't make me indispensable, but it does make me empathetic. It makes me someone they can talk to. If you see me as so egotistical that I think I'm indispensable, I'll have to live with that. I know what I am. And that's all that really matters, isn't it?"

Although her question was obviously rhetorical, Adam felt compelled to respond. The guilt of unjustly accusing her was more than he could silently endure. "I suppose it is. So, what is it, Deirdre? What do you have that puts you in such high esteem with people I talk to about you?"

"You talk to people about me?" she asked. "Why?"

He shrugged. To his amazement, it actually helped relieve some of the sexual tension coursing through him. "You intrigue me. You're the only person I've ever met that I can't get along with, and I want to find out why."

"You should have talked to me then because I know the answer. Your attitude sets me off every time."

"Just like yours does me," he mumbled. Even though his mind reeled with personal questions to ask her, the timing was wrong for that type of conversation. Instead, he changed the subject. "Are you going to see Robin today?"

"I thought I'd run out there after I clean up the lunch dishes."

"Why don't you go when you finish eating? I'll clean up then go do my own work for a couple hours." Gazing into her eyes, he questioned her in concern. "You will come right back here, won't you, Deirdre? You won't go back to look for Patty?"

"I'll come straight home," she agreed. "I promise."

The next morning Adam called and announced that he would be tied up with business until about eleven. As disappointed as she was that he would be late, a part of her was glad. Adam emitted a decidedly sexual magnetism that disoriented her. He threatened her sensibilities, and she could hardly bear to be around him because of it.

The thought of him brought back the excitement of being in his arms. Why, when she disliked him? Those same memories caused her so much confusion that she found herself recalling them often if she didn't keep busy. To occupy herself, she went to the mailbox. To her dismay, the mail had not yet arrived, so she watched for nearly an hour and a half. As soon as the mailman was gone, she hurried out to retrieve her letters.

Sorting through the stack of correspondence, she tossed all of the junk mail directly into the wastebasket marked recycle beside her desk. The bills she put in a file basket marked as such. That left one letter, which she really didn't want to open. Like the two clippings she'd received, her address was typed and there was no return address. And it had been mailed from yet another nearby town.

Deirdre stared at the envelope for a long time before she got up the courage to open it. With trembling hands, she tore into the envelope and pulled out the paper folded once. The paper shook as she unfolded it. Typed in the middle of the page were five words: *YOU WON'T FIND HER THERE.*

The doorbell rang, and Deirdre dropped the message like it was a poisonous snake. Panic coursed through her.

The bell rang a second time, followed by a loud banging on the door. Gathering her courage with a deep breath, she pushed herself out of her chair. As she made her way across the foyer, Adam's frantic voice erupted on the opposite side of the door.

"Deirdre! Are you in there?"

"Adam!" Relief flooded through her. Racing to the door, she threw it open and embraced him. "Oh, Adam! I'm so glad it's you."

He returned her hold, escorting her into the foyer then shutting the door with his foot. "What happened, honey? You're shaking like a leaf."

"He knew we were looking in Patty's apartment yesterday."

"How do you know?" he asked as he took her to the living room.

They sat down on the couch before Deirdre released him. To her delight, he continued to hold her while she leaned against him. It felt good to be in his secure embrace, as though nothing could ever harm her again.

From the first time she'd heard his voice, she'd disliked him. Then from his first kiss, she'd found herself attracted to him. Initially, she'd wanted him out of her life. Now his presence was comforting, even though they couldn't spend more than a few minutes together without snapping at each other.

That brought her to another question. Why did she derive comfort from knowing he was around? Because he'd saved her life, of course, and she knew he would do it again if necessary. Maybe she had trouble getting along with Adam, but he was the only man she could trust. That had to be the reason.

"Deirdre, honey," he said, breaking into her thoughts. "You didn't answer my question. How do you know he saw us?"

"There was another message in my mail today. It said *You won't find her there.* And that's *all* it said. There was no return address, and it was mailed from Kissimee." She paused to gaze up at him. "Now what do we do? Call the police again?"

“And have them tell us they can’t do a damned thing?” he asked, his voice filled with anger. Her jaw dropped in surprise at his response, and he slid his fingers into her hair and smiled. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t take my anger at incompetent cops out on you.”

She flashed a quick smile to acknowledge his apology. “So, what do we do?”

“I don’t know yet, but I do know we don’t go back to that hotel. The guy I decked might have reported that it was us. Do you have any other ideas of where Patty might be?”

“Not even one.”

“Then I suggest that I spring for two lunches. After we eat, you can check on Mandy while I make a couple of business calls. After that, you can run out to see if Robin’s back at work. I’ll bide my time by doing a little work of my own.”

Deirdre sat up and grinned at him. “Work last night, this morning, and work this afternoon. What happened to that dispensable guy I talked to yesterday? You remember him, don’t you? The one who delegates authority?”

“Very funny,” Adam returned with a chuckle. “Actually, I’m only dispensable in San Francisco. In Orlando, I have to do things myself because there’s nobody to delegate *to*. Now get your purse and keys so we can go. And lead me to your favorite Chinese place. I have a craving for some Mongolian beef.”

To her disappointment, Deirdre’s day wasn’t very productive. Not only was she unable to think of where Patty might be, Robin had called in sick. And poor Mandy wasn’t doing well at all. Her condition hadn’t worsened, but her vital signs still hadn’t stabilized.

Stress and tension had caused Deirdre to have another argument with Adam in the hospital parking lot. Now that she was home, she couldn’t even remember why they’d fought. All she knew was that she felt bad because she had started it.

“Hi, Mr. Colter,” Jared greeted when Adam opened the motel room door for him. “What did you want to know that we couldn’t talk about over the phone?”

“I have some questions about Deirdre.” Adam led the youth to the conversational grouping and pointed to several sodas on the table between the two chairs. “I didn’t know what kind you like, so help yourself.”

“Thanks,” Jared said as he sat down. As he popped the top on a can of Pepsi, Adam opened a Sierra Mist. “So, what’s up?”

“I overheard somebody talking about how Deirdre got in the business, and I wondered if it was true. Did she really run away because her mother was making it with a guy Deirdre had her sights on?”

“Pretty awful, huh?”

“And she was never able to reunite with her folks because they both died?”

“That’s what she told me. It’s still pretty hard on her because her brother wouldn’t believe her side of the story. It’s a real shame, too. He’s all the family she has—unless you count me. I guess that’s why she tries so hard to reunite other runaways. She doesn’t want them to suffer through the guilt she does.”

“Well,” Adam said with resignation, “at least, she has friends to support her.”

Jared shook his head. “I wish she did, but she doesn’t have friends. The two of us talk a lot, but it’s always about my problems or her work. We never talk about her problems. Deirdre’s a very private person, so I guess that’s why.”

"It's probably more than that. No matter how mature you are, you can't understand an adult's problems. She might not feel comfortable confiding in you."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"Let's get back on topic. Do you know where Deirdre grew up?"

"On a farm outside Erie, Pennsylvania. Why?"

"I want to know about her, and I doubt she would answer my questions."

"Why should she when all you two do is fight?"

Adam grinned. "Good point. That's why I want to get to the bottom of it, because I don't like not getting along with people. If I can find out what makes her tick, maybe I can understand her better. What about her brother? You said he didn't believe her reason for running away, but you didn't give me his name. Do you know it?"

"Brandon Mackenzie, but I don't see how that could help you."

"I thought I'd talk to him. Maybe he can give me some insight into why Deirdre and I can't get along."

"Are you *nuts*?" Jared asked, aghast. "If she finds out what you did, she'll be furious. She'll never even look at you again."

"That's a chance I have to take."

Jared tilted his head back and took another swig of Pepsi before he said, "You know, Mr. Colter, Deirdre doesn't like you very much as it is. She'll *hate* you if you talk to him. She feels bad enough because he doesn't want anything to do with her. If you drag him into ..."

"I'm just going to talk to the guy, Jared. Do you know where he lives?"

"No, but she keeps his address and phone number. She sends him birthday and Christmas cards every year. She never gets any back, but she doesn't seem to care." Pausing a moment, he stared at Adam in astonishment as though he suddenly understood the motive behind Adam's question. "Oh, no, Mr. Colter. No way! I won't get that number for you. If she finds out that I was involved, I'll be in as much trouble as you."

"Then I guess I'll have to tell you the truth." Adam wandered to the dresser and stared into the mirror while rubbing his beard. He hadn't trimmed it since the morning he'd left home, and it was beginning to look straggly. Insomnia had taken over his nights, and he barely had enough time for coffee when he got up. When Jared left, he'd have to find out if he still had a razor and scissors and use them!

When Adam didn't continue, Jared prompted, "What *is* the truth, Mr. Colter?"

"Don't tell Deirdre, Jared," he said as he turned to face the teen, "but I want to see if I can help her reunite with her brother. She's done it for all those kids, so somebody should do it for her. I also want to find out about her childhood from him, so what I told you wasn't exactly a lie. It just wasn't the whole truth. But remember. I don't want her to know that I'm trying to get her brother to agree to a reunion unless I can bring it about. Understand?"

"Sure. You don't want to hurt her."

"Then you'll call me with his address and phone number?"

"Okay, but only if you promise not to tell Deirdre how you got them."

Again, he kissed her, and again, she forced herself away from him after only a couple of minutes. To get involved with the handsome blond standing before her was ridiculous. This time, he grabbed her shoulders a second time and pulled her against him. Embracing her, he

captured her mouth with his. Her will to escape deteriorated so rapidly that she released a soft moan of pleasure, even though her arms were pinned against his chest by his strong hold.

At first Jared thought he had unintentionally awakened Deirdre just by opening the door. On second glance, he saw that she was dreaming, and the smile on her lips showed her enjoyment of it. He didn't want to disturb her, but he had to get her out of the room to look up Brandon Mackenzie's address and phone number. Kneeling beside her, he laid his hand on her back.

"Stop doing that!" she demanded as she jerked upright in her chair. Then as she stared at Jared, she blushed. "I'm sorry, Jared. I was dreaming about that aggravating Adam Colter."

He grinned at her but decided against telling her about her contented expression. "If you were already asleep at eight, you're working too hard. You need to take some time off and do something by yourself."

"The last thing I need right now is time by myself."

"The first thing you need is sleep," he insisted. "Why don't you go to bed?"

"What I really need is a shower. It's so humid today I feel grungy. Before I take it, though, tell me what the emergency was."

"Oh, that," he said, sitting down cross-legged on the floor. "Turns out it wasn't really an emergency. Mr. Colter ..."

"You're not supposed to have anything to do in reuniting Robin and her uncle," she reminded him.

"It wasn't about Robin. I asked before I agreed to meet with him. He wanted to know about how you got in the runaway business. He was really interested."

"Why?"

"He said he didn't like not getting along with people, and he wants to find out what makes you tick. He even wants to contact your brother."

"You're kidding!" she exclaimed. "He can't do that without my permission."

"I wouldn't put anything past Mr. Colter. He found out how to get in touch with you, didn't he?"

"That doesn't mean he'll find out how to contact Brandon. I'm the only person who knows, and I'll never tell him."

"He seemed awfully determined to find out about you. He even wondered about your friends until I told him that you don't have any."

Exasperated, she groaned, "That's just great. Well, I guess I'll have to take matters into my own hands again. I'm going upstairs and take a shower, and then I'm going to his motel room myself. Don't you tell him I'm coming, either."

"Okay, Deirdre, if that's the way you want it."

Deirdre went to the door then turned around to smile at Jared. "Thanks for calling me Deirdre. I've wanted that all along, and you finally using it gives me hope that your eighteenth birthday won't turn you into a stranger. I know I haven't said it before, and I suppose I wouldn't be saying it now if Adam hadn't knocked some sense into me. But I think of you as family. I always want you in my life."

Jared smiled. "I'll always be there."

"Good. Maybe things will start going better around here. Maybe we'll find Patty soon and reunite Robin with her uncle. That way he'll be out of my hair forever."

After giving Adam the information he wanted, Jared mentioned that Deirdre had been asleep at her desk when he got home. Then he hung up, wrote a note telling Deirdre where he'd be, and left the house to see if Robin was at work. If so, maybe he could take her home, and they could discuss the situation between Adam and Deirdre. Something had to be done to get the couple on friendlier terms or Adam might grow impatient and force a reunion before Robin was ready.

When he entered the coffee shop at a quarter to nine, Robin was busy with a customer. Sitting at the counter, he waited until she set a cup of cocoa in front of him, then he ordered a hamburger. She repeated it to the cook before she looked him in the face. Instinctively, Jared gasped in shock at the large bruise on her right cheek and eye. She had tried to conceal it with makeup, but it hadn't helped much.

"My God, Robin!" he exclaimed. "What happened?"

"Glenn found Deirdre's business card. He was really mad, and he hit me. He told me that if I talk to her again, he'd see that Uncle Adam *never* finds me."

"How did he find out Mr. Colter was in town?"

"I don't think he did. He's been using that threat for years, so I'll keep living with them." She grabbed his wrist tightly. "Please, Jared. You can't tell a soul about this. If Glenn finds out Uncle Adam is here, he might kill him. I don't want that."

"Is this why you won't go to the halfway house?"

"Especially now. That's the first place he'll look. Jared, please. Promise you won't say a word to anybody—not even Deirdre or Uncle Adam. I'm going to run away from the Thomases, but I can't right now. They'll go straight to Deirdre and find out about Uncle Adam. Please promise me."

"Okay, okay," he agreed. "But that doesn't mean I think you're doing the right thing."

"I want to go back to Uncle Adam now that I know Aunt Natalie isn't with him. You have to believe that. But I want to do it so it's safe for him. Otherwise, we'll never live together again. And it'll be *my* fault."

"It wouldn't be your fault, but I still won't say anything—yet. But if that man ever touches you again, I won't keep my mouth shut. I'll tell Deirdre and Mr. Colter."

"Glenn won't hit me again as long as I do what he says. One of these days, though, I'm going to get out of there. And I'll do it before he realizes I'm gone."

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know. That's one reason I can't leave yet. When I do think of a place, though, I'm long gone. And I'm calling Deirdre as soon as it's safe."

Behind her the cook hit the bell on the counter to signal that Jared's order was ready. Robin turned around to retrieve the hamburger and placed it in front of him before he said, "Let me know if you need my help."

"I'll try, but I doubt I'll be able to. I'm going to wait for the right chance and grab it. When I take off, I'm not telling anybody. I won't have time."

"But I could help you. I could divert Thomas or something. I know! I could start dating you. He'd never know the difference if we went out and you just plain didn't come home."

She shook her head. "That won't work, and you know it. The first place he'd look is with you, and that would lead him to Deirdre. Then she'd tell him about Uncle Adam, and Uncle Adam would get hurt. I can't take that chance."

"I guess you're right. Just promise me one thing. If Thomas hits you again, get the hell out of there right away."

"If he does hit me, I won't be able to. Last time he locked me in my bedroom the second after he hit me. And there was no way out, because where we live there are bars on the windows. It was like being in Alcatraz. I couldn't have escaped if I'd wanted to. It didn't matter, though, because I wouldn't know where to go. Now do you see what I'm up against?"

"I sure do, but I don't like it. You've got to get out of there as soon as you can."

"And I will. Just leave the time up to me. I know the Thomases, Jared. I know how they'll act."

"Okay," he agreed in concern. "Will you call me when you decide to do something?"

"I'll try."

"I guess that's all I can ask." He grinned to lighten her mood and changed the subject. "So, can I drive you home from work tonight?"

"I can't date, and Glenn would really be mad if he saw you. Then I'd get in trouble again." Smiling at him, she also changed the topic. "What about Deirdre and Uncle Adam? Do they still fight all the time?"

Jared explained the talk he'd had with each of the adults that evening, adding, "I'm not sure that Mr. Colter doesn't like Deirdre. In fact, I think he likes her a lot."

"I don't know why *else* he'd try to get her together with her brother. He probably thinks it'll get him on her good side."

"I'll bet that's it," Jared agreed. "If it is, maybe they'll start talking like a couple of human beings instead of going at each other's throats like a couple of animals. I sure hope he paid attention when I told him how hard Deirdre's been working lately."

"Why?"

"Maybe he'll take her out to dinner or something. Then they can find out that neither one of them is as bad as the other thinks. They can work *together* to get you back with Mr. Colter."

"And maybe," Robin said mischievously, "they'll find out that they like each other more than they're willing to admit. Wouldn't *that* be great?"

"Wait a second. You're not trying to play matchmaker with them are you? Is that why you won't go back to the halfway house?"

"Of course not. But it would sure be nice to see them together, wouldn't it?"

"Only because Deirdre needs a social life. I don't think anything else should happen."

"Is this Brandon Mackenzie?" Adam asked the man on the opposite end of the phone.

"Yes," he responded with a note of curiosity.

"Do you have a sister named Deirdre Ingstrom?"

"Did she put you up to this phone call?" Brandon demanded. "If so, I don't appreciate her manipulating me like this."

Adam chuckled. "Quick tempers must be a family trait. Actually, she'd probably be just as furious as you are if she knew I was calling."

"Then why are you?"

"For two reasons. One is that I can't seem to get along with her, and I'm trying to understand why. Can you tell me what she was like growing up?"

"I'm not answering any questions until you tell me what your interest is—and who the

hell you are.”

“My name is Adam Colter, and my only interest is in getting along with your sister.” After an almost imperceptible pause, he added, “So we can work together, of course.”

“Oh, of course,” Brandon said. “Listen, Colter, my sister is a married woman. So, back off.”

“That’s an awfully protective attitude for a man who doesn’t care about his only sibling. Too bad you didn’t keep in touch with her. If you had, you’d know that Deirdre’s been a widow for years.”

“A widow?” he repeated in shock. “I ... I didn’t know. I never open the cards she sends me, but the return address label always says Mrs. Parker Ingstrom.”

“That’s the proper way for a widow to be addressed. You really do care about her, don’t you, Brandon.”

“She’s my sister.”

“Then tell me about her.”

“I don’t know what I could say. She’s seven years older than I am. What I remember best is that everybody liked her. She was a quiet person, almost withdrawn when I look back on it. And she was like a second mother to me. When Mom couldn’t meet me after school, I always waited for Deirdre. That was at least twice a week. She was always there for me, too—until she ran away.”

“It sounds like the two of you were pretty close back then,” Adam observed.

“That was before she killed Mom.”

“I thought your mother committed suicide.”

“She did, but it was because of Deirdre. I found her in the car, and I read the note she left. I’ll never forget it. She wrote that she hated herself because Deirdre left and apologized to me for having to find her.”

“How did she know you would find her and not your father?”

“He was away on business and wasn’t due back until the next day. Mom died because of Deirdre leaving, and I’ll never forgive my sister for that.”

“If your mother worded the note the way you remember, it sounds more like she was overwhelmed with guilt.” As he sat on the bed, Adam noticed a shadowy figure at his window. Moving casually, he stood and turned so his side was exposed to the intruder. “I seem to have unwanted company, Brandon. You won’t hang up if I go check it out, will you?”

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t.”

“Because you still care about Deirdre whether you admit it or not. Just don’t hang up, no matter what you hear. I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.”

Seven

Laying his cellphone on the nightstand beside the motel phone, Adam went into the bathroom, counted to sixty, and then flushed the toilet. On the way back, he meandered toward the phone, glancing out the window to see if the figure was still there. Spotting him, Adam dashed to the door, disengaged the safety lock, and yanked the door open. He looked in each direction but saw no one. Instead of going back inside, he sprinted to the nearest corner of the building. Again, he saw no one who could have been lurking outside his room. It seemed like he'd imagined the person, but Adam knew better. Someone had been watching him. He was as sure of that as he was that Brandon cared about Deirdre.

Returning to his room, Adam locked the door again before he picked up his phone. "You still there, Brandon?"

"Yeah. What's going on, anyway?"

"I'm not sure. When I chased after the guy, he'd disappeared. I just hope it wasn't the same man who was tailing Deirdre."

Brandon gasped. "Some guy's been *tailing* her? Why?"

"Nobody knows for sure, but the cops and I suspect he thinks she witnessed an attempted murder."

"Did she?"

"No. She was as surprised as the cop and I were that there was an unconscious girl in the alley. That jerk just came at her from behind."

"Behind! Good Lord, this keeps getting worse all the time. Is she all right? If she's in the hospital, I want to know."

"Don't worry. I scared the guy off. At least, I thought I did until he followed her to my motel room and crashed into another car. He had to quit following her then, or he would have been charged with leaving the scene of an accident if someone noticed he was still behind her. That would give away his identity. If he borrowed or rented a car, he might have come here to see if she was with me."

"Wait just a minute," Brandon accused. "What kind of scam are you trying to run on me? You told me that you don't get along with Dee. What's this about her being in your motel room?"

"Calm down," Adam returned with a laugh. "Everything I said is true. She just came here to tell me to quit tailing her, which I only did the first night we met. After that, the other guy did it."

"Is she in danger?" Brandon demanded, his voice giving away his concern.

"Do you really want to know?" Adam asked. "After all, you claim not to care about her."

"I don't want her to get hurt, damn it!"

"Then, yes, she's in danger. Unfortunately, the cops can't do anything because this nut hasn't hurt or threatened her. Although, why they don't consider those clippings a threat is

beyond me.”

“What clippings?” Brandon asked.

“Before I got to town, she got a newspaper clipping in the mail. It was about an unidentified boy with her business card on him who was killed in a hit-and-run accident. The other one was about the girl. She only had Deirdre’s card on her, too. Now there’s a girl missing who Dee’s been trying to get together with her parents. We have reason to believe that everything’s tied together. Unfortunately, the cops can’t do anything to protect her unless he actually assaults her. That’s why I’ve taken up surveillance—with police permission, of course.”

“This is incredible!” Brandon exclaimed. “Are you *sure* about your facts.”

“Positive. Unless this guy makes a move, I’m all the protection she has. That’s one reason I want to find out what makes her tick—so I can understand her. I don’t like following her just so we don’t spend our days fighting, and that’s exactly what would happen if I accompanied her everywhere. I’d rather be with her so I can protect her right.”

“Are you a detective?”

“Nope, just a man who barged into her life one night. Now we’re stuck with each other because I fought off her assailant. I’m ninety-nine percent sure that’s who was lurking outside my window a few minutes ago, too. Anyway, Deirdre’s trying to reunite me with my niece. And that brings me to the other reason for this call.”

“Which is?” Brandon prompted when Adam paused, uncertain he should speak the words.

“She’s been reuniting runaway teens with their parents for years now, but she can’t reunite with you. I decided I’d return the favor she’s doing me if I can. What do you say? Will you come down here and get back with her? It tears her apart because you won’t see her.”

“She deserves it after what she accused Mom of.”

“She saw what happened, Brandon. And she was devastated that your mother would make it with a guy her daughter was interested in. Besides, from what you said was in the note, your mother felt it was her fault for Deirdre leaving.”

“That’s what Dad said, too,” Brandon admitted.

Adam was beginning to lose his patience with this young man and struggled to keep his voice calm so as not to antagonize him. “You’re still blaming her for something she did as a confused, upset kid. You said yourself that your mother didn’t always pick you up after school. Did she work?”

“Not according to Dad.”

“Then what was she doing? And why would Deirdre make up a lie when she’d run away years before?”

“Mom died because she ran away,” Brandon insisted. “And Dad kept comparing me to Dee. She was always a better athlete, a better student, better at just about everything until the day he died. She sure as hell wasn’t a very good daughter. She wasn’t even there to sit at his bedside with me.”

“A lot of parents compare their kids, Brandon. My parents did it, too.”

“But you didn’t have to compete with a memory. So *what* if she was better at those things? I had good qualities, too.”

“Deirdre didn’t do anything to you, Brandon,” Adam reminded him. “Your *parents* made you bitter, not your sister. She’s as much of a victim as you are—maybe more so since she never got to reunite with her family. She’ll never get that chance with your parents now, and

it still hurts her. Can you imagine what it must be like to reunite one runaway after another with their families, knowing that she can't do it for herself? It has to be very painful, yet she still does it."

At that moment, someone knocked on the door. Adam shouted for the person wait a minute then continued speaking to Brandon. "There must be a sign on my door saying that this is Grand Central Station. I've got another visitor, but at least, this one's polite enough to knock." The persistent knocking became banging. "Tell you what. I'll let you think about our conversation and call you back tomorrow night. Will you still talk to me?"

"All right, Colter," Brandon agreed, "but only because I'm getting worried about Deirdre after all you said. Take care of her, okay?"

"Will do. Bye for now. I'll call again with an update." Hanging up, Adam loped to the door, calling, "All right, I'm coming. Don't you have any ..."

"Not where you're concerned, Adam Colter," Deirdre answered as he opened the door. Striding into the room, she dropped her purse on the dresser then turned to face him. Closing the door, he approached her slowly, awed by her appearance, as she said, "I don't have any patience at all with you. Where do you get off asking Jared personal questions about my brother?"

Adam halted before her. In all the times he'd seen her, she'd always worn full makeup. That night she had on none. What a flawless, pale complexion she had! It was a beautiful contrast to her dark brown hair, which cascaded softly around her shoulders in a slight page-boy ending just above her breasts. She looked about ten years younger with no curls in her hair.

"Answer my question," she demanded. "Or don't you have anything to say in your defense? You follow me around, you save my life, you comfort me when I'm scared out of my wits, you even kiss me. But most of the time, you make me mad as blazes. Then you have the *gall* to go behind my back and find out things about Brandon that I don't want anybody to know. What kind of man are you, Adam Colter? Why do you make me so angry then turn around and make me feel more comfortable than I've felt in years? Why are you doing this to me? Don't just stand there! Do something! Get mad or something, but don't just stand there staring at me."

Throughout her lecture, two of her words echoed so loudly in his mind that he could think of nothing else: *kiss me ... kiss me ... kiss me*. But he couldn't. He had to keep his distance no matter how good she looked, no matter how much he wanted to run his fingers through her shiny soft hair, no matter how much he longed to silence her unceasingly moving lips that beckoned to his, no matter ...

"What *is* it with you, anyway?" she asked, her tone hot with rage. "Why won't you do anything? Why are you just staring at me? Are you afraid to admit that I'm right, that you have no right to know anything about my family?"

"Do you remember what happens when you talk too much?" he asked with a different kind of heat in his tone. Giving in to temptation, he slid his fingers through her baby-fine locks, placing it all behind her shoulders.

He smiled down at her. Desire gleamed in her deep blue eyes, a desire Adam suspected she didn't even know she couldn't hide. It gave him hope that maybe someday she would give him a sign that he could understand and know beyond a doubt that she wouldn't turn him down if he asked for more intimate caresses.

But this was obviously not the time. He needed to maintain his resolve to gain her trust,

and that wouldn't include mentioning her obvious excitement right now. Instead, he decided to admit the truth of his thoughts and maybe hint at his conflicting emotions.

"I see you do remember," he said. "You know something, Deirdre? You're almost more than I can handle. If I didn't know that you have a master's degree, I'd swear you were only in college the way you look tonight. How old are you?"

"Thirty-one next month," she replied in a near whisper.

"No kidding. I'll be thirty-seven next month. It looks like we've got more in common than just a desire to see Robin back home."

With no more to say, Adam continued his automatic journey through her tresses. As he did, he inched closer to her by shuffling his bare feet across the carpet. Oh, how he wished she would start talking nonstop again! At least, then he'd have an excuse to kiss her. He could silence her as he had silenced her on previous occasions.

Then he realized the reason for his reluctance. Deirdre Ingstrom seemed unattainable, and he'd never considered a woman unattainable before. Every single one he'd chosen had fallen prey to his charms without even the time to flirtatiously bat their eyes at him.

Of course, Deirdre was unattainable. It was only natural since they fought all the time. But there was more to it than that. She didn't like him, and so far he'd found only one quality he liked in her. She truly cared about the runaways and their families. Maybe the reason behind his attraction to her was that he couldn't have her, so he wanted her all the more. That *had* to be it. It was the only logical answer.

"Adam?" she asked, bringing him back to reality.

"What?"

"Why do we fight so much? I don't like not understanding our relationship."

Diverting his eyes from her full, pouty lips, he moved his gaze over her pert nose to the big blue eyes staring up at him with so much innocence. Somehow he had to force himself to continue the conversation instead of kissing her again. It wouldn't be easy, but he could do it if he tried.

"I don't know," he admitted, "but I don't like it, either. In fact, that's why I wanted to talk to your brother. I was hoping to get some answers."

"Did it help?"

"*What?*" he asked, aghast. "How do you know I talked to him?"

"You were on the phone when I got here. Now answer my question."

"That phone call didn't answer a damned thing. All it did was raise a more questions. For example, why do I find it so hard to like you one second and so hard not to kiss you the next?"

"Is it really hard for you?" she asked in a near-whisper. "Or are you just saying that to cover up the truth?"

"Even if I knew the truth," he replied, "I'm not sure I would cover it up. You're too honest and open. And I should probably emphasize the word too."

"You dislike women with those qualities?"

"No, but I think there's a limit to something like that. You say exactly what's on your mind whether it hurts others or not."

"Not usually. Normally, I'm very careful how I word things. I have to be if I'm going to initiate successful reunions. The only person I have trouble with is you. And I have no idea why other than that you irritate me every time I turn around. In fact," she said, the agitation returning to her voice, "you seem to go out of your way to make me mad. Why? I haven't done anything out of line in my dealings with you. That's quite the opposite of some things *you've*

done. Now that I think about it, ...”

“Things like this?” He embraced her to block off her words with a kiss.

She considered freeing herself, but her desire for him stopped her. Within her chest, her heart constricted even tighter than it had when her late husband kissed her. Her lungs ached for more oxygen than she could inhale. Now a man she hated filled her with the same excitement that Parker had. No, not the same. Something was different, because the hate consuming her was even more intense than the love she’d shown Parker.

Then something damp touched her lips. At first it was tentative, but the forcefulness slowly increased until she parted them to admit his tongue into her mouth. When it collided with hers, a sexual wildfire raged through her body. No longer able to control herself, she moaned into his mouth and relaxed against him.

This was the most incredible feeling! Adam’s arms tightened around her, bringing her even closer to him than she thought possible. She could feel his hardness against her stomach when his hands slid down her back to her buttocks, squeezing them gently while they pushed her pelvis against his. This embrace felt much better than before—even better than those few other men had shown her, including Parker.

To her dismay, Adam pulled back his head and slipped his hands back to her ribs. At least, he continued to hold her; and for that, she was grateful. Deirdre laid her head against his chest, delighting in the comfort of his embrace while he rested his chin on her head.

“Why does that happen when we don’t even like each other?” she asked after several minutes.

“I don’t know.”

“When I met you, I hated you, you know,” she admitted. “Even though you showed me feelings stronger than Parker ever did, I hated you.”

In the next moment, she regretted her words, because Adam spoke in a tone that revealed the pain she’d caused him. “You’re too honest, Deirdre.”

Somehow she had to cover up her regret while still being honest with him. “I’m sorry. But I can’t let you think that I willingly accept your kisses. I don’t, you know. You’ve forced me into them every time. You never ask me if it’s okay.”

“If I did, you’d just tell me no.”

“That’s exactly my point.” Although she felt no animosity toward the man so tenderly stroking her hair, she spoke with a flat tone. “You can’t seem to do anything without forcing it on me. You barged into my office, and you barged into my business life. Now that you’ve talked to Brandon, you’ve even barged into my personal life. You never ask my permission to do anything concerning me.”

“You never would have given it to me, so why bother? And by the way, I’ve never said that I don’t like you. I said that I find it hard to like you, and that’s not the same thing. Just because you hate me ...”

“I don’t hate you,” she interrupted.

“You just said that you did.”

“I said hated, past tense. When you kiss me, yes, I kind of hate you. Other than that, I don’t hate you. Okay, maybe I dislike you, and maybe I hate your actions. But I don’t flat-out hate you, because I know you must have something good hidden deep inside that you haven’t shown me yet. There’s compassion in you somewhere, Adam Colter. I believe that with all my heart. It’s just very hard to dig up.”

Adam kissed the top of her head then repositioned his arms around her, his embrace even more caressing. "You really shouldn't be here, you know."

"Why not?" she asked, stunned by his statement.

"Somebody was watching me through my window tonight. I scared him off, but he might come back."

"What makes you think it wasn't me?"

"He was too tall to be you, or even Jared coming by to see if his little message sent you running to me. Which reminds me. He said you've been working too hard lately. How about taking some time off and showing me around Disney World? You could show me the best places to see—maybe even tomorrow."

"As strange as it seems, I've never been to Disney World."

"Then you *have* to take me. Nobody can live in Orlando and not see Disney World."

"I'm sorry, but I can't." Deirdre drew up the courage to separate herself from him. She didn't want to, but she knew she must. Things have already spiraled out of control that night. "Our relationship has gone too far, well beyond professional. If I went to Disney World with you, it would be a date, and I don't date my clients. Besides, what about my promise to reunite you with Robin?"

"I was all set to burst in and take over everything when I came down here, Deirdre, but you gained enough of my trust to keep me from doing that. Granted, I followed you that first night, but I still trusted you enough to give you the chance to talk to her. You probably won't believe this, but I wasn't even going to follow you into the building."

Adam followed her to the mirror and gazed unfalteringly at her reflection while he massaged her shoulders. At the feel of his caress, she grew weak-kneed and leaned back against him for support. It felt good to have a man treat her with such caring again, but it was hard to imagine that it would be Adam, the only person she couldn't get along with. After releasing a soft moan, she spoke words she didn't even know were in her mind.

"I can feel that compassion right now, Adam. That's how I know it's there. Why won't you let me see it?"

"I will, if you'll just give me the chance." Turning her toward him, he stared down at her while she gazed into his dark eyes. "Don't block me out, Deirdre. If you'd just open up to me, I could open up to you."

"But it's not right, not professional."

"Then tell me what's wrong about it. I don't like to fight with you all the time. In fact, I hate it. How are we ever going to get a successful reunion with Robin if we can't even work together? That's what's wrong, you know. I want Robin back, and you believe she wants to come back. Let's work together and see that it happens."

"Deep in my heart I know you're right, but ..."

"But what?" he asked when she stopped.

"I don't know," she admitted. "That's why I didn't finish. All I know for sure is that there's some reason I can't get along with you. I'm not even sure it's your attitude anymore."

"Oh, Deirdre," he breathed.

Only seconds after his lips caught hers again, his cellphone played the theme from *Star Wars* like an alarm telling them to stop their games and continue with a serious relationship. Jerking away from her, he hurried to answer the phone. While he was too busy to stop her, she picked up her purse and rushed toward the door.

"Colter here," Adam said as Deirdre headed toward the door. After a brief pause, he

stopped her short with his frantic voice. "Deirdre! Don't go."

Spinning to face him, she stared at him in astonishment. The desperation in his voice stunned her into immobility, until he held the phone toward her and announced that it was Jared. As she took the smartphone from Adam, she turned her back on him.

"Hi, Jared," she greeted with fraudulent cheerfulness. "Why didn't you call my cell?"

"Because you forgot it again," he replied. "Did I interrupt you two?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"The sound of your voice, *and* you didn't deny it."

"You think you're pretty smart for a kid, don't you." Her hair tickled her neck as Adam moved it behind her shoulder, and Deirdre giggled. He kissed her neck lightly. Shrugging away from him, she said, "Would you stop that?"

"I'm sorry, Deirdre," Jared replied. "I only called because I didn't think I should wait."

"That's okay, Jared. I was talking to ..." Behind her, Adam grasped her shoulders to nuzzle her neck just below her ear. "Adam!"

"You wanted to see compassion, honey," he whispered into one ear while Jared laughed in the other.

"*Compassion*," she returned aloud. "Not passion."

Jared laughed louder. "Man, I *did* interrupt something. I'm really sorry, but I thought you'd want to know. Patty called."

"She did?" Deirdre asked in amazement, pushing Adam away. "Knock it off, Colter. This is important. Patty called."

"What did she want?" Adam asked as he sat down on the bed and pulled her onto his lap.

"Stop it, Adam," she demanded when he wouldn't let her rise again. "Now isn't time for your immature games."

"I just want to hear what's said." He took the phone from Deirdre and put it on speaker.

"Are you two doing what I think?" Jared asked.

Adam chuckled and caressed Deirdre's waist. "We're sitting on the bed, Jared, not lying in it. Now tell us what Patty said."

"She wants you to pick her up, Deirdre. She told me she's at the *Paddlefish*."

"How in the world did she get way out there?" she asked in astonishment.

"She didn't say. All she said was that she'd been hiding out there for two days and had to beg a lady to borrow her cell to call."

Glancing at her watch, Deirdre sighed and bit her bottom lip gently in concentration. It would take quite a while to get to the *Paddlefish*. And once she was there, would she even be able to find the runaway teen? "Did she say she'd be waiting for me at the boat? Or will she be someplace else?"

"She only said that's where she was calling from."

"Darn. I wish I knew exactly where to find her. She could be anywhere out there."

"I knew you'd say that, so I had her give me the number on the phone she was calling from. I told her you'd call to make arrangements."

"You call and tell her to wait for me in the ladies' room. If they close before I get there, have her wait as close as she can. I'll be there as soon as possible. Thanks a lot for calling, Jared. I appreciate it."

Deirdre rose while Adam turned off his phone. Then he went to the dresser, stuffed his wallet into his back jeans pocket, his change and room key card into one front pocket, and another set of keys into the other front pocket. Then he picked up his rental car key. When

he glanced up, he saw Deirdre's openly aggravated expression in the mirror before him.

"If you think you're going to follow me this time, I swear I'll ..." she started to say as he approached her.

"Why is it," Adam asked, grasping her waist, "that you always get excited at the wrong time? I'm not going to follow you, Deirdre. I'm driving you."

"You are not!"

"I most certainly am. You weren't here a while ago when I chased some guy away from my window. Brandon was on the phone at the time, and he asked me to take care of you. By the way, I told him what's been going on around here."

"I don't believe you. Brandon doesn't care about me. He's made that very clear."

"He cares, all right, probably more than even he realized at the start of our conversation. But this isn't the time to discuss it. We have to get to the Rainforest Cafe and pick up Patty. Where is that, anyway?" he asked as he laid his hand on the small of her back and escorted her to the door. "I haven't seen it around."

"It's in Buena Vista at the Disney Springs." He turned off the light and closed the door, checking to make sure it had locked before she continued. "Maybe I should drive. I know this place pretty well, and it would be easier."

Deirdre and Adam made their way through the small shopping center of boutiques, shops, and restaurants to the *Paddleboat*. As they hurried along, Adam mentioned that he wanted to come back to browse through the specialty stores and suggested that she join him for the trip. Ignoring his invitation, she led him to the restaurant. There he leaned against the wall outside the ladies' room, while Deirdre went in to talk with Patty.

"Are you in here, Patty?" she asked once the woman washing her hands left. The only closed stall door opened. A teenager with short curly hair emerged, her face bruised in three places. Deirdre gasped in shock. "Oh, my word! Not you, too. Who did this to you, honey?"

Tears sprang to Patty's eyes, and she raced to the comfort of Deirdre's arms. "He was my pimp. He found me when I ran away from the motel. I really didn't run away, though. I was just taking a walk, but I hadn't told my parents. Anyway, he saw me and forced me to go with him. He wanted me to work for him again, but I wouldn't. I hated doing it, Mrs. Ingstrom. I always did. You made me realize that I didn't have to, so I told him I wouldn't turn any more tricks."

"What's his name?"

"I can't say. He might find me and kill me."

"He can't if he's in jail," Deirdre reminded her. "You'll be perfectly safe."

"You know that's not true. He'll get out in no time."

"Maybe, but you could be out of the state by then. You could be home with your parents."

"I won't tell you his name," Patty declared. "I won't tell anybody. He knows where my parents live, and he'll come find me. I know it."

Deirdre sighed. She didn't like this, but she couldn't force Patty to reveal the man's name. If she antagonized the girl, she might not be able to pull off the reunion. And she was too close to success now. "Okay, Patty. I won't push it. Do you want to go back to your parents now? Or would you rather wait until morning?"

"I just want to go back, Mrs. Ingstrom. I want to go home."

Tears of joy streamed down Deirdre's cheeks. Those words always touched her heart. It meant she had succeeded with another runaway where she had failed herself.

Oh, how she longed to have a family again, and her successes only increased her desire. When she was alone later, she could come to terms with her own loss. Then she could regenerate her courage to continue with the next case.

"I'll take you to them as soon as we finish at the hospital. I want a doctor to examine you before we let your parents know you were beaten." Hugging her tightly, Deirdre collected herself then asked, "How did you get here, anyway?"

"I hid in the back of a covered pick-up. I didn't care where I was going as long as it was away from him so I could call you."

"Jared said you were here for two days. Why didn't you call sooner?"

"I wanted to make sure he didn't follow me."

"That was a good idea, but it only postponed my being able to help you. Now let's get you to a hospital. There's a gentleman waiting outside to escort us."

"A gentleman?" Patty asked. "But I thought you always did reunions things alone."

"The only reason I let him come is because I've been followed myself lately, and he promised my brother he would take care of me. Otherwise, I never would have agreed to this."

"Don't you like him?"

"Not particularly," Deirdre admitted. "Let's get out of here before we get locked in for the night."

When Patty saw Adam for the first time, she nudged Deirdre and leaned over to whisper in her ear. "You'd better grab this one up, Mrs. Ingstrom. He's a hunk."

Stifling a laugh, Deirdre introduced the two, only vaguely noticing Adam's concerned expression. After greeting the teen cheerfully, he escorted them back to her van.

Eight

When they finished at the emergency room, they drove to the motel where Patty's parents were staying. Only a moment after Deirdre knocked on the door of the darkened room, an average-height man in pajamas answered it.

"Mrs. Ingstrom!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here at this hour?"

"I brought you a present," Deirdre said as she drew Patty to her side. Adam watched, determined to see Deirdre's reaction to this reunion. "She's ready to go home."

"Patty-cake!" Mr. Wilder hugged his daughter, as though she would run away again if he let her go. "Oh, my God. It's a dream! I just know it is."

"No, it's not, Daddy," she said, returning his embrace. "I want to go home, and I never want to leave again."

"Patty?" Mrs. Wilder asked as she separated the father and daughter then hugged the girl herself. "I've never been happier in my life. Your brother and sister will be happy, too."

Adam glanced down at Deirdre, and seeing her tears, slid his arm around her shoulders. She gazed up at him with a smile until Mr. Wilder's voice drew her attention back to him.

"How can we ever repay you for this, Mrs. Ingstrom?" he asked. "You brought back our baby, and it's finally all over."

"That's a nice thought, Mr. Wilder," she said, "but there's still a long road ahead of you. For your reunion to be successful, family counseling is almost a necessity. There are a lot of adjustments in your future, a lot of give and take for all of you. But Patty's taken the hardest step—at least, for her. She swallowed a lot of pride to come here tonight, and she found out that her love for you was a lot deeper than she thought. As for repayment, just getting the word out that we're a non-profit and take tax-deductible donations, is good enough."

"How did she get the bruises?"

"I think it's best that she explain. Mr. Colter and I took her to an emergency room, and she's just fine. No serious damage was done." Turning her gaze to the teenager, Deirdre asked, "What about it, Patty? Do you want us to stay for moral support?"

"I don't think so," Patty said, "but thanks for asking. And thanks for caring. I don't think I could have done this without you."

"That's what I'm here for," Deirdre replied as Patty hugged her. "Don't lose my business card because I want you to keep in touch. If any of you want to talk, just let me know. It doesn't even have to be important. I'll always take time to listen or offer whatever advice I can."

"We'll remember that." Mr. Wilder put his arm around his daughter when she backed up between him and his wife. "And thanks again, Mrs. Ingstrom. If there's ever anything we can do, ..."

"The only thing you can do for me is love your daughter unconditionally. That's all I'm in

this business for—to see families happy again.” Gazing up at Adam, she said, “We’d better leave these people alone now, Adam. They have a lot to talk about. Good night, everybody. And good luck.”

As Adam escorted Deirdre toward the van, Patty called out and raced to her side, hugging her one more time. Although she whispered into Deirdre’s ear, Adam heard her say, “Don’t let him get away, Mrs. Ingstrom. Even I can see how much he cares about you. And I’m going to check to find out how things are going with you two.”

“I’ll see, Patty. But don’t get your hopes up.”

Adam tried to start a conversation several times, but Deirdre consistently rejected him. After about fifteen minutes, she explained that she needed complete silence after the ordeal of reuniting a family. When she stopped outside his motel room, he unbuckled his seat belt. Reaching across the van, he turned off the motor and pocketed the keys under her angry protest.

“If you want them,” he taunted, “get them yourself.”

“Not only are you overbearing and irritating,” she grumbled, “you’re depraved.”

“If a woman can stuff my motel room key down her bra and tell me to retrieve it, why can’t I put your car keys in my pocket?”

Deirdre gasped, and her jaw dropped in surprise. “Did a woman really do that?”

“Just last night,” he admitted with a lusty grin. When he saw her look of disappointment, he smiled. Obviously, she didn’t like the idea of his being with another woman. “I didn’t take her up on her offer, Deirdre. In fact, I threatened to tell the manager she stole my key. That’s how I got it back. Then I went straight to my room.”

“How you handled the situation is none of my concern.”

Unbuckling her seat belt, Adam grasped her knees and turned her toward him. Then he took her right hand in both of his. Watching his thumbs stroke the soft skin, he considered his words a few moments before he gazed into her eyes. “I wanted to discuss something different, but I think we have even more important matters that need tending to.”

“I don’t know what they would be.”

Adam sighed. He’d hoped that they’d gotten past her becoming irritated every time he brought up a serious discussion; he’d hoped they could talk about anything now. Apparently, he’d thought wrong. But that didn’t change the fact that they needed to talk.

“I think you do know,” Adam said, determined to see the conversation through to the end. “Something happened in my room tonight, something that neither one of us expected.”

“I agree. Something did happen, but it isn’t what you want to think. I never dreamed I could hate somebody with all my heart. I did hate you, too, Adam—more than I ever want to hate anybody again.”

“Why? During the eternal silence back here, I gave this a lot of thought, Deirdre. I have a theory, but I want to hear yours first. So, answer my question. Why did you hate me?”

Deirdre examined him in the illumination of the streetlight. She honestly had no idea what he meant by his question, so she couldn’t answer it. Even if she did understand, she wasn’t sure she would explain. She didn’t want a relationship with any man, and that especially meant Adam Colter. But she had to say something, or he would pressure her into a

response. To avoid a possible confrontation, she said, "I don't know how to answer because I don't understand your question."

"Then let me ask it differently. Do you hate me because I kissed you, or because I made you feel again after all these years?" Furious, she opened her mouth to protest, but he touched a finger against her lips, silencing her. "Don't answer yet, Deirdre. That was a rhetorical question that I want you to think about, not a real question that I want you to react to—like you reacted to me earlier this evening. You might be able to fool yourself for the time being, but you didn't fool me, not for a second."

"I can't believe how arrogant you are!"

"It probably does sound that way, but I'm actually as honest with myself as you are with me. I hope you'll be honest with yourself, too." He pushed back her long hair as he repositioned himself. "If it's any consolation, I know it isn't easy. I'm as confused about all of this as you are."

Most of her anger diminished under his tender caress. "Really?"

"Really. We can't get along, but we're still attracted to each other. Even though you say that you hate me, there's something drawing us together over which we have no control. People call it fate or maybe kismet. I've never run across a situation like this before. But I do know one thing. I have a new respect for you after seeing you in action tonight. I don't think I've ever seen three happier people, and they were all very grateful to you."

"It was nothing," she mumbled, her face heating in embarrassment. "I just did my job the best I could."

"Those people didn't think it was nothing, Deirdre, and neither did I. You worked hard to get them together again. I saw how desperate you were to find Patty, and I saw your beautiful but puffy eyes when you came out of the bathroom. You don't just care about the runaways you work with. You actually *feel* for them. Their sadness is your sadness, and their happiness is your happiness. It's like you're living a reunion with your family through them."

"In a way, I am. I've never admitted this before, Adam, probably because I didn't even think of it until you said something, but you were right. Those kids are all I have. There's absolutely nothing else."

"I was dead wrong, though," he declared. "You have a lot more than the kids."

"No, I don't."

"Oh, but you do. I could never get the kind of satisfaction from my job that you get from yours—not if I worked a lifetime at it. When I witnessed that reunion tonight, I had just as many tears in my eyes as you had in yours. It was all I could do not to show it. What I don't understand is how you can do it time and again when your own reunion went so badly. I certainly couldn't. You must have the emotional strength of ten men."

"Knowing that they'll be happy in the long run keeps me going."

"You're one courageous lady." Staring at her longingly, he hesitated several seconds. Then he kissed her on the lips and opened his car door. "I'd better let you get home. You need all your strength to pull off the next reunion. And I hope that one's mine with Robin."

"So do I, Adam. I really do."

"Will you call me if you need anything?" She nodded with a shy smile, and he ran his fingers through her hair again. "Terrific! Maybe we'll start getting along together now."

"We don't have much choice, do we? If we want a successful reunion with Robin, we have to."

"That's right," he said sarcastically as he got out of the van. Taking her keys from his

pocket, he returned them. "We have to get along for my reunion with Robin. Good night."

Once Adam reached his motel room door, Deirdre threw open her car door. She shouldn't encourage him by doing this, but she wouldn't be able to live with herself if she didn't say something to make him understand that she wouldn't mind a relationship with him in the future, while keeping that information hidden. Racing to his side, she said, "Just a minute, Adam."

"What is it?" he asked, facing her.

"Thank you for being there tonight. I never thought I'd tell anybody this, but I really appreciated your company. It made the reunion easier to have somebody at my side when I watched it."

"I'm glad I could help."

Breathing deeply for several seconds, she gazed up at him, her eyes not leaving his thin lips. If only he would kiss her like he had in his room! After all the years of emptiness, even having a man, one she loathed, one who held like he had, filled some of the void that had grown without her knowledge. Maybe Adam was right about why she hated him. Maybe it wasn't Adam Colter himself, but the emotions and sensations he sent coursing through her body whenever he touched her. If they were to keep theirs a business relationship, though, she had to hide it from him. If she let her reborn feelings reign, she could become involved with him.

"Do you want to come in?" he asked.

"I'd better not. I have a lot to do tomorrow, and it's late."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Good night again."

"Adam?" she said, grabbing his wrist when he started to unlock the door. "I probably shouldn't say this, but I want you to know. For the first time in days, I felt safe, and it was just because you were with me. All this being followed and everything had me more on edge than I thought. I didn't realize how scared I was until I didn't have to be."

Now that she'd admitted the truth, should she continue with her confession? If she did and he got the wrong idea, she might make a mistake she couldn't change. But if she didn't, she'd feel as though something was missing from her life. Instead of speaking frankly, however, she thanked him one final time.

"You're entirely welcome, Deirdre. Like I said earlier, if you ever need anything, just give me a call."

"I will." Inhaling deeply, she gazed up at him then said, "Oh, what the heck."

Not caring about the possible consequences of her actions, she threw her arms around his neck and stood on her toes to kiss him soundly. He returned her hold, drawing her close and grasping her head with one hand as his mouth ground hungrily against hers.

The renewed feelings flooded over her. Being in his arms was wonderful! Who cared if she didn't like him? He was willing to spend a little time to fill the void in her soul that he'd told her was there long before she knew about it. And she wasn't about to live without that feeling of unexpected fullness just because she didn't like the man.

The arm across her back moved lower, until his hand came to rest on her buttocks. It was only a tentative squeeze, but one that sent the flood waters of emotion even higher. She melted against him with a contented moan.

Then she felt his desire against her stomach. Overwhelmed by embarrassment, she pushed him away with a mumbled apology.

"There's no need to apologize for filling a void, honey," he told her. "If it's been since your

husband's death, it must be some void, too. But you really should go before we do something that you might regret in the morning. Call me when you get home. I want to know you got there okay."

"All right," she agreed with a smile. "Good night."

Why had she kissed him good night the evening before? Deirdre wondered as she pulled into her garage. She wouldn't have such an empty feeling now that he had stopped following her for the day if she hadn't. Like he'd said, they were attracted to each other whether they liked it or not. Thank goodness, she hadn't had the opportunity to speak with him that day. She never could have hidden her embarrassment at having been so forward last night. Trying to dismiss her thoughts, she went upstairs and was stripping out of her clothes when the cellphone in her purse on her bed rang.

"Hello, honey," he greeted when she answered. "I haven't even had a chance to say that today. You were on your way out of the house when I got there this morning."

"How did you get back to the motel so soon?" she asked.

"I'm calling from the car because I wanted to warn you to stay in tonight."

"I can't, Adam. I have to see if Robin is back at work yet. But first I want to take some of the grunge off with a shower."

"Send Jared. You stay in the house."

"Why?"

"Because you weren't the only one being followed. I was, too. I had a feeling that would happen after I chased that guy off last night, so I was on the look-out. There were definitely two cars tailing us."

"There were?" she asked in shock.

"That's right. I'm going back to the motel to make a business call and pick up a few things. Then I'm coming over to sleep in your spare room. I don't like the things that are happening."

Deirdre gasped in horror. "You can't do that, Adam. What would Jared think? He already thinks that we're ... that we've ... Well, *you* know what he thinks. And what about the other kids?"

"I don't give a damn," he insisted. "You could be in danger, Deirdre. I can't just sit back and let something happen when I should be there to protect you."

"You don't have to feel obligated to me, you know."

"Knowing it doesn't stop the feeling. Who else is there for you to confide in? Who else can protect you?"

"There's Jared to confide in and Shadow to protect me."

"Shadow's a good dog, honey, but he still needs to recuperate a while before he'll be up to full capacity. I'm coming over, and there's nothing you can say to change my mind. Now send Jared to see how Robin is, and you stay put. I'll probably be there in ninety minutes or so. In fact, if you'll hold off on that shower, I'll scrub your back."

"I wouldn't even consider showering with you in the house," she snapped. "And you're a warped man to even think such a thing. It isn't natural."

Adam chuckled. "I know it's been a long time for you, sweetheart, but I didn't think you were naive. Anything that makes a man and woman feel good together is natural. See you in a while."

She hit the End button on her cellphone, slammed it onto the nightstand, and stalked to her closet. Taking her bathrobe from the back of the door, she left her room in search of Jared. She found him studying with another teen in the living room. Of all the things she did for the teenagers, she believed getting them back into school second in importance to reuniting them with their families. No matter who came to her home, she insisted that the child attend the school in her district. Although there was often initial opposition, she found that after a couple of weeks the teenagers enjoyed the new companionships and learning experiences. No matter how reluctant they were in the beginning, they invariably thanked her.

"Jared," she said, "I need to talk to you for a minute."

"Sure," he replied as he laid his book on the coffee table. "What's up?"

Deirdre led him into the foyer before she explained, "Adam wants you to run an errand for me. He doesn't want me out tonight, but he still wants to know if Robin's feeling better. Would you run out to the café and see if she's working? Find out if she's ready to go back to Adam, too, okay?"

"No problem. What time do you want me home?"

"Ten, I guess, but you have to study until at least eleven."

"Will do," Jared agreed. "Thanks a lot, Deirdre. I really like Robin, and she can't date yet. The more I can see her at work, the happier we are. See you later."

When Adam got to his motel, he placed a call to Pennsylvania instead of making a business call like he'd told Deirdre. A woman's voice greeted him.

"May I speak to Brandon please?" Adam asked.

"I'm sorry, but he isn't home. Could I take a message and have him return your call?"

"My name is Adam Colter, and . . ."

"Mr. Colter!" she interrupted. "I've been waiting for your call. Brandon left for Orlando early this afternoon. He had to take the roundabout way to get there and had with a three-hour layover in Atlanta. He asked me to get your number so he can call you."

"Why did he come down?" Adam asked in surprise.

"I'm not sure. Something about his sister being in some kind of trouble. He said you already know about it."

"I do, but I didn't expect him to show up. I didn't think he wanted anything to do with Deirdre."

"That's nothing. I didn't even know he *had* a sister, and we've been dating off and on for two years now. I tried to get more information out of him, but he wouldn't talk, not even when he called to tell me got there okay."

"He's already here?" Adam asked, astonished.

"He got in about a half an hour ago."

"If you'll give me his cell number, I'll call him."

Before he did, though, Adam devised a plan by which he could protect Deirdre better. After making arrangements to meet with Brandon, he called Deirdre and insisted that she pack a grocery bag with clothes for the night and the following day, adding that he'd definitely be late getting to her house. Despite her initial protest, she eventually agreed. Satisfied that she would be ready when he arrived, Adam went to the front desk and spoke to the night manager about his change of plans.

"I've made arrangements for someone else to stay in my room," he announced. "I hope that doesn't cause you any problems."

"Not really," the man said, "but it's never been done before. May I ask why you want to leave? It isn't our service, is it?"

"Your service is fine. That's one reason I went ahead and filled the room for you. Unfortunately, I was called back to the office on an emergency. A friend of mine just got into town, and I thought I'd let him have my room. I've only been in it a few minutes today, so it doesn't even need cleaning."

"I don't see any problem, as long as he doesn't mind."

"Terrific," Adam said with a smile as he pulled out his MasterCard. "I'll check out now and you can hold the room for him until he gets here, okay?"

With that done, Adam drove to the airport, dropped the rental car off, relinquished the keys, and signed the proper paperwork. Now he needed a ride back to town. Placing another call to Deirdre, he asked her to have Jared pick him up at the airport as soon as possible. When she announced that he wasn't home, Adam insisted that she find him and have the teen meet him at a different motel.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"I'll explain everything later," he replied.

"Oh, no, you don't, Adam Colter," she ordered. "You tell me what's going on right this second, or I won't do anything you asked. I don't like not knowing what you're thinking."

"There you go again," he teased, "getting all excited at the wrong time. I told you I'll explain everything later. I just don't have the time now. I have to be somewhere as soon as possible, and I still have to get there from the airport. Now do as I say."

"You're impossible!" he heard her shout as he hung up the phone.

"I interrupted Mr. Colter and Deirdre when I called his motel to talk to him last night," Jared told Robin sheepishly. "Maybe you're right. Maybe they do like each other and just won't admit it."

"Wouldn't that be romantic?" she crooned. "I'd love to see Uncle Adam with somebody as sweet as Deirdre."

His cellphone rang with Deirdre's special ringtone, and he dug into his back jeans pocket to retrieve it. "What's up, Deirdre?"

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but I don't have a choice. Adam wants you to meet him as soon as possible."

"Why?"

Deirdre bristled at his question and snapped, "That idiot won't tell me. He said he'll explain everything later. If he doesn't stop this fooling around, though, he's not even going to get the chance."

"Where am I supposed to meet him?"

After repeating Adam's instructions, Deirdre asked to speak with Robin. When she was on the phone, Deirdre explained, "Adam's trying to pull one over on me, and I wondered if you might know what it is."

"How could I?" the teen asked in surprise. "I haven't even seen Uncle Adam."

"I wouldn't put anything past that man. He's so blessed stubborn I can't even talk to him for more than a couple of minutes at a time without getting angry with him. Now he won't answer my questions. I was kind of hoping he'd contacted you and said something."

"Sorry."

"So, how are you feeling?"

"Much better, thanks."

"Are you ready to see him yet?" Deirdre longed to get them together so her life could return to normal, uncomplicated by conflicting emotions of attraction and dislike. "He's really worried about you."

"I know that, Deirdre. I always knew he loved me. I just didn't realize how much until I had time to think while I was loc ..." Robin hesitated for a few seconds then said, "Anyway, I didn't feel like watching TV, so I thought about our talks about Uncle Adam."

Even though Deirdre was sure of Robin's problem now, she said nothing about the girl's deception. Robin had been locked up somewhere, probably as a form of punishment. Rather than mention it, Deirdre continued as though she hadn't noticed Robin's slip. "I hope that means you're deciding to reunite with him soon."

"Pretty soon maybe. I even had Jared bring me another one of your business cards because I lost mine. I won't lose this one, though. I promise."

"May I at least tell Adam that a reunion might be possible soon?"

"I don't know. I don't want to get his hopes up. What do you think? You probably know him better than I do now."

"He'd be thrilled, and I would explain everything you said."

"All right. You can tell him."

"Terrific! Now would you please tell Jared to get his bucket in gear and meet Adam? It sounded important."

Adam stared in amazement at the dark-haired man standing in the doorway of the motel room. If it was Deirdre's brother, he bore no resemblance to her except for his hair color. Apparently, one of them looked like each parent. While Deirdre's eyes were the deepest blue he'd ever seen, her brother's were a dark brown like his own. The shape of her face was almost a perfect oval, her nose quite small, her complexion pale. Brandon had the round face and ruddy complexion of an Irishman, and a rather oversized nose. After a moment, Adam recovered his senses to introduce himself.

"My name is Adam Colter."

"I figured," Brandon said as he stepped back to let Adam enter. "Brandon Mackenzie. Have a seat."

Noticing the room contained two double beds, Adam sank onto one of them. "I'm sure glad you have two beds. I was afraid we'd have to share."

"What are you talking about?" Brandon demanded. "Why would you stay with *me*? You have your own damned motel room."

Adam chuckled at Brandon's unwarranted anger. "Boy, you two really do have the same parents—whether you look like it or not. You both have the same quick temper. I don't have a room anymore, Brandon. I checked out tonight, and I left them your name so you can take it over."

"Why would you do that?"

"I need to get Deirdre out of danger. I told you she was being followed."

Brandon nodded. "That's why I came down here. I want to help if I can."

"That's exactly what you'll be doing. As far as the management at my motel is concerned, I had to go home, and my friend is taking over my room. I want our stories to match in case you're questioned for some reason. You got the room because we ran into each other in a bar, and I noticed that you had your suitcase with you. When I found out that the motel you were going to use had overbooked, I offered to let you stay with me for the night. Then I had to leave because of a business emergency, so you took it over. Deirdre and I are taking over your room here, but don't check out. We need the cover."

"Did something happen since I talked to you last?"

"It sure did. We're *both* being followed now, and I have to cover our tracks the only way I can think of."

"Did you tell the cops?"

"To hell with the cops! They won't do a damned thing to protect Deirdre, anyway."

Brandon glared at Adam. "And I'm suppose to think that *you* can protect her?"

"A hell of a lot better than *they* can," Adam declared. "Now about my plan. I checked out of the motel and turned in my rental car. As far as anybody knows, I'm headed home."

"What about an airline ticket? Did you cover that?"

"I came on an open one, and I don't think the airlines are allowed to give out a passenger roster. I should be covered."

"I hope you're right."

"You're not the only one." At that moment, there was a knock at the door. Brandon stared at him in astonishment as Adam rose to answer it. "That's probably another friend."

Before opening the door, Adam turned off the light and pulled back the heavy plastic drapes at the window. Rocking nervously back and forth, Jared stood under the outside room light. With a sigh of relief, Adam turned the light back on and opened the door to admit the teen.

"Jared, this is Brandon Mackenzie," Adam introduced as he closed the door. "Brandon, Jared Ellis, Deirdre's ward. Now let's get down to business."

Jared's eyes widened in shock. "You brought Deirdre's brother here without telling her? No wonder she's mad at you again."

"I didn't bring him; he came on his own. Besides, she doesn't know he's here, and I don't want her to yet. You have to keep our secret."

"Hey!" Jared exclaimed as he threw his hands up in surrender. "I don't want to be in the doghouse. If you want to make your own announcement, be my guest. I don't want anything to do with this."

"Good. You two just sit there and listen, because we don't have a lot of time to take care of everything."

Why was she doing what Adam told her? Deirdre wondered as she the paper bag from from the recycle bin. Neatly folding the white slacks and red and white Polo shirt lying on her bed, she placed them in the bottom of the bag. This was ludicrous. Adam could be tricking her into bed, and she was sailing right into it.

But he'd sounded so sincere when he said he would explain everything. If he had things to tell her, it could mean that more danger lay ahead of them. Besides, she hoped he could prove that her irrational behavior wasn't the stupidity of a naive woman who had only been to bed with one man.

Finished packing, she picked up her brush and dragged it through her long, straight hair. Although she had automatically heated up her curling brush after her shower, she'd unplugged it when she caught a glimpse of her thick tresses in the mirror. The night before Adam had apparently loved the feel of her soft locks, and she had loved the feel of him running his fingers through it, something Parker had never done.

Come to think of it, Parker had never kissed her like Adam had, either. He'd never once caused the intense flame within her that Adam had instilled in her while she was in his arms. Oh, no! Adam was right! She didn't hate him because he'd kissed her. She hated him because he'd caused a reaction in her unlike any she'd ever experienced. If that were the case, did she really hate Adam Colter for causing it? Or did she hate Deirdre Ingstrom for having it?

The knock on her bedroom door startled her to reality. Hurrying to open it, she saw Adam staring down at her with a delighted grin across his perfectly proportioned lips. Oh, how good they would taste at that moment. That wasn't reality! It was another fantasy! She had to pull herself together.

"How did you get in here?" she asked in shock. "Don't you know there's somebody watching the house?"

"You were supposed to hold off on your shower," he teased as he passed her and watched her close her door. "Are you sure you want to do that with this dirty, old man in your room?"

"Stop your juvenile insinuations and answer me."

Adam shook his head and grumbled, "You have absolutely no sense of humor, woman. If you really must know, Jared smuggled me onto the grounds while I lay across the back seat of his car. Are you ready?"

"Yes, but I don't like what's happening here. I don't like you taking me somewhere for the night without telling me where we're going."

"We're going to a motel room. Did you pack a nightgown?"

"Why you ..." Unable to control her rage, she slapped him across the left cheek.

His head snapped to the right by the force of her blow. He grabbed her wrists and pulled her against him, restraining her by pinning her arms behind her back. "What the hell did you do that for?"

"Because you're tricking me for immoral purposes. First you say you're taking me to a motel room, and then you want to make sure I have my nightgown. You're a lech!"

"I didn't realize you have such a dirty mind," he returned. "Besides, I don't need a motel room for immoral purposes, because there's a bed right behind you." Releasing her arms while still keeping his embrace, he fell on the bed with her under him, his dark eyes gleaming with mischievous desire. "And the reason I want to make sure you have a nightgown is so this won't happen."

His mouth bore down on hers, hungrily at first then with increasing passion that flooded her with warmth. Unable to stop herself, she relaxed and slid her arms around him. His hands moved across her back to her sides. His hand cupped her covered breast, massaging it while his thumb taunted her already hard nipple.

She accepted him without reservation, despite her mind's insistence that she shouldn't. His maleness pressed against her thigh, his leg sensuously positioned at the junction of her

legs. Sliding her fingers into his slightly long, soft hair, she sighed and moved against his thigh. To her shock and dismay, he scrambled to his feet and grabbed the bag on the bed.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” he declared. “I want to get you to safety as soon as I can.”

“Safety?” she asked as she rose. “I don’t understand. How can you get me to safety when we’re being followed?”

“Because I lost my tail twice after I dropped you off. We’re going through the backyard and take an Uber from your neighbor’s house. We have a two-bed motel room now, so you’ll be safe from me, as well as the guy after us. We’re going back there, and you’re getting into bed while I take the coldest damned shower I’ll ever have. That way I won’t see you in your nightgown and get ideas that might hurt me again. We both need sleep. We have a full day tomorrow.”

“Doing what?” she asked.

“You’ll see tomorrow. All I can say is that it’s important that we go out to EPCOT Center. We have an appointment.”

She gazed up at him skeptically. “But won’t that be dangerous? Just because you lost these people tonight doesn’t mean you will tomorrow.”

“Don’t ask questions. I wouldn’t want to get carried away trying to shut you up again.”

“Adam, please. I have a right to know.”

“I can’t tell you any more than I already have. You’ll just have to trust me on this one. Our appointment is very important, and I highly doubt there’ll be a minute of danger in anything we do. In fact, I’m so sure that I’ll guarantee it if you want.”

“Well,” she agreed, “all right. If you’re that sure, I’ll take a chance. But you’d better not let me down.”

“Believe me, honey.” Smiling down at her, he draped his arm around her shoulders. “You won’t be a disappointed. Let’s go now. The Uber might be there already.”

Nine

No matter how hard Deirdre tried to cajole Adam into revealing the nature of their appointment, he adamantly refused. When she couldn't get answers, her temper flared—until he jokingly reminded her about the improper timing of her excitement. To still her reaction to his innuendo, she changed the subject by bringing up her latest conversation with Robin.

"I forgot to tell you that I talked to Robin last night."

"How's she feeling?" he asked. "It wasn't anything serious, was it?"

"Apparently not, because she said she feels much better." Pausing to consider the effect her next words might have on him, she toyed with her scrambled eggs. If she mentioned it, maybe she wouldn't have to go to EPCOT with him. "She's been considering a reunion, Adam, and she thinks it might be soon. Maybe we should stay at the mansion in case she calls."

"We can't," he insisted. "Besides, your cell number is on your business cards."

"If you'd just tell me what this appointment is about, I could decide which is more important."

He grinned with a glint of mischief in his eyes. "Sorry, honey, it won't work. You already know how important I feel reuniting with Robin is, and I'd like nothing more. Unfortunately, I can tell by your voice that soon probably isn't today. Besides, the appointment I set up at EPCOT is just as important."

Baffled, Deirdre shook her head. "None of this makes sense. Why do you need me? I don't have time for EPCOT. Now that Patty's safe, I want to concentrate on helping Mandy."

"And now that her father's here, she doesn't need your help."

"She still won't say who assaulted her, and I haven't asked her myself since the first time I met with her. She's been too sick. She confided in me before, so she might again. Besides, somebody has to do something. The police don't have a single lead."

"Don't you *dare* question her," Adam ordered. "I just got you out of danger. I'm not going to let you walk back into it."

"Are you referring to my being followed?"

"To *our* being followed."

"But the police aren't even sure it's the same man."

"And they're not sure it's not," he reminded her. "If it is that guy and he thinks you witnessed the attack, he won't follow you forever. He'll kill you."

"That's a chance I have to take. I won't let him get away with what he did to her. Besides, what if it's the same guy who beat up Patty? She was a runaway, too. And she was living in the same part of town before she came to the halfway house. Not only that, but she was a prostitute working for a pimp, which is how she got beat up the other night. If he's the same guy, he should be arrested before he hurts somebody else."

"Not at your expense."

"What difference is it to you?" she asked. "You don't like me, anyway."

"I never said that. And even if I had, I still wouldn't want to see you dead." Although his voice was angry when he began speaking, it took on a soft, caring note as he continued. "Look, honey, I don't want us to argue today. I want us to enjoy each other's company, so let's drop this topic. I don't like you asking for trouble, but I'm not going to try to change your mind. That would lead to an even bigger fight. Let's just relax and get to know each other better. Who knows. Maybe it will stop our constant bickering."

Studying him, Deirdre seethed with anger. He had set up the entire series of events from the previous night through that day. From the way he was talking and the sound of his voice, he didn't even have anything important planned—only a day of fun at EPCOT Center, which he had tricked her into just as he had tricked her into his new motel room.

Well, she'd shown him. She'd lain awake for quite a while, feigning sleep in one of the beds while he had watched television until late. Unfortunately, the entire time her mind had been filled with visions of him joining her, of him pulling her nightgown out of the way and quickly making love to her like Parker used to do before going to sleep. Who did she think she was fooling, anyway? She hadn't shown Adam anything. In fact, she'd probably suffered through her fantasies more than he had suffered knowing she was in the other bed. If he was aggravating, she was downright infuriating.

"You're not going to start yelling at me in public, are you?" he asked. "If so, you won't embarrass just me, you'll embarrass yourself, too."

"I *should* yell at you," she admitted. "You tricked me into spending the day with you. There isn't even an appointment to keep, is there."

"Yes, there is. And I absolutely guarantee that you'll be madder at yourself if you *don't* keep it than you are at me right now for having set it up."

"And I absolutely guarantee that you'll find out just how furious I can get if it turns out there isn't one."

Despite her curiosity, Deirdre dropped the subject, knowing he wouldn't tell her what he had planned no matter what she said. But her anger toward him grew so strong that she stopped talking completely. Silence was better than risking an argument. After all, that might prompt him to cancel the appointment, and by now she was so curious she could hardly stand it.

Deirdre didn't even speak when Adam escorted her to another rental car not far from his motel room. At the entrance of EPCOT Center, he left her side to speak privately with one of the ticket-takers. Moments later he returned and escorted her to another ticket-taker.

"Good morning," Adam greeted as they joined the woman at the turnstile. "I was told that you have two tickets waiting for Adam Colter."

Reaching into her inside blazer pocket, the woman withdrew two tickets, stamping them with the date before passing them to Adam. "There you are, Mr. Colter. Welcome to EPCOT Center and have a terrific day." Then she stamped one hand on each of them with another stamp.

"Thanks," Adam returned, draping his arm around Deirdre's shoulders. "We plan to."

As they strolled toward the large sphere dominating the world-renowned amusement park, Deirdre broke away from Adam and stared up at him.

"Let me see one of those, Adam," she said. After reading the bold letters declaring that the ticket was *EMPLOYEE DISCOUNT*, she returned it to him. "That's what I thought. How did you get them?"

"I have my ways," he said mysteriously. "I hope you don't think I'm cheap."

“Heaven’s no! Tickets are expensive, and I can’t blame you for cutting costs.”

“I’m glad you feel that way because it wasn’t my idea. I’ll tell you one thing; I couldn’t have gotten them without you. And before you ask, that’s all you’ll get out of me.” Holding his hand out palm up, he grinned at her, his dark eyes sparkling with excitement. “How about checking out some of this place before it’s time for our appointment?”

“And what time is that?”

“Later. Now let’s go. Or do you practice some sort of religion that’s abolished fun?”

She giggled and accepted his hand, entwining her fingers with his. “As a matter of fact, I don’t. And as long as we’re here, I’d love to see some of the exhibits. Where should we start? The ball over there?”

“Nope. We’ll get there later. I heard some terrific things about a place called *Journey into Imagination*. According to my cousin, it’s a must. Let’s get a map so we can find it.”

After picking up a guidebook, the couple consulted it before heading toward a pyramid-shaped building. Making their way through the maze, they got into a small cart that took them through the exhibit. Their guides were an *Audio-Animatronics* gentleman with blond hair, a beard, top hat and tails called Dreamfinder. At the end of the ride, they wandered through the Image Works and Sensor maze before going outside to the Picture Garden. While passing the fountains, Adam was hit in the head by water that leaped from one side of the walkway to the other. Laughing, he wiped the water from his face as they strolled leisurely toward another exhibit.

During their visit to the World of Motion and Horizons exhibits, Deirdre began to relax. Her life had been so completely filled with runaways’ problems that she’d forgotten she deserved time to unwind from work. If it hadn’t been for Adam’s insistence, she wouldn’t be getting it then, either.

“You know something, Adam?” she said as they started toward the eighteen-story geosphere called Spaceship Earth. “I can’t remember the last time I felt so relaxed. I was really mad that you insisted on coming here, but I’m glad you tricked me into it now. I don’t even care that you lied to me about having an appointment.”

“I didn’t lie,” he vowed. “In fact, we’re on our way to keep it right this second.”

“Really?” she asked in amazement. “I thought you were just using that as an excuse to get me here.”

“Nope. It’s for real.”

“Since it’s almost time, why don’t you tell me what it’s about?”

“I can’t. Everything has to be done right on schedule, or it won’t work the way it should.”

“Work?” she repeated. “Adam, please. You’re driving me crazy with the suspense. Just tell me and put me out of my agony.”

Adam chuckled again. “Agony, is it? Deirdre Ingstrom, I never figured you for one to get excited about something like this. I thought for sure you’d stay mad at me and never forgive me when it’s all over.”

“But it’s not all over yet,” she reminded him as they neared a gift shop. “Oh, Adam, look! It’s a stuffed Figment, and it’s absolutely adorable. From what I understand, Figment used to be part of the *Journey into Imagination* exhibit. Would you loan me some money so I can buy it? After all, you’re the one who made me put my purse in the trunk so I wouldn’t have to carry it.”

“I’ll do better than that,” he said, grasping her elbow to escort her into the building. “I’ll buy it *for* you.”

After making their purchase, they got in line for the “time-machine” ride through Space-ship Earth where they watched the *Animatronics* from early time through the future. As they got off, she noticed two young men watching them but thought little more of it than that the one wearing the blazer looked vaguely familiar.

“You see those two guys over there, Adam?” she asked in a near whisper. “The ones who seem to be watching us? The one in the blazer looks like somebody I know—or used to know. Wait a second! He looks a little like a picture I have of my dad, except for Dad had dark hair.”

“What a coincidence,” he responded. “Let’s go so we don’t miss our appointment.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Dismissing her notion, Deirdre let Adam guide her away from the men. Only moments later, someone bumped into Deirdre and knocked her into Adam.

“Watch what you’re doing!” Adam said irritably.

The young, dark-haired man, who had been with the one in the EPCOT blazer, grabbed Deirdre’s arm to steady her, apologizing profusely. “I’m sorry, ma’am. Are you all right?”

“Fine,” she replied. Now that she could see him in better light, this person looked familiar, too, but she couldn’t place where she had seen him before. Then her eyes widened in disbelief as she stared at the young man beside her. Her voice cracked as she gasped, “Oh, dear Lord!”

“Deirdre?” Adam prompted. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

Deirdre’s heart pounded as she stared at the younger man. “Adam! Adam, it’s him! You’re him! Oh, my word. I can’t believe it. This is a dream, right? Somebody tell me I’m dreaming.”

“You’re not dreaming, Dee,” Brandon said with a broad smile. “It’s really me.”

As desperately as she longed to hold her brother, she stared at him in shock while clinging to Adam’s arm with both hands. After all the years that had passed since she’d last seen him, he’d finally come to terms with what she’d done. Now he was there to be her brother again, and she couldn’t even bring herself to touch him. Tears of joy flooded her eyes then spilled onto her cheeks.

“Aren’t you going to give your brother a hug?” Adam asked.

“I’m afraid to,” she admitted in a choking voice. “I’m afraid I’ll find out it isn’t real.”

“Then I’ll just have to hug you,” Brandon declared as he dragged her away from Adam and embraced her.

Her arms folded around him in a tight hold that she wished could last forever, and she cried against his shoulder. “Oh, Brandon. I’ve missed you so much. I prayed and prayed that you’d finally agree to see me again, but I didn’t want to push you. What made you change your mind?”

“Your friend,” Brandon explained. “He made me realize that you didn’t do anything to kill Mom. She did it herself.”

“No, Brand, it *was* my fault. If I hadn’t left, you never would have had to go through that ordeal.” Her heart bursting with happiness, she squeezed him harder. “I love you, Brand. If I’d known Mom would commit suicide, I never would have run away. I would have been there for you the whole time you were growing up.”

“Don’t blame yourself, Dee. Like Adam said, *she* started it all. Unfortunately, she ended it all, too. It’s over, and it’s part of the past. Let’s keep it there. She’s ruined our lives long enough. Let’s just put the pieces together and go on like a brother and sister should.”

“I don’t think there’s anything I’d like more.” Finally releasing her brother, Deirdre turned to Adam and asked, “Was Brandon my appointment?”

Adam grinned. "What can I say? Deep down inside, I'm a nice guy."

"I *knew* it was there." Tears still streamed from her eyes as she hugged him in gratitude. "But I didn't expect you to show me in such a wonderful way. I don't know how I'll ever repay you."

"Tell you what," he suggested. "You reunite me with my niece, and we'll call it even."

"Excuse me," another man said as Adam handed her his handkerchief. "But I'd like to know if this is a *family* reunion, or just between the two of you."

"What?" Deirdre asked in shock, gazing at him wide-eyed as she wiped her tears. "Are you really part of the family?"

"He got us the discount tickets," Brandon explained. "Meet our cousin, Mike Bowden. Mike, Deirdre Ingstrom."

"I've got relatives in Orlando?"

"Just me," he admitted. "Ever since I came here when I was a kid, I wanted to work at Disney World, so I came down after I graduated from high school. Now I'm working my way through college. Frankly, I didn't even know Brandon had a sister. Nobody ever talked about you."

"I'm not surprised," she said. "I was kind of the black sheep of the family. You will come for dinner sometime, won't you?"

Mike winked and gave her a quick hug. "I may have to come *live* with you if I don't get back to work. It was nice to meet you, Deirdre."

"It was great meeting you," she replied, returning her gaze to Brandon when Mike left. Again, she embraced him, this time releasing him almost immediately. "I'm completely overwhelmed by this."

"Me, too."

"Me, too," Adam agreed as she smiled up at him. "I was sure you'd walk out that door with your brother and forget that I was here."

"How could I do something like that to a man who went out of his way to make me so happy?"

"Then you're not mad at me for interfering in your life?"

"Are you kidding?" she exclaimed. "I couldn't be happier with you. What I want to know is how you talked this hardheaded kid into coming down here."

"I didn't. He came on his own when he found out what's been happening around here."

"That's right, sis," Brandon said. "I was worried about you, and that's when I realized how stupid I'd been all these years. Adam told me that I still care, and he was right. Now let's get out of here and have some fun. We've got all day to see things, and I got a late start. We can talk while we play."

After viewing the remainder of the Future World exhibits, the trio went to the World Showcase. Deirdre spent quite a bit of Adam's money buying items that depicted different parts of the world—from France and the United Kingdom to Morocco and the United States. They ate lunch at the Biergarten while listening to Oktoberfest entertainment at the German pavilion. Then they watched the Circle-Vision 360 motion picture in the Chinese pavilion before taking in other exhibits and dining at the Japanese Yakitori House for supper.

By the time EPCOT Center closed that night, they had taken in everything possible. Although Deirdre suggested that they take Brandon back to the motel, Adam forbade it. It was then he revealed that he had changed rooms with Brandon so the people following them would think that he'd left town. Not wanting to break the spell cast by the magic of Disney

World, she agreed to Brandon calling a cab from their motel.

After she kissed Brandon good night on the cheek, as she had when he was a small child, she and Adam watched him leave from the doorway.

“Well, honey?” Adam asked as he closed the door. “How do you feel?”

“Relaxed,” she replied, flopping back onto one of the beds, “tired, happy, content.”

“I’m glad.” Sitting down beside her, he toyed with a lock of her hair. “That was the purpose of today. Brandon wanted to have a nice quiet reunion, but Jared and I convinced him that this would be better.”

“Jared knew about it?”

“If it hadn’t been for him, we probably wouldn’t have gone there. He was pretty insistent that you needed some time away from your troubles.”

“I wouldn’t have agreed this morning, but I sure do now.” Gazing up at him, she tugged on his arm to bring him closer to her. “You know, I’m not even angry about you abducting me last night. In fact, I’m so content I think I can say something that I probably shouldn’t.”

“What’s that?”

“Did you know that I was awake until after you turned off the TV last night?”

“You were?” he asked. “Why did you pretend you were sleeping?”

“Because I was mad. I didn’t like you tricking me into coming here.”

“If I’d known that I never would have ... Well, let’s just say that I wanted you more badly than I could handle. If I’d known you were awake, I would have ...”

“Go on,” she prompted with a soft smile.

“If I tell you, you’ll just get mad again, and I don’t want that. I want us to end the day as friends.”

“Believe it or not, I don’t. I felt the same way you did last night, Adam. I wanted you more badly than I could handle, too. Only I didn’t know what to do about it, except suffer with my fantasies.” After kissing the palm of his hand, she continued in words foreign to her. She’d never made an admission like this to any man—not even Parker. “I don’t want us to end the day as friends, Adam. I want us to end the day as lovers if that’s what you want, too.”

Lying down beside her, he drew her against him as he whispered, “I want it, honey. I want it a lot.”

His lips captured hers. The camaraderie they had shared that day, combined with the longing she’d experienced since the first kiss in her office, started a fire that raged throughout her body. Since she had little sexual experience, she let Adam take the lead. His mouth devoured hers, his tongue dueling with hers for many long minutes. Then he loosened his hold to let his hands explore her clothed body.

The flames shot higher when his fingers brushed against her skin as he slipped his hands under her shirt. When he slid his hands under her to release the hooks on her brassiere so he could caress her naked breasts, she lost control. No longer did she think of their coming union; no longer did she wonder what it would be like to watch him sleep afterward. All thought drained from her as feeling took over her body.

His hot hands fondled her cool breasts and stomach. Then he broke the kiss and slid her short over her head before he slithered his tongue over her chin and throat, across her chest, to one of her nipples. While he suckled gently, he unbuttoned her slacks. He directed his attention to hard bud and, with her help, he worked her jeans and panties over her hips and down her legs.

He kissed his way lower, to her midriff, her navel, her abdomen. His hands slipped slowly

up her long, lean legs, until his thumbs taunted her womanhood. He moved lower—and kissed her again. Then he nibbled his way back up to her breasts. His tongue tickled them for several seconds before he broke contact and scrambled out of his own clothes.

While she watched, expectantly awaiting his return to the bed, she glanced at the clock. He'd already taken longer than Parker had when they'd made love. Yet he still didn't join with her, even though he was deliciously naked as he lay down beside her. Instead, he took her into his arms to kiss her, to fondle her, to drive her to the brink of enjoyment, until she nearly begged for him to satisfy her.

Finally, he entered her heated cavern with a lusty growl. Moving slowly, deliberately, he dove inside her, all the while kissing her, his tongue dueling with hers. Time seemed to stop as she centered her attention on their lovemaking, enjoying the act as she never had before. But she could only hold her explosion of desire for a few minutes. Her body pulsed as though she'd never before coupled with a man.

Only then did Adam groan into her ear with his own satisfaction. Rather than rolling away from her as she expected, Adam cradled her head on his shoulder and rubbed her upper arm. This was amazing! She didn't know men liked to cuddle.

Curious to find out if this was a normal reaction from him, she asked, "Aren't you tired?"

"Exhausted. What about you?"

"Me, too. I just thought you'd go to sleep now."

"After an exciting experience like that? No way! I want to revel in it for a while." Not knowing how to respond, she wondered if all men acted like Adam, until he interrupted her thoughts. "I have to know something, Dee."

"What's that?"

"Did you give yourself to me out of gratitude?"

"Absolutely not. I hate to say it, Adam," she admitted with a yawn, "but I really wanted you—at *least* as badly as you wanted me."

"Then you're not angry?"

"I can't be angry when I'm so happy." She sighed and snuggled closer to him, trailing her fingers through the coarse hair on his chest. "No, I'm happily content. It's been a long time for me, Adam. I don't know why I wanted you, but gratitude had nothing to do with it. Maybe we should go to sleep now. I have to get back to work tomorrow whether you like it or not."

About ten the next morning the cellphone between the beds rang, waking Deirdre. Adam lay unmoving while she reached across him to answer his phone and greeted the caller.

"Good morning, ma'am," came a woman's cheerful voice. "Is this Mr. Adam Colter's phone?"

"Yes. Just a minute please." Placing her hand over the speaker, Deirdre passed it to Adam with a grimace. "I thought it was Jared, but was I ever wrong! It's a lady for you. I hope I didn't get you in trouble by answering."

"There's not one woman in my life—other than you—who could possibly make me care if I got in trouble." Taking the handset, he put it to his ear. "Good morning."

Not wanting to hear Adam's end of the conversation, Deirdre got out of bed.

"Ah, Joyce," he said with a grin as Deirdre gathered up her clothes. "Hold on a minute, would you? You don't have to leave, Deirdre. It's just my cousin."

"I will, anyway," she offered. "I want to shower."

Going into the bathroom, Deirdre let the hot spray sting her body awake while she recalled the previous night. At nearly thirty-one, it was the first time a man had ever done so much for her in bed. Adam had actually given her a sense that her pleasure mattered to him. But being inexperienced, she didn't know if most men acted like that or only those who had a special interest in a woman. If the latter were the case, she would have to be careful that it didn't happen again—no matter how badly she wanted a repeat.

To avoid her memories, Deirdre concentrated on her reunion with Brandon. Adam had been wonderful to promote it, just as wonderful as he had been in bed. Not again! How would she ever get on with business if her night with Adam kept invading her thoughts? Somehow she had to rid herself of the memory.

After vigorously scrubbing her body with a soapy washrag, she rinsed then dried with a coarse towel. Dressing in the clothes she'd worn only a couple of hours the night she came to the motel, she unpinned her hair and ran a comb through it.

"Look, Brand," she heard Adam say as she exited the bathroom, "Dee's done now, and I have to get ready. We'll discuss this in about an hour and half, maybe two depending on how long it takes you to eat and get here. Bye for now."

"Why did you hang up?" she asked clicked off his phone. "I wanted to say hello."

"You'll have to say it later," he said before kissing her quickly on his way to the bathroom. "I've got to get a move on. My flight leaves in three hours."

"Leaves?" she repeated, an unexpected ache tugging at her heart. "You're going home?"

"I have to. My plant has labor problems. That's why Joyce called so early their time."

Unexpectedly desperate to get him to stay, Deirdre protested, "But what about Robin? She's almost ready to see you."

"I don't have a choice, honey. My manager can't solve the dispute in the perimeters I gave him."

"And this is coming from a man who told me he isn't indispensable," she said with a pout. "What if Robin decides she's ready while you're gone?"

Grasping her shoulders, he examined her for a few seconds then said, "You have my cell number. Call me whenever you want, even in the middle of the night when you wake up and I'm not there."

"Don't act so arrogant. After yesterday, I know you aren't. Besides, that game doesn't suit you."

"It's no game. I can see in your eyes how upset you are."

"I'm upset for Robin."

"Sure you are," he said sarcastically. "Oh, hell, I don't have time to argue. Do me a favor and run over to McDonald's. I'm starved this morning. I'll have pancakes, sausages, orange juice, and coffee. You order whatever you want."

"All right." Although he strode to the bathroom, he stopped in the doorway to gaze back at her. Stunned by the expression of disappointment covering his face, she asked, "Now what's wrong?"

"I'm sorry I can't show you that I don't want a one-night stand, but there just isn't time." Pausing, he released a heavy sigh then added, "God, you're beautiful in the morning. I'd better make that a *cold* shower."

After they ate, Deirdre wrote Adam a check for everything she bought at EPCOT Center, then watched television while Adam checked out of the room. When Brandon arrived, Adam

instructed him on the best way to protect Deirdre while still allowing her the freedom to work. Deirdre hated putting her brother in danger, but both men were adamant. Brandon would live in her spare bedroom and spend every waking minute with her until Adam returned or the man following her was apprehended. Despite her initial objections, she agreed to their plan.

When his flight number was called for final boarding, Adam embraced Deirdre and kissed her passionately. As he disappeared down the boarding ramp, she collapsed onto a chair and stared after him with tears in her eyes. Her heart already ached with emptiness. Beside her, Brandon grasped her hand.

"He'll be back, sis," he assured her.

She nodded her agreement then said, "I know. He'll reunite with Robin before long, and he'll have to come back for that."

"He would come back, anyway," Brandon insisted.

"I doubt it. His business is in San Francisco. He doesn't need to come back except for her."

"He has you."

"Don't be silly. We don't even get along very well."

"That's not what I saw yesterday, and it's not what I saw when he said good-bye just now. The man's crazy about you."

Her chest was heavy with sorrow that she was reluctant to show her brother. "What good would it do even if that were true? My job is in Orlando, and his is in San Francisco. We'll never be anything more than acquaintances." She turned her gaze to Brandon and smiled. "At least, he got you to come down here. But it's made my life more difficult, too, because I could hate him before. Now that he showed me a side I already suspected was there, I like him."

"Maybe more than you think you should?" Brandon asked.

"More than I *know* I should." Pausing, she sighed to collect herself then grinned. "So how did my kid brother get so smart when his big sister wasn't around to teach him these things?"

"It's called growing up," he answered. "Let's get out of here so you can get to work."

Instead of working that day, Deirdre spent much of it telling Brandon about her life after she ran away. Around three in the afternoon, she excused herself to take a nap. She was much too exhausted and relaxed to stay awake, even though she knew she would be awake half the night. Shortly after six, Brandon woke her for dinner, but she couldn't eat.

"What's the matter, Dee?" Brandon asked when they were alone.

"I don't know," she replied with a yawn. "Maybe I've been working so hard for so long that it finally caught up with me when I took time to relax. Maybe I'm coming down with the flu or something now that I have time for it."

"Do you feel sick?"

"Not exactly sick, just not well. Look, Brand, I know you're only here for a week, but I'm bushed. I'm going back to bed. If you need anything, ask one of the kids for help, would you? Good night."

"Night, Dee. I hope you feel better tomorrow."

"So do I. See you in the morning."

The next day Deirdre still suffered from fatigue and spent most of the day just lying in

bed absently watching television. Again, she joined Brandon, Jared, and two other teens at the dinner table; again, she simply moved the food around her plate. When everyone else had finished eating, Deirdre excused herself and returned to her room. Within minutes, there was a knock at her door.

“Who is it?”

“Jared,” he replied. “May I come in?”

“Of course.” As he sat on the edge of her bed, she pulled herself up to sit against the headboard. “What can I do for you, Jared?”

“That’s what I want to know. What can I do for you?”

“Thanks for offering, but I don’t need anything.”

“I didn’t mean that. You haven’t been acting like yourself the last couple of days. I thought you might want to talk.”

She smiled at him. “That’s sweet, but it’s not necessary. I’m just feeling a bit under the weather. There’s really nothing to talk about.”

“Not even Mr. Colter? Do you know what I think, Deirdre? I think you really like him now. In fact, I’d say ...”

“Don’t say it,” she said, holding her hand up in a halting gesture. “I know what you’re thinking. Brandon’s been trying all day to get me to admit that I miss Adam. Well, I won’t do it because ...”

“That’s not what I was thinking,” Jared interrupted. “I think you’re falling in love with him, and you feel guilty about it.”

Ten

Deirdre stared at Jared in amazement. Was that possible? Were the feelings she was experiencing caused by guilt or love? The night Adam had kissed her so passionately she'd hated him, but maybe she'd associated the feelings in her heart with the wrong emotion. What was it people said? There was a fine line between hate and love.

"Am I right, Deirdre?" he asked. "Are you falling in love with him?"

"I don't know, Jared," she admitted. "I'm not even sure I'd know what love is if it walked in that door and announced itself in no uncertain terms."

"But you were married."

"Out of gratitude," Deirdre insisted, "and I knew it at the time. You see, Parker found out he had cancer before we were married. He'd been so good to me that I wanted to give something back to him. When he asked me to marry him, I agreed—as long as he made out a will that left his fortune to the halfway house, with me receiving a salary and only this wing of the mansion. He didn't exactly live up to that agreement because the house is all mine, but he did leave the money to my pet project. And I get a salary, even if it is higher than necessary. He had millions, too. In fact, I can easily run the house on the interest and stock dividends. I don't *need* donations. But I didn't love him. As far as I know, I've never been in love."

"Then you really could be falling in love."

"I suppose it's possible. Even so, it has nothing to do with me not feeling well now. It must be the flu."

As she spoke, her cellphone beside the bed played the theme from *Star Wars* and Deirdre knew exactly who it was. She'd set that ringtone for Adam because it was his generic ringtone. Jared answered it. A moment later he smiled and said, "No. I've got a big test tomorrow, so I'd better hit the books. I'll put Deirdre on." Passing her the phone, Jared announced, "It's Mr. Colter."

Excitement raced through her as she accepted the phone. When Jared closed the door behind him, she greeted her caller. "Hi, Adam. I haven't talked to Robin since you left, so I don't have anything to report."

"I didn't call for that," he replied. "I'm going into withdrawal because I haven't had a good fight in days. I knew you could give me the best."

"What if I don't feel like fighting?" she retaliated in a light tone.

"That's okay. I'll talk to you, anyway. How are you doing?"

"Not real terrific. You wore me out at EPCOT, and I've been sleeping a lot since yesterday afternoon."

"Are you all right?"

"Just a little under the weather. I'll be fine. How's it going out there?"

"Not bad. I settled the dispute, but I'm not entirely happy with the results." After a pause, he asked, "Did I tell you that I've been considering opening a new plant for several months now?"

"No," she replied, wondering why he would mention it to her.

"Well, I have been. And I did some basic research on the Orlando area several months back. I also had one of my assistants come down to do an in-depth study while I was busy tailing you. I have his report in front of me right now."

"I see," she replied, struggling to keep her excitement contained. But her heart raced with the thought of what he could say next.

"Don't you want to know what it says?"

"If you want to tell me."

"Try to contain your enthusiasm," he chortled. "The report says that I have a very good chance opening up down there. What do you think?"

"It's nice, but I don't see why you should want my opinion."

"Oh, I think you do."

"I'm sorry, Adam, but I really don't."

"Will you give me a chance to explain without going off on some tangent before I finish?"

"All right. What is it?"

Adam sighed. "I don't know how to say this, but I'll try. Everybody here noticed it right away, Deirdre. They told me I just wasn't my old cheerful self. I gave them the same excuse you gave me. I was a little under the weather. I could tell most of them didn't buy it, but they let it drop. Unfortunately, Joyce isn't one to let things drop. She's the one who made me stop and think about why I was so down."

When Adam paused, Deirdre prompted him on. "Well? What decision did you come to?"

"I wasn't under the weather at all," he admitted. "I was just plain depressed."

"Depressed?" she asked. "How can you tell?"

"For one thing, I wanted to curl up in bed and forget about the world. And I would have if I hadn't had so much to do at the office. I'm tired, no appetite, ready to tell everybody who bothers me to go jump off Niagra Falls, to come back when my world isn't upside down. But I'm lonely, too. God, am I lonely. I haven't felt this way in years."

"I've *never* felt this way," she admitted, her voice filled with sorrow even though her heart burst with happiness. At least, she wasn't the only person who felt those symptoms.

"That's what *you're* feeling?" he asked in astonishment.

"Yes, but I didn't realize I was lonely until you used the word. I felt kind of ... I don't know. Kind of empty, I guess."

"Me, too." He fell silent for several moments then said, "Don't get mad at me for saying this, Dee, but I have to. I miss you a lot."

"I guess maybe I miss you, too, Adam. I just wish I could say for sure. All I can tell you is that I've never felt this way before, and I'm really glad you called. I feel better knowing that I'm not alone in my misery."

"I told you something happened in my motel room that night," he reminded her. "And I don't think it was you hating me."

"If it's any consolation, I don't think so anymore, either. I just didn't know what other word to put on it at the time."

"Do you now?" he asked.

"Not positively." She paused, reluctant to continue. "Adam?"

"What?"

"When are you coming back?"

"As soon as possible. I don't like being separated from you. Look, honey, I'd better say

good night. This phone call is a lot harder than I thought it would be. Now I wish I were there to hold you like I did the night before I left.”

“So do I,” she admitted. “I miss you, Adam. Will you call me again?”

“Every morning and every night. Take care of yourself and don’t do anything stupid before I get back there to protect you.”

Deirdre smiled. “I’ll try not to. Good night.”

“Night, honey. Remember that I miss you.”

Deirdre placed the handset on the cradle. Jumping out of bed, she released a joyous yell that brought Jared racing into her room while she donned her robe. When she insisted she was all right, he left her alone. Then she hurried downstairs to the kitchen, suddenly ravenous after almost no food in two days. While she was raiding the refrigerator, Brandon came in to make a snack.

“I see you’re hungry now,” he teased. “I don’t suppose this has anything to do with the phone call Jared told me you got.”

“You don’t suppose wrong then,” she returned, “because it had everything to do with my appetite. I found out exactly what my problem was, and just knowing solved it.”

“And what *is* your problem? Or should I ask since Adam’s involved?” he taunted as he took some cookies from the cookie jar. “I wouldn’t want to embarrass you.”

“Very funny.”

“So, what’s your problem?”

Turning toward him, she smiled. “I don’t have one now. Do you know what was wrong with me? I was depressed and lonely. Now I’m happy and lonely.”

“Sounds contradictory to me,” Brandon said.

“It’s not. I’m happy because I’m not the only person lonely. Adam is, too. He misses me, Brand. He told me so. And he’s had the same symptoms I have, too. Fortunately, I got to wallow in my depression. Poor Adam had to work. And do you know what else?”

“What?” Brandon repeated.

“He’s seriously considering opening a plant in the Orlando area. Not only that, but he started researching the idea before we talked on the phone the first time. Do you know what that means?”

“What?”

“That he really thinks his plant has a chance. He’s not doing it because I’m here. It’s something he’s been considering for months.”

“I guess you two are getting along better then.”

“Famously,” she drawled, happy for the first time in many years.

“Uncle Adam’s not here?” Robin asked in shock. “I didn’t think he’d leave just because I wasn’t ready to reunite with him.”

“That’s not why he left, Robin,” Jared explained. “He had some business emergency. It must have been super important, too, because he never would have left with Deirdre in so much danger if it hadn’t been.”

Robin gasped in horror. “Deirdre’s in danger?”

“A lot of it. Mr. Colter’s got her brother guarding her while he’s gone.”

“Is he back in San Francisco?” Robin asked.

"That's what Deirdre said."

"Hum," she said, placing her elbow on the table and propping her chin on her fist. Studying him, several seconds passed before she spoke again. "Do you still want to date me, Jared?"

"Do I!" he exclaimed.

"We have to be careful that the Thomases don't find out."

"Whatever you say. When should we go?"

"How about Saturday? A girl asked me to trade days with her, but I'll tell Glenn I have to work overtime to make up for when I was sick."

Jared's shoulders sank along with his spirits. "I can't, Robin. I have to work."

"That's okay. I can wander around SeaWorld and see things until you're done. Then we can do something together."

"Okay."

Without warning, Robin changed the subject. "What do you think about Uncle Adam and Deirdre? Are they making it?"

"I doubt it. I keep suggesting that they did, but I'm only kidding. I do know one thing, though. Almost the second Mr. Colter left town, Deirdre got sick. She went to bed and didn't eat. Then she got a phone call while I was talking to her tonight. And did she ever get excited when she found out it was Mr. Colter! As soon as she hung up, she went to the kitchen."

"She must really like him."

"It's more than that, Robin. I think she's falling in love with him. She thinks it's possible, too."

"Oh, Jared!" she crooned. "That would be wonderful."

"It sure would, but we should stay out of it," he warned. "They'll settle things themselves, and we shouldn't push a romance between them. Once Mr. Colter gets settled here ..."

"Gets settled! He's *moving* here?"

"Maybe. He's considering putting a plant in the area. I don't know all the details because I just heard part of Deirdre's conversation with Brandon. But she was sure happy about the prospect. I just hope he doesn't disappoint her by changing his mind. I love her like she was my mother, and I don't want her to get hurt." He grinned and added, "No, more like she's my big sister or aunt. She's too young to be my mother."

"I don't want her to get hurt, either. She's really nice. She should be happy."

Deirdre woke the next morning to the sound of her *Star Wars* on her cellphone. During a brief, cheerful conversation with Adam, they discussed the probability of him opening a plant in Florida. Afterward, she showered and washed her hair then dried it. Finally, she went downstairs to breakfast.

When Jared and two other teenagers left for school, she sat down to relax over coffee. As soon as she did, her office phone rang. Rushing to answer it, she learned from Frank Reagan that Mandy wanted to talk with her. Deirdre was so eager to find out what Mandy had to say that she stopped short when she told Brandon that she was leaving.

"Do I need a jacket?" he asked. "I didn't hear the weather forecast last night."

"Nope," she replied, "because you're staying here. I just found out that a friend of mine is in the hospital, and he wants to see me."

"Some guy, huh? I'd like to meet him. Mind if I tag along?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. He asked me to come alone."

"And you agreed? How could you do that when you know Adam doesn't want you taking unnecessary chances?"

"It isn't unnecessary, and it isn't a chance. I've already thought of a plan to keep whoever's tailing me off my back for a while. I had to under the circumstances."

"Who is this guy, anyway?" Brandon asked. "Does Adam know about him?"

"It's none of your business," she responded, her tone filled with irritation. "The only thing you need to know is that this visit's important, and I'm taking every precaution to insure my safety."

Brandon laughed. "Boy, you are hot-headed. When I met you, I figured Adam was over-reacting. I remember you being sweet."

"I *am* sweet," she declared. "It's that infuriating Adam Colter who makes me like this. He seems to think I can't take care of myself."

"He just worries about you, sis," Brandon insisted. "Give him a chance to prove he's not the bad guy. After all, he got us back together, didn't he?"

"He's overprotective. He drives me nuts."

"And you drive *him* nuts by not letting him get close to you."

With a half-smile, Deirdre thought that he couldn't have been any closer the night they went to EPCOT Center. Then her smile disintegrated. Brandon hadn't been referring to that kind of closeness, and she didn't want him to know that she had made love with Adam. To hide her thoughts, she said, "I suppose I do drive him a little nuts, but I can't help it. I don't know how to express myself. I don't know how to let my emotions show."

"You've been doing a damned good job since I got here. That's not the kind of closeness I meant, anyway. Adam wants to get to know you. Why don't you let him?"

"Mainly because I'm not sure *I* know me. I've been so wrapped up in others' lives that I haven't developed one of my own. And speaking of being wrapped up, I have to run. I don't want to be late for my meeting."

"Don't go, Dee," he pleaded. "It's too dangerous."

"I have to go. And the danger doesn't matter because I'm needed at the hospital. Besides, this whole mess could be over by nightfall if I go."

"Really?"

"It's possible. Don't worry about me, Brand," she said, laying her hand on his cheek. "I promise I'll be very careful."

"I don't like it, and neither would Adam."

"I can't let my friend down. Now stop worrying. I'll be fine. And I'll come home as soon as possible. Bye."

Without giving Brandon another chance to protest, she raced out the back door. Carefully making her way through the trees, shrubs and bushes of the gardens, Deirdre hurried to her neighbors' house. After briefly explaining her problem, she borrowed a short, red wig and a car.

The cellphone on Adam's nightstand chimed three times before he answered it. Almost immediately, Brandon began his frantic explanation.

"I don't know how the hell you handle Dee," he said, "but I sure can't. She just took off for some hospital without me. She said it was an emergency and she had to go alone. I tried to talk her out of it, but I couldn't."

"She's probably going to see Mandy," Adam observed with a yawn. "She prefers to go alone, but I always insisted on joining her. I just waited outside Mandy's room."

"She's visiting some guy."

"Some *guy*?" Adam repeated, unable to keep the pain from his voice. His heart ached at the thought that another man had entered Deirdre's life. Suddenly, he regretted not having made his proclamation over the phone. When he had talked to her, though, he'd decided an admission like that should only be made in person—preferably over a private, romantic dinner. Now it could be too late.

"You all right, Adam?" Brandon asked after several moments of silence.

Adam inhaled and released the air to regain his composure. "No, but my problem isn't important right now. Why didn't you follow her?"

"She said she was going to take precautions, and then she went out the back. I followed her to the fence, and she climbed over it. I figure she went to a neighbor's. Since she didn't go past the car watching the mansion, I thought it would make matters worse if I tried to find out where she went."

Adam paused to think, but his mind was numb with a mixture of loneliness and fear that he would never see Deirdre alive again, never get to tell her how he felt despite their short acquaintance. Somehow he had to force words out to help Brandon deal with Deirdre. "You're probably right. Following her now might put her in even more danger. If they decided to tail you, they could find out where she went and put the two of you together. As it stands, they probably don't even know that either of you left the house."

"What should I do?" Brandon asked.

"Nothing yet. I'm going to catch the first plane I can."

"Is your business done?"

"Not completely," Adam said, "but done enough so I can leave the problems in somebody else's hands. Hopefully, I'll be in Orlando by mid-afternoon. Let me make my reservations and call you back. If she comes home, don't tell her I'm on the way. I want to surprise her."

"Just get here as soon as you can," Brandon said, "because I can't handle her."

When Deirdre arrived at the hospital, she learned from a nurse that Mandy had been asking for her since about four that morning. Upon entering the room, she saw Mandy sleeping while her father sat in a chair at her bedside.

"Good morning, Mr. Reagan," Deirdre announced in a quiet tone as she set a chair beside his. "How is Mandy doing this morning?"

"Not well," he replied in a near-whisper. "She has a brain bleed that might require surgery. First, they're trying medication. The doctors were surprised by it because wasn't bad a first. It just got worse over time. My daughter's a real fighter, Mrs. Ingstrom. She always has been. But I'm afraid that she's tired of fighting because of all that's happened. I'm really worried."

Grasping the man's hand, she trailed her other hand back and forth from his wrist to his elbow. Unlike his ex-wife, he adored Mandy and found coping with her illness difficult. The

tear sliding down his stubbled cheek was a testament of his concern.

"She's my only child, you know," he continued sorrowfully. "My second wife can't have any. I love Mandy more than myself. I let her live with her mother because her new husband could give Mandy everything she wanted. I didn't know that he would give her something she *didn't* want. He raped her. That's why she ran away again. But she won't go back there. Even if she wanted to, I wouldn't let her. It doesn't matter if money will be tight. At least, she'll be loved and away from that bastard."

"I'm glad to know you truly care. She went through a lot on the streets, Mr. Reagan. She'll need psychological counseling to get over it."

"I know. She already talked to one of the psychiatrists on staff a couple of times. And she wants to keep it up when we get home."

Deirdre smiled. "That's a good sign. It means she'll work with her doctor instead of against him. A lot of runaways are just plain belligerent and refuse to cooperate. With a little determination on her part, Mandy will be both physically and mentally healthy before you know it. Did she say why she wanted to see me?"

"She said something about a girl named Patty. I guess this Patty gave Mandy your business card and asked her to call you as soon as she thought it was safe. Mandy never got the chance."

"That explains how she got it. Was she beaten before she could call?"

"Yeah. If I ever get my hands on him, I'll tear him apart."

"Did she say why she wanted to talk to me?"

"She was doing this Patty a favor. When she finally had a second to look at the card, she decided she'd go to your home, too. She said she was going to ask you to help her find me. The guy who beat her up must have known she had your number. I guess he said something about putting you out of business for good."

A shiver raced up Deirdre's spine. Whoever was tailing her lately really was after her, and it was probably Mandy's pimp—Patty's, too. If that were the case, her being near the alley that night had been a lucky coincidence for him. He hadn't needed to do anything except watch the street for her return with the police.

"Are you all right, Mrs. Ingstrom?" Mr. Reagan asked. "You look kind of pale."

"Mandy didn't give you a name, did she?"

"No. She wanted to tell you personally. She doesn't even want me in the room."

"Then I guess I'll have to wait until she wakes up again." Deirdre paused then said, "If you'll excuse me, I should call my brother. He's visiting from out of town, and I don't want him to worry about me."

Leaving the room, Deirdre closed the door then collapsed against the wall. No doubt remained now. The person who had attacked Mandy was the same one who had beaten Patty and the same one who had followed her. He was probably the same one watching her house, too. Was it possible that he was also the same one who'd hit the unidentified boy who had her card? She didn't like to think it was, but the likelihood was extremely high with everything that was happening.

All of a sudden, she felt violated. That man had invaded her life. He had followed her, had watched her every move, had seen who-knows-what if he had been watching her through binoculars. Did he know about Adam, too? Or Jared? Or Brandon? Just how much *did* he know about her? Had he discovered her favorite color? Her favorite food? If she asked him, could he tell her the title of her favorite song or book?

Neither Adam nor Brandon could answer those questions, but the man following her might be able to. Dear Lord, how much did he know about her? And what if he had learned that she had slept with Adam? He might try to hurt Adam just to get to her. Before she did anything else, she had to contact Adam and make sure he wasn't returning to Orlando soon. Even though she missed him, he would be safer away from her.

Taking her cellphone from her purse, Deirdre scrolled her call log until she found his number. Then she glanced at her watch. It was almost eleven. Adam would probably be at work, so she retrieved his business card from her wallet and dialed the number. Touching the green phone icon on her cell, she waited for someone to answer. On the seventh ring, a woman answered in an out-of-breath rasp.

"A. L. C. Industries."

"Good morning," Deirdre said pleasantly to hide the fear coursing through her. "Is Mr. Colter in yet this morning?"

"I don't know. I just got in myself. May I say who's calling if he is?" Deirdre gave the woman her name and waited, impatiently tapping her foot, while his secretary put her on hold. It seemed like minutes before she came back on the line. "He didn't answer the intercom, Mrs. Ingstrom. Could I have him call you back?"

"That won't be necessary. I just wanted to say hi. What time does he take lunch? I'll call back then."

"He tries to leave around twelve-thirty, but he'll probably eat at his desk today. There's no way he'd miss *your* call."

Deirdre's mood lifted when she heard that he wanted to hear from her. "It's really nothing important, so don't tell him I called. If you do, he might think it has something to do with his niece, and it doesn't."

"I'll still get him to eat at his desk. He's really been down since he got back, and it's because of you. If he's not talking business, he's talking about you. Maybe he'll cheer up if he talks to you instead."

"All right then. I'll do my best to call around twelve-thirty. Don't tell him I already called, though, in case I don't have time later. I don't want him to be disappointed."

Hanging up, Deirdre sighed in relief. Now that she knew Adam would be in the office, she didn't have to worry about him. And hopefully, his secretary wouldn't tell him that she'd called. If she did, he would wonder why and try to reach her. Then he would find out that she'd left the house without Brandon and most likely catch the next flight to Orlando.

Maybe she should call Brandon and warn him that Adam might phone. But if she did that, Brandon would be suspicious and call Adam himself. No, when she called Brandon, she would have to act like nothing was wrong.

Adam paced as he waited for an answer. It had taken three calls within five minutes, but he'd finally got something more than a busy signal. Now Joyce wasn't even there to answer the phone. Her voice came on, but it was her voice mail. He cut the call and tried again because he didn't want to leave a message. Determined to get through, he phoned again. Just before the sixth ring when the phone would automatically switch to voice mail, she breathlessly answered.

"I thought I'd *never* get through," he said, not even bothering with a greeting.

“Adam! I thought you were on the way in. Where are you?”

“At the airport. Get Mueller to take over for me. I have to go back to Orlando right away.”

“It sounds serious. Did something happen to your niece?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Then it must be your new friend. Is she in some kind of trouble?”

“Why do you ask that?” Adam asked, suspicious that she would mention such a thing.

“I told her I wouldn’t say anything, but she called this morning. She was pleasant enough, but I got the impression she was pumping me for information about your working hours.”

“Why?”

“She said it was so she could call you during your lunch hour, but I think she just wanted to know if you were going to be in the office. No real reason, just a feeling I had.”

“Damn! No wonder she took off on her own this morning. She must be protecting Brandon. Look, Joyce, if she does call, cover for me. I don’t want her to know I’m on my way.”

“What do you want me to tell her?”

“I’m in a meeting, I guess. I can’t get free. Tell her I’ll call as soon as I can. I’ll call you when I land in Orlando. Better yet, I’ll call from Chicago. I have a plane change there. If she hasn’t called by then, I’ll call from Memphis. This is really a roundabout trip.”

“All right. I’ll see to it that there’s someone here to man the phones all day.”

“Good idea.” Adam started to say good-bye then thought better of it. “One more thing, Joyce. I made a firm decision last night. I’ll definitely be opening a plant in Orlando. I’ve got Carter scouting a couple locations now. That means I’ll be moving there as soon as possible, so I’ll be around to take care of all the building plans. I want you to talk to your husband about moving, too. A year off work is a long time, and maybe he can find a job down there.”

“You want me in Florida?” she asked in amazement.

Adam chuckled at her surprise. “You bet I do! You’re more than just my secretary-slash-cousin, you know. I really depend on you. We might even be able to hire John after the plant opens if he still hasn’t found employment.”

“I’ll discuss it with him. When do you want an answer?”

“As soon as you can make a decision. I’ve got to go now. Don’t forget to stall Deirdre if she calls.”

“I sure hope John agrees to move. I can’t wait to meet this Deirdre. She must really be something to make you up and leave San Francisco.”

“Deirdre has nothing to do with this. I’m opening a plant there. You know I’ve been searching for months.”

“Right,” she said with a laugh. “Tell your new plant hello for me when you see her.”

The office phone rang, and Brandon raced to answer it. “Hello? I mean Mackenzie’s Half-way House for Runaways.”

“Is Deirdre Ingstrom there?” a man asked.

Thinking quickly, he covered for his absent sister. “She’s busy at the moment. Could I give her a message?”

“Yeah. Tell her she stepped on one toe too many.”

The phone clicked in his ear and a dial tone buzzed in his ear. Brandon hung up the handset slowly, staring at it with a wary gaze, as if it would come alive and attack him. If that

wasn't a threat on his sister, he didn't know what was. Maybe now the police would protect her. But when he called them, the sergeant he talked to said that there was nothing they could do.

Dejected, Brandon hung up. *Now* what should he do? Like Adam had claimed, the police would do nothing, and he didn't know his way around the Orlando area. Just as he as he took his cellphone from his back pocket to call Adam, it began to ring.

"Hi, Brand," Deirdre said. "How are things?"

"Quiet. I thought I was going to have a reunion with my big sister, but it turns out I don't have anybody except Shadow to talk to."

Deirdre frowned. As bad as she felt about leaving Brandon stranded, she couldn't go home yet. "I'm really sorry, too. I'd much rather be with you than at a hospital, but this is a real emergency."

"So how is he?"

"Who?" she asked, confused by his question.

"The guy you're sitting with."

She stifled a gasp. She'd forgotten all about having told Brandon she was visiting a man, and she didn't want Brandon to suspect that she'd lied to him. Now she needed to choose her words carefully so she didn't give her deception away. "Not very good. Apparently, the doctors are quite concerned."

"I don't understand any of this, sis. Adam and Jared told me that you don't have a social life. Now all of a sudden you have some guy you care enough about to sit with in the hospital. It doesn't make sense."

"It does when you stop to consider that it's one of the runaways I helped reunite with a parent recently." After a brief pause to relieve her anxiety about lying, she continued along a different line. "The only reason I called was to let you know that I'm not sure when I'll be home."

"All right. By the way, how did you dodge that guy watching the house?"

"I borrowed my neighbor's car and a red wig."

"I've got to see you in that sometime," he said with a chuckle. "Are you sure you weren't followed?"

"Positive," she assured him. "And I didn't take off the wig until I was in a ladies' room at the hospital. So, you see, I was very careful. Okay?"

"I'm just worried about you. Adam would be, too."

"I know, and I appreciate it. But I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself. I've been doing it for years."

"Have you ever dealt with a maniac out for your hide?" he asked.

"Of course not."

"Then you don't know how capable you are of taking care of yourself."

"Well ..."

"Be careful, Dee. I don't want to lose you again—not when I just found you."

Tears stung her eyes. She'd never dreamed he would say those words to her, and they made her unbelievably happy. Choking out the words, she said, "I will, Brand, because I don't want to lose you, either. I really have to go now. She could be awake again and want me. Bye."

Before Brandon could respond, Deirdre hung up. His suspicions were aroused by the use of one letter. Deirdre had said *she* instead of *he*.

When the phone rang again several minutes later, he hurried to answer it in the hope that Adam was calling to give him a schedule. Instead, another man's voice spoke to him.

"Is Mrs. Deirdre Ingstrom there?"

"She's busy at the moment. If you'll leave your name and number, I'll have her return your call as soon as she's able."

"My name is Glenn Thomas, but she can't call me. Just tell her that Bobbie's our daughter now, and we won't give her up."

Instead of hanging up this time, Brandon placed a call to Adam's office. To his disappointment, the secretary could only tell him that Adam was in transit and should arrive in Orlando sometime that day. With a sigh, Brandon plopped onto the couch in the den, hoping that Adam would call again. If Deirdre had lied about seeing a man in the hospital, Adam should know. It could only mean something serious was in the works—something Deirdre didn't want anybody to know about.

Eleven

Deirdre couldn't believe what the woman in Adam's office had told her. When she'd called at three-thirty, his secretary had said that he was in a meeting that could last at least two more hours, and she declined to leave a number when the woman requested it. She hadn't even said that he knew it. Instead, she promised to call again. But the woman who answered when Deirdre called at six told her that Adam hadn't been in the office all day because of an emergency. And Deirdre knew exactly what that emergency was. He was on his way to Orlando. Rather than tell the woman her name, Deirdre thanked her then hung up. Furious, she waited impatiently for twenty minutes then called again.

"Is this Mr. Colter's secretary?" Deirdre asked when a woman answered.

"I'm Joyce Kramer. Can I help you?"

"Only if you'll tell me the truth this time."

"Uh-oh," Joyce said. "Now I recognize your voice. You're Deirdre Ingstrom, aren't you?"

"That's right. Now could we please get this over with as painlessly as possible? For *us*, at least."

"Something tells me this won't be painless for Adam."

"Not if what I suspect is true," Deirdre declared. "He's on his way to Orlando, isn't he?"

"I don't know how you found out, but I was just following orders."

"Darn it! *Now* what am I going to do?"

"About what?"

"He could get hurt down here, and I don't want that. You don't, either, do you?"

"Of course not. What kind of problem do you have, anyway?"

"What makes you think I have a problem?" Deirdre asked, unsure she should divulge any information to this woman.

"Adam wouldn't drop unfinished business unless it was important. When he called from the airport this morning, he said he thought you were protecting somebody. Now you're saying he could get hurt. From the sound of things, you want to protect him, too. And if that's the case, you're the one in trouble."

"How did you figure all that out?" Deirdre asked in amazement.

"Mostly from the things Adam *hasn't* said. I've never heard him talk about a woman like he does you. You can hear the respect and pride in his voice, even when he talks about your fights."

"He told you about them?"

"He was trying to talk himself out of missing you. And I should probably emphasize the word trying. It didn't work."

Deirdre smiled, recalling her conversation with Adam. "I know. Maybe we should get back to the original subject. You never did answer me. Is he on his way back here?"

"If he isn't already there. He's really worried about you, Mrs. Ingstrom," Joyce said, "and

I have a feeling that he has good reason to be. What's going on there, anyway?"

"I can't say, because I'm really not sure."

"There is danger, though, isn't there."

"Adam thinks so."

"It sounds like you do, too. I've never seen him so protective of a woman. He's my cousin, and I've known him all my life. I knew right away what his problem was when he came back from Orlando depressed. When he started talking about your fights, I decided to try something. I did the same thing I've done before. I told him exactly what I thought of the situation. This time he was furious. Other times he just laughed it off. He told me to keep my opinions to myself because I didn't know you. Don't get me wrong, though. I only said it to test him, and I told him so when he hit the ceiling. The point is that he defended you when he never defended another woman—not even his ex-wife. And, believe me, I never made any bones about what I thought of Natalie."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I don't think there's ever been a woman in his life that hit him as hard as you did. He's worried sick about you, Deirdre. He's been popping antacids like candy since he's been back."

"Does he have an ulcer?" Deirdre asked in concern.

"No, just a nervous stomach. Anyway, he dropped everything to run down there. I don't know how long it will take him, though. He had a couple of layovers."

"Maybe I should call home again and see if he's there."

"You're not home?"

"No, I'm at the hospital."

"The hospital?" Joyce exclaimed. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I'm just waiting to talk to somebody. Would you do me a favor?"

"If I can."

"I know you won't talk him into going back to San Francisco, but would you try to convince him not to go to the mansion? I don't have any real reason to believe it, just an intuition, but I have a feeling he's in as much danger as I am. My place is being watched, so I'm not even going home tonight."

"Should he meet you somewhere?"

As badly as she wanted Adam with her, she couldn't subject him to danger. "I don't know where I'll be yet. Will you convince him to stay away from my place?"

"I'll do my best, but I can't promise anything."

"Thanks, Joyce. Oh, and it was nice talking to you."

"Same here. Bye."

"What the hell?" Adam asked in amazement. "All day?"

"She hasn't come back once," Brandon said. "She called a couple of times, but she wouldn't tell me where she was."

"That's why I'm worried, Mr. Colter," Jared insisted. "Deirdre always tells me where she is. Maybe not specifically, like I only know that she went to the hospital, not which one. But she always tells me a general place. *Always*."

"Wait a minute, Adam," Brandon said. "I almost forgot something. Remember I told you

she went to see some guy in the hospital? When she called this afternoon, she talked about a *she* not a *he*. I wanted to ask her what she was talking about, but she hung up before I could. And there's another thing. I asked her how the guy she went to see was doing, and guess what she asked me. *Who?* That's the first thing that got me suspicious."

"Maybe you should tell me the whole conversation." Adam took a roll of antacids from his shirt pocket and popped one into his mouth. When Brandon finished recounting what he could remember, Adam rose wearily. "Damn! Well, at least, I know where she is."

"With Mandy, right?" Jared said.

"That's my guess. I'm going there right now. If she calls, don't let her know I was here. She might take off if she thinks I know she's running around without protection."

Not waiting for an answer, Adam raced out the patio door to his rental car in the neighbors' driveway. He arrived at Mandy's room about a half an hour later.

"Where's Deirdre?" he frantically asked the man sitting at Mandy's bedside.

Mr. Reagan stared up at Adam in shock. "What?"

"Deirdre Ingstrom. And don't tell me she isn't here because I know her better than she thinks. Now where is she?"

"Why should I tell *you*?" Mr. Reagan asked.

"I came all the way from San Francisco today," Adam declared, "to protect her. I'm tired, and I don't need this game of twenty questions."

"Well, you made the trip for nothing, because she just went to get something to eat."

"Then she has been here."

"Almost all day. She only left a few times to make some phone calls, and for lunch and dinner."

"And she didn't say where she was going?" Adam asked.

"Sorry."

"Did she at least tell you how long she'd be gone?"

"Nope. She just gave me her business card in case my daughter wakes up coherent. And before you ask, I can't give you her number. She asked me not to give it to anybody. She told me no exceptions." Mr. Reagan's expression took on a concerned look. "I don't suppose your name is Adam Colter."

"As a matter of fact, it is." Pulling up a chair, Adam sat down and popped another antacid in his mouth. "And I already have her number. I've only known Deirdre a short time, but I swear that woman's giving me an ulcer. I wonder how she found out I was coming."

Mr. Reagan shrugged. "I don't know, but she left a message for you. You're supposed to call your cousin Joyce."

"Uh-oh. Sounds like I'm in for a peck of trouble on both coasts. Joyce never tells people we're related when they call the office. As far as business goes, she's just my secretary. She and Deirdre must have had quite a talk if Joyce told her we're cousins. Come on, Mr. Reagan. You've got to tell me if you know where she went. I have to make sure she's all right."

"Then you know about the guy who wants to put her out of business?"

"What?" Adam asked, shocked by the news. "What guy?"

"I don't know his name. Mandy wanted to tell Mrs. Ingstrom herself, but she just hasn't had the strength."

Adam turned his distraught gaze to the teen in the bed. "Did you know I was with the cop when he found Mandy?"

"You were? I had no idea, but I appreciate your helping until the ambulance got there."

The doctors said it was a good thing you did.”

“I couldn’t very well sit back and do nothing. I’m not that kind of man. Anyway, Deirdre passed that very alley the night Mandy was attacked, and some guy came barreling out of there straight at her. The cops and I think he was after Deirdre because he thought she saw something. I think it could be the same guy. And what’s Deirdre doing? Running all over Orlando without protection. She could get herself killed. Is that what you want?”

“Of course not,” Mr. Reagan said, “but I couldn’t go with her.”

“I can,” Adam announced, determined to get that number, “if I can find her.”

“Oh, all right,” Mr. Reagan agreed, reaching into his shirt pocket and withdrawing a slip of paper. “Here’s a phone number for where she’ll be. She said her cell’s out of power, and she didn’t have a charger with her. I just hope she understands that I’m only doing this for her safety. She’s been good to Mandy and me, and I don’t want her to get hurt.”

“Thanks, Mr. Reagan. You won’t regret it.”

“I didn’t realize how hungry I was,” Deirdre said as she and Robin ate dinner together. “Do you think I could get a piece of chocolate cake a la mode?”

“Sure,” Robin agreed. “I’ll get it for you.”

While she was serving up two pieces of cake and ice cream, the phone near the cash register rang. Hurrying to answer it, she said, “Campbell’s Coffee Shop.”

“I’m looking for somebody who left this number with a friend. Could you tell me if she’s there? Her name is Deirdre Ingstrom, and she’s a beautiful brunette with the deepest blue eyes you’ve ever seen.”

“Sure, she’s here. May I say who’s calling?”

“No, no,” Adam said frantically. “Don’t do that. Just keep her there. I’m coming over to meet her, but I’m afraid she’ll leave if you tell her I’m on my way.”

Robin gazed over at Deirdre, unsure she could do as he asked. “How do I keep her here?”

“I don’t know. Think of something. Where is this place, anyway?”

“I don’t know if I should tell you. How do I know you’re not some nut who’s trying to pick her up?”

“I know the woman. We’ve been working together lately, and her life’s in danger.”

“In danger?” Robin repeated.

“That’s right. All I want to do is catch up with her and keep her safe. Do you know the address there?”

“And you really want to help her?”

“I swear it. She’s been out running around without protection all day. She’s going to run out of luck if she’s not stopped. Now give me the address so I can put it in my GPS.”

“All right.” After giving him the address, Robin asked, “Are you sure you won’t tell me your name? I don’t like what I’ve done. I don’t know if I can trust you.”

“Don’t worry, ma’am,” he replied with a chuckle. “You can trust me. I’ll be there as soon as possible.”

Robin hung up then finished dishing up their desserts and carried them to the table. As Robin sat down, Deirdre asked, “What’s wrong, Robin?”

Robin set down the food before sinking into her chair. “Some guy just called, and I don’t know what to make of it.”

"Why do you say that?"

"He was looking for somebody, but he wouldn't tell me his name. He said something about this person not staying put if he did."

"Oh, no!" Deirdre exclaimed. "I'll bet that was Adam. He's probably already back in Orlando. Did he say where he was calling from?"

Robin stared at Deirdre in shock. "I was talking to Uncle Adam?"

"I was right. The man *was* looking for me," Deirdre exclaimed irritably. "Did he say where he was?"

"A hospital."

"I *knew* it. I'm out of here as soon as I finish my dinner and pay. I can't stay around and let him catch up with me. The last thing I want to do is expose him to danger."

"I don't want it, either," Robin said, "but what can we do?"

"I'm leaving."

"What about me?" Robin asked in desperation.

Deirdre stared at her in astonishment, unable to think of a reason for her question. "What about you?"

"He'll see me. He'll know where I am. And if I remember anything about Uncle Adam, he doesn't take no for an answer. I can't hide here, or he'll insist on talking to every waitress in the place. He's bound to find me, and then he'll want me to go with him. And I won't be able to say no."

Grasping the teen's hand, Deirdre smiled reassuringly. "Then don't say it. Just get up and walk out the door with him. That way you'll never have to go back to the Thomases."

"You don't understand. When Glenn found your card, he threatened to hurt Uncle Adam if I tried to go back."

"He found my card?"

"Uh-huh. Then he hit me and locked me in my room. That's why I was off work. I'm going to run away from him soon, but I can't yet. I have to make him think I'm staying."

"I'll tell you what. As soon as I'm gone, call Jared and have him drive you home. I don't think I'm the one who should do it. It took me forty-five minutes to get here from the hospital, and I knew where I was going. It should only take Jared about twenty-five minutes. Better yet, I'll call him right now." After making her call from a phone booth and successfully concealing her location, she returned to the table. "He's on his way. Tell your boss there's an emergency at home and you have to leave when your ride gets here. He'll probably understand. My appetite's gone, so I'm leaving." She opened her wallet, took out twenty dollars and a business card. "Here's my card again. Contact me if you decide to run away from the Thomases. I'll meet you anywhere. And hide it in a place Mr. Thomas won't find it or keep it on your person at all times."

Adam raced into the building only to discover that Deirdre was no longer there. What had happened to her? Why hadn't the waitress made her stay? Going up to the counter, he ordered a glass of milk before he questioned the woman who served him.

"Have you seen a beautiful brunette in here tonight?" he asked in concern.

"We get a lot of brunettes in here, mister."

"I suppose you do. This one was here about an hour ago. I called before I came and asked the waitress to detain her. Are you the woman who took the call?"

"Nope. Must have been Bobbie."

"Could I speak with her a minute please?"

"She left, too. Her boyfriend came and got her about, oh, twenty minutes ago?"

Adam stifled the urge to slam his fist on the counter. "Damn! I'll bet she told Deirdre I was coming. But why would she leave? That doesn't make sense."

"All I know is that she had some sort of emergency at home. Jared said they had to hurry."

"Jared!" Adam exclaimed. "What did you say this girl's name was?"

"Bobbie Thomas. Do you know her?"

"I don't think so, but I'm not sure. What does she look like?"

"She's really a cute little thing—petite, long hair about the color of yours, pretty blue eyes."

"How old is she?" Adam asked.

"She just turned sixteen a few weeks ago."

"Oh, my God! I'll bet it was Robin." Excitement raged through Adam, and he struggled to remain calm. "Where does she live? Do you have her phone number on file? I've got to see her. I've got to know if she's my niece."

"Your niece? Wouldn't you know it if she is?"

"Not necessarily. She ran away four years ago, and I've *got* to find her." Suddenly the excitement left Adam, and he exclaimed, "Oh, no!"

"Now what?"

"Deirdre must have known it was me on the phone and told her. Do you have any idea where the brunette went?"

"Sorry. All I know is that she and Bobbie had dinner together, and they both left. And can't give you Bobbie's address or phone number. It's against our policy."

"That's okay. I'll get together with her before long. Right now, it's more important that I find Deirdre. Where's your restroom?"

The waitress pointed toward the sign above a doorway.

"Thanks." Drinking his milk in one breath, he stalked back to the hallway the waitress indicated, but instead of using the facilities, he called Deirdre's house. When Brandon answered, he asked, "Is Deirdre there?"

"Haven't you caught up with her yet?" Brandon asked in concern.

"I wish I had. What about Jared? Is he there?"

"Nope. He got a call a while ago and had to leave. He said he'd be back as soon as he could."

"He didn't say where he was going?" Adam asked.

"Just that it was an emergency."

"Damn! I think he took my niece away so I wouldn't run into her, and I think it was Deirdre's idea. Right now, I'm at the coffee shop where Deirdre ate dinner. Unfortunately, she already left. If she calls, tell her to stay put. And get her location. I'm tired of this damned cat-and-mouse game she's playing."

"I've been trying to do that all day, but she always hangs up on me. What the hell am I supposed to do when she does that?"

Adam chuckled at the memory of their first few days together. "I don't know. That's one thing I haven't figured out yet. When we first met, I quit calling her because we always ended

up having words and she hung up. You've got to watch it, or she'll walk out of the room, too. But you can follow her when she does that. Anyway, tell her I'm in town. Let her know how desperate I am to find her. Maybe that will keep her in place long enough for me to catch up with her."

"All right. I'll do what I can."

Once she was in a hotel, Deirdre called the diner to see if Robin was still there. Learning that she had left, Deirdre released a sigh of relief and thanked the woman who answered. Next Deirdre dialed the hospital and asked for Mandy's room.

When Mr. Reagan answered, she said, "This is Deirdre Ingstrom, Mr. Reagan. How's Mandy doing?"

"A little better, but she's still not very coherent. Your friend was here a while ago. Did he find you?"

"He might have if he hadn't called first. His niece is a runaway I'm currently working with, and she answered the phone. She was suspicious when he wouldn't leave his name, so she told me about the phone call."

"Didn't she know who she was talking to?"

"No. I wanted to leave new number with you and beg you not to tell Adam this time. His life is in danger if he's around me, and I want to spare him."

"The man's practically a basket case, Mrs. Ingstrom. Why don't you just let him catch up with you? All he wants to do is protect you."

"That's all I want to do for him, too," Deirdre insisted. "Please, Mr. Reagan? Promise you won't tell him this time."

"All right, but I think it's a lousy idea."

"It probably is," she agreed, "but I need to stay away from him. Thank you, Mr. Reagan. I'm going to try and get some sleep. If Mandy wants me, I can be there within five minutes. That's how close I am."

"All right. What's your number?"

When Adam arrived at the hospital later, Mr. Reagan told him that she hadn't returned. Adam dropped onto a chair as exhaustion overcame him.

"I can tell how upset you are by the look on your face," Mr. Reagan said. "I promised not to tell you her phone number this time, but I *didn't* promise not to give you a clue."

Straightening in his chair, Adam repeated. "A clue?"

"That's right. She called earlier to give me an updated phone number. She's spending the night at a hotel in the area. She said it would only take her about five minutes to get here. I don't know the area myself, but maybe one of the nurses could tell you which motel it might be."

"You'll never know how much I appreciate your help."

"I think I do. After all, you helped save my daughter's life. I'm just returning the favor. Which reminds me, Mrs. Ingstrom said you might be in danger if you joined her, so be careful. And go easy on her. She's just trying to protect you like you're trying to protect her."

"I will," Adam agreed as he hurried out the door. "And thanks again."

Pacing the dark room, Deirdre wondered how she would ever extricate herself from the mess she'd made. Somewhere between the time she'd left home and the time she'd arrived at the motel, she'd let down her guard. The cream-colored car was following her again, and she hadn't even been paying attention most of the day. If she hadn't taken her precautions for granted, she probably would have known exactly when she'd picked him up.

But it was too late for hindsight. All she could do now was pray that the man would think it was a case of mistaken identity and go away. Unfortunately, that possibility was remote. If only she had waited for Adam at the coffee shop! But if she had, he would be in danger now, too. As much as she missed him and wished they were together, she was glad he was safe.

Suddenly, another thought hit her. What if the man who had called at the coffee shop hadn't been Adam? What if it had been the man following her? Maybe that's when he'd found her. Poor Robin. If she found out that she had given directions to the man who Deirdre was trying to avoid, she'd probably feel responsible. Well, if that were the case, Deirdre would just have to make sure Robin never found out about it.

Hopefully, Adam was still on the way to Orlando. But that wasn't very likely, either. He was probably already searching for her. With any luck, she'd kept him from finding her. A lot had happened that day, and she didn't want Adam to find out what was going on. That would only make him more determined to find her.

A knock at the door startled her into immobility. Who was it? The man who had followed her? Or Adam? As badly as she wanted to look out the window, she couldn't. If it was the man, he would probably see her and force his way into the room. If it was Adam, he'd just keep trying until she opened the door. Maybe he would even call her name to see if she was in there. The best course of action was to wait and see what happened next.

The person knocked again. Deirdre dropped to the floor on the hidden side of the bed. If there was even a crack in the curtains, she could be seen from outside. And she couldn't have that.

Her heart raced with fear; her lungs ached as she struggled to calm herself. But calmness eluded her. She could only think of what had happened to Patty (the lucky teen), Mandy (the one fighting for her life), and the dead teenage boy. What if the same thing happened to her? What would all those runaways do if she wasn't there to help them reunite with their families? What about Adam and Robin? She'd promised him a reunion, and she might not be able to keep that promise.

And why not? Because of her own stubborn stupidity. Because she'd spent an entire day trying to keep Adam from finding out what was going on in Orlando. Because she wanted to protect the people she loved from getting hurt.

Well, enough was enough. She'd confront this stranger and tell him to leave her and her loved ones alone. At least, she would as soon as she could pry herself off the floor and answer the third knock on the door.

Adam stared at the desk clerk in shock. "What do you mean you're going to check on her

room?”

“We don’t allow hookers to work here.”

“Deirdre’s no damned hooker.”

“What else could she be when you’re the second man in less than fifteen minutes to ask her room number?”

“The second man?” Adam repeated frantically. “Oh, my God. Something’s wrong. Even I’m not supposed to know she’s here. What did this other person look like?”

“He was a really tan guy. Maybe he was Hispanic. I don’t know. This is Florida, you know. People are outside a lot.”

“How big was he?” Adam demanded.

“About your size. Is this lady in some kind of trouble?”

“She sure is. And *you* gave her room number to somebody who might be out to kill her. How could you be so stupid?”

“He said they were husband and wife, that they were playing some sort of love game. How was I supposed to know they weren’t?”

“All right. Look, I need a room key. If this guy was after her, I want to surprise them. I don’t want to have to knock to get in the room.”

“I can’t do that.”

“I could call the cops and get their help if you want, but it would waste a lot of time. Let’s just do this on friendly terms, okay? Let’s keep the cops out of it until I find out if they’re needed. It certainly wouldn’t look good for your motel to have the police come rolling in with their lights going.”

“Are you some sort of private investigator?”

“I’m the man who’s been protecting her. Is that good enough for you? Just give me the damned key.”

“Oh, all right.” After looking up Deirdre’s room number, the clerk coded a card and handed it to Adam. “The room number is 115—out the door and around the corner to the right about three quarters of the way to the end of the building. But I’m only doing this because you look like you’re really worried about her.”

“I am,” Adam said, running out the door. “Thanks.”

Instead of getting into his rental car, Adam raced around the building in the direction the clerk indicated. The moment he turned the corner, he slowed to a walk. Parked near a street-light across the parking lot was a large, cream-colored car. Adam probably wouldn’t have noticed it if he hadn’t heard a car door close in that direction. But there were no people in the lot. That could only mean whoever closed the door was in a car. If that were the case, the person should be leaving in a moment. Yet no motor started; no headlights came on; nothing indicated that someone would be driving out of the lot.

Then he saw it! Movement in the cream-colored car. Someone was there with no intention of going anywhere else. Deciding to confront the person, Adam casually crossed the parking lot and started toward the car. All of a sudden, the engine roared to life. The tires squealed as it tore out of the parking space in his direction. Thinking quickly, he dove between two parked cars as the car sped past.

When the car was gone, Adam sat up. No doubt remained. That car had been the same one following Deirdre, and whoever was driving it knew who he was. That man wasn’t after one person anymore; he was after two. No doubt remained about that. Well, if he wanted them that badly, he would find them—together. Adam couldn’t protect Deirdre any better

than being with her constantly.

His forearms stung. His knee ached just like it did whenever he moved it wrong since his high school football injury. Rising, he went to the streetlight and checked himself. He had badly skinned his arms, as well as his knee, tearing his jeans in the process. Caring for his injuries would have to wait. He had to see if Deirdre was all right before he could even consider tending to himself. When he looked down for the key he'd been carrying, he realized that he'd lost it.

Ignoring the pain in his knee, he sprinted across the lot, located Deirdre's room and pounded furiously on the door.

Twelve

Oh, no! *Now* who was it? Had the man following her come back? Or had Adam found her? Either way, she had to keep the door closed. She couldn't open it for anybody. Then a frantic voice called out her name.

"Deirdre! It's Adam. Open up." Even though she longed to do exactly that, she was afraid that he would be hurt if the man found them together. And she desperately wanted to save Adam.

"Come on, honey!" he called. "Open the door. I have to know if you're all right. Please, don't shut me out now. It's too important."

Joyce's words echoed in Deirdre's mind: *I've never seen him so protective of a woman*. By the sound of his voice, Joyce had meant the words literally. Joyce had also said something about him popping antacids like candy. If that were the case, he was more concerned for her well-being than she'd originally thought. He probably wouldn't go away if she ignored his desperate pleas; he would probably keep pounding on the door until he drew enough attention to bring other residents to their doors. She didn't want to disturb anybody so she should probably let him in. Rising, she hurried to the door and unlocked it to admit him.

The moment the door began to open, he burst into the room and grabbed Deirdre. He hugged her tightly against him while he slammed the door shut with his foot. Releasing her with only one arm, he bolted the door and flipped over the security bar for double safety.

In an instant, all the wonderful sensations he had revived in her returned. She slid her arms around him to show her acceptance. When he spoke, he did so in a pained tone that Deirdre could only classify as total devotion.

"God, Deirdre, I thought I'd *never* find you. I went everywhere you did. I even went out to the coffee shop where you had dinner with Robin. At first, I was mad because she'd left. But finding you was much more important. She was safe; you weren't. Why did you do it, honey? Why did you keep running from me?"

"I was afraid for you," she admitted, clinging to him. "I didn't want you to get hurt. Oh, Adam! I was so scared. That guy is following me again. Did he see you come to my room?"

"No, but he did see me. Somebody in a cream-colored car tried to run me down a couple minutes ago. I'm surprised you didn't hear his tires as he took off."

"I did. I'd hoped it was him, but I thought it was probably you—mad because I wouldn't let you in the room."

Adam pushed her away, his hands not releasing her shoulders, his dark eyes wide with horror. "He came to your door?"

"Uh-huh. But I wouldn't open it. I even hid behind the bed just in case there was a crack in the curtain. I didn't want him to know anybody was here. I thought if I kept the lights out and TV off, he'd think I was out. I guess it worked."

As Deirdre stared up at him, she saw his expression of concern change to one of awe. Her

heart melted at the thought that he might kiss her again.

"If you had any idea of how worried I was about you," he continued, "you'd probably send me on my way for good."

"I doubt it."

"And I've missed you, Deirdre—desperately. I hated being away from you. I tried to convince myself that the separation was best for both of us, but I could only remember the good times. Times like when I was there to protect you from that guy the first time, and when you came to me for protection the second time. What I remembered the most vividly was the day we spent at EPCOT. That night, too, of course. I remembered all those things, Deirdre, even though I tried hard to remember the fights we had."

"Me, too."

"You're not angry because I'm saying these things? I thought for sure you would be."

"Why?" Her heart cried out for him to embrace her, to let his lips capture hers in the passionate demand he'd shown her before.

"Because you always told me that you don't mix business and pleasure. You said you don't get involved with your clients. Apparently, it's one of your rules."

Deirdre smiled at him. "I've heard a rumor that rules are made to be broken."

"Are you saying what I think you are?" he asked with a hopeful tone in his voice. "Are you telling me you feel something in return?"

"I don't just jump into bed with a man, Adam. I have to feel something."

"Thank God," he sighed, his expression of relief vividly manifested in his eyes.

"May I make a confession?" she asked, although reluctant to tell him the truth.

"Of course. What is it?"

"You're only the second man I've slept with. There wasn't anybody before Parker, and you were the only one after."

"That's what I thought. Now *I* have a confession to make. I wanted to take you to bed from the first second I laid eyes on you. I didn't want to admit that's what I was feeling," he added hastily, "not even to myself, but it was. And I followed you that first night for more reasons than not believing you. I followed you because I was worried about you. Then when you went to that part of town? I was sure you were out to get yourself killed. I was sure I'd never know why I found myself so attracted to you. When I talked to you on the phone that first time, I sure as hell didn't expect to find the most beautiful woman I'd ever laid eyes on."

"You weren't what I expected, either," she admitted. "I envisioned you as a flabby, overweight man, balding, short, your stereotypical businessman who spends his life behind a desk."

"Did I disappoint you?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Far from it." Trailing her hands up and down his hard, muscular arms, she studied the man before her. "Let me guess. You're really a nine-to-fiver who works out to keep in shape. What? Running? Swimming? Maybe lifting weights? Am I close?"

"Almost right on the button. I never did much swimming." Embracing her again, he hugged her while she slid her arms around him. "I can't tell you how much I missed you. When I left, I knew it wouldn't be easy, but I never dreamed it would be so damned hard."

"Well, *I* thought it would be easy. Unfortunately, I was wrong. I think it would have been easier on me if I'd had some inkling that being separated would be difficult."

"Then why did you run away from me when I came back?"

"To protect you." Suddenly remembering something he'd said earlier, Deirdre pushed

away from him. "Wait a minute. Did you tell me that the guy following me tried to run you down?"

"That's right. I had to dive between a couple of cars to keep from getting hit. He was really moving out when he came at me."

"That means he's after you, too, doesn't it."

"It seems that way," he agreed. "But don't worry. I only have a few superficial wounds. Nothing that won't heal in a couple of days."

"Are you sure?" she asked, turning on a light to examine his body from a distance. "Oh, no. You skinned your knee and tore your pants."

"Yeah." He grinned. "I haven't done that since I was a kid."

"Don't make light of this, Adam," she scolded. "You could have been seriously injured because of me."

"All because of *me*, you mean," he insisted. "He probably knows who I am because of the night I had the run-in with him. Besides, a skinned knee and a couple of torn-up arms are worth it when you consider that I was out to protect you."

"Your arms, too? You march right into that bathroom and wash them off. Even a small cut or scrape can get infected. Go on now. I'm going to call home, and let Jared and Brandon know that you finally caught up with me and that everything's okay."

"Everything's *not* okay, Deirdre," Adam declared, "and don't you dare tell them it is. You tell them the truth. Tell them that somebody's out for our hides so they'll be prepared. Then call the cops and have them send somebody over. I want to report what happened. Maybe that will make the cops do something to protect us."

"All right, but only if you go clean up."

After Deirdre called the police, she called her brother. Once Brandon was on the phone, she told him what Adam wanted and gave him the number where she could be reached. By the time Adam finished showering, the police officer had arrived and was ready for his statement. To her amazement, Jared appeared at the motel with Shadow, explaining that he and Brandon decided she needed even more protection. They'd found her by going through all the motels in the phone book until they got the right number.

An hour later, the couple was finally alone again. Deirdre collapsed onto the only bed in the room, exhausted after her long, tension-filled day. A moment later Adam sat down beside her and tenderly stroked some hair from her face.

"What a day," she mumbled.

"I agree. I've been awake since about three a.m. I couldn't get back to sleep good after I called you this morning."

"It seems like a week ago that you called."

"I know. We're alone now, though—except for Shadow. And everything has settled down for the night."

"What if he comes back?" she asked in concern.

"He can't get in, honey. We've locked the door from inside."

"He could break a window."

"True, but I doubt he would. That would draw attention to him. Even if he does come back, he won't do anything stupid. He's out for my hide for sure and yours possibly. He won't try anything unless he thinks he can get away with it. Besides, we have a police officer staking out the room. We're completely safe tonight, so relax."

Bending over, he kissed her on the forehead then repositioned himself to let his lips

caress hers in a brief kiss. She flung her arms around his neck when he started to pull away and spoke desperately. "Hold me, Adam. Please. Just hold me."

Lying down next to her, Adam drew her against him. Deirdre snuggled closer, feeling safe for the first time all day. When his lips again met hers, she tried to experience every new sensation that he'd shown her existed in her soul. Unfortunately, the only thing she could think of was that he had almost been run over that night.

She wanted to give herself to him, wanted to make love with him, just in case they didn't live through the following day. But she couldn't bring herself to get excited. Did she really feel as strongly for him as she'd thought? Or did she only want the sexual release he'd shown her that she needed?

It had been five years since she'd made love with a man. Even then, it wasn't the kind of exciting liaison that she'd had with Adam on that one occasion. But was that because she had emotions for Adam, or because he was a better lover than Parker? How would she ever learn the answers if she couldn't even get excited in Adam's arms?

Then it happened again! The very thought of not being able to satisfy this man had brought on the stirrings within her, and her heart constricted with happiness. She did still have feelings for Adam! And nothing could have made her more joyous.

His fingers toyed with the buttons on her shirt until he could push it apart. His hands slipped under her back to unhook her brassiere. Giggling behind his kiss, Deirdre unhooked the clasp between her breasts and placed his hand on her bare breast. Oh, the feel of it! She loved the way he massaged her, but something in his caress had changed since their last night together. She didn't know what it was, but she knew she could spend a lifetime feeling it. On second thought, was it really his caress that had changed? Or was it the way she reacted to his caress?

An unexpected thought crossed her mind, and she panicked. She pushed him away and hooked her brassiere again.

"What's wrong, honey?" he asked. "I thought I was pleasing you."

"You were. But we have to stop."

"You didn't say that the other night," he said in a husky voice as he released her brassiere again.

She inhaled sharply when he caressed her bare breast, his thumb and index finger gently tweaking her nipple. It hardened on contact.

"That was the other night," she whispered. "This is tonight. Things have changed."

"They sure as have," he replied. "We're closer now. So don't fight it, sweetheart." He kissed her nipple, drawing an instinctive moan from her.

"I'm not fighting it," she said. "I'm admitting it. I want you, Adam. I really do. I want to make love as much as you do, but we can't. Not unless you have a little foil packet in your wallet for just such an emergency."

He jolted upright and stared down at her in shock. "Oh! And you're right. This is no time for us to be taking chances. Believe it or not, I can protect you from harm, as well as an unwanted pregnancy."

"Unwanted?" she repeated. Is that really why she had stopped him? Because she didn't want a pregnancy? If that were the case, why did she have this sudden, overwhelming desire to change her mind? No, that was crazy! She'd never given motherhood a passing thought. But now the idea was so tempting that she could hardly restrain herself from attacking the man beside her.

"You don't want to get pregnant now, Deirdre," he said as he fumbled to get his wallet from his jeans. "We aren't even married."

"Then why do I suddenly want a baby?" she asked.

"I don't know, but now's not the time. Don't worry. There'll be plenty of time when this is over and that nut is behind bars."

"There will?" she asked, stunned by his statement.

"Of course. You already know that I'm going to open a plant here. We'll be seeing each other often." Adam pulled the packet from his wallet and held it up for her to see. "It's been there for quite a while, but it's still good as new."

"Wait a minute," she said. "What are you saying? That you want to give me a baby?"

"If you want one that badly, sure. I'll help you get pregnant."

She stared up at him. "You would agree to be an unwed father?"

"Under the right conditions." Laying the packet on the nightstand, Adam shed his clothes. Deirdre did the same without getting out of bed. Then he lay down next to her and took her into his arms again. "I think we've discussed this enough. You're not going to get pregnant tonight no matter how badly you want a baby, so I'm going to protect you."

His lips caught hers hotly, demandingly, lovingly; and Deirdre knew beyond a doubt that more lay behind his proclamation than she'd thought. But the notion was only passing as he buried his head in her hair and kissed her neck. She shuddered with anticipation.

His lips went lower, to her breasts, where he lingered, kissing and sucking her nipples with such passion that Deirdre felt as though this would make her reach the climax without so much as him touching her anywhere else. But he did. His hands massaged her hip and the other breast. Then the hand on her hip moved to her thigh and back upward to caress her heated passage of desire.

He released her breasts and kissed his way lower, lower, until he was positioned between her legs. Deirdre grabbed his hair when she felt his lips caress her womanhood, and she was completely lost in the sensations he caused in her. After several minutes, she pulled him toward her, desperately wanting more of him.

As he positioned himself for their joining, she gazed up at him and whispered, "Didn't you forget something?"

"Took care of it, sweetheart," he replied, driving himself into her body.

Deirdre inhaled as he filled her. She thrashed beneath him, frantic to reach the ultimate goal of lovers, unable to wait a moment longer, ready to give her all. Then came the all-consuming release, and a cry of joy burst forth from deep within her chest as she instinctively dug her fingernails into the soft flesh of his buttocks.

A moment later, he groaned into her ear. He collapsed beside her. Pulling her to him, he held her securely. Deirdre snuggled closer still and kissed the side of his neck. He mumbled, and she stared at him in shock. Looking closer, she realized that he was asleep. But had he been awake when he said "I love you"? Or had he already drifted off?

Her heart swelled with happiness, and she laid her head back on his chest. It didn't really matter. She loved him, and she was completely happy for the first time in her life.

When Deirdre woke, she was filled with a sense of relaxation unlike any she'd experienced since meeting Adam. With the police guarding them, she felt that she needn't concern

herself with her safety or Adam's. The law was there now and would protect them if anything happened.

Deirdre's peace continued throughout the day, even though Mandy was still too weak to stay awake very long. Because of her improvement, the doctors wanted her to get as much rest as possible and kept her on a heavy dosage of painkillers. It wasn't until nearly dinner-time that Mandy finally demanded to speak with Deirdre in private.

Once Adam and Mr. Reagan were out of the room, Deirdre grasped the teen's hand. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Why I wanted to see you. I don't remember when I asked, but I know it was a long time ago. I want to tell you my pimp's name."

When Mandy didn't continue, Deirdre asked, "Which is?"

"Hector Rodman. Patty asked me to tell you that she wanted to come back to the home, but Hector got mad. He found out about your business and decided to get rid of you."

"Why?"

"Runaways are the only people he works with. He feeds us and gives us a place to live. But he keeps us scared, too. Every once in a while he makes an example of one of us. I was his choice the last time. David Giles. He's the hit-and-run John Doe. David was the time before that."

Deirdre stifled a gasp of horror. The unidentified teen with her business card *had* been part of all this. "Well, now that you've told somebody about it, everybody will be safe. Nobody else will be hurt because I'm calling the police. How many of you are there?"

"Fifteen. We all live in the same place—just different apartments so we can conduct business without being interrupted by people coming and going."

"No wonder nobody would talk to me when I was looking for Patty."

"Almost all the kids there want to go home, Mrs. Ingstrom. They're just scared."

"They won't have to be anymore," Deirdre assured her. "I'll call the police and have them raid the place, then I'll take the kids to the halfway house. Rodman will be picked up at the same time."

"Don't be so sure. He's sneaky. He could get out before the cops show up."

"I'll tell them what you said, Mandy. Then they'll be on the lookout for him during the raid. You just go on back to sleep and get well, okay? I want to see you healthy when you go back to your father's house."

"Thanks, Mrs. Ingstrom. I appreciate all the help you're giving everybody. They will, too, because nobody likes Hector."

During the raid, the police were unable to find Hector Rodman in the building. One of the teens they apprehended explained that Rodman hadn't been around for a couple days, and no one knew where to find him. According to others, they were told to continue business as usual until he returned.

After Deirdre and Adam helped the teens settle into her home, they met with the officer guarding them to discuss the problem.

"So," Adam began as he and Deirdre sat on the couch in the den, "how do you plan to find this nutcase running around Orlando?"

"There's an APB out on him, but that doesn't mean we'll find him right away. This is a big

city, with lots of suburbs. He'll blend in pretty well."

"In the meantime," Adam insisted, "Deirdre's life is in danger."

"Yours, too, Mr. Colter. The man did try to run you down last night."

"How do you know it's the same one?"

"You were busy when I made the call. Headquarters said Rodman has a cream-colored Lincoln. Isn't that the general description of the car from last night?"

"It sure is."

At that moment, the telephone on the table near the door rang. Deirdre excused herself to answer it, listening absently to the conversation between Adam and the policeman while she said hello. The second she heard Jared's frantic voice, however, she lost all interest in the discussion across the room.

"Jared!" she exclaimed. "What's the matter?"

"It's Robin. I can't find her anywhere. I've looked all over SeaWorld, and she's not here. We had a date for after I got off work, but she wasn't where we agreed to meet. I don't know what to do."

"Adam!" she called out. "Adam, it's Robin. She's disappeared."

"Disappeared?" he repeated. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I don't know. Jared said they were supposed to have a date when he was done working. She didn't show up where they were going to meet. He's looked all over SeaWorld."

"Tell him we're on the way, and see if he can make arrangements for us to bring Shadow in."

"I heard him," Jared said. "Why would you need a guard dog here in SeaWorld?"

"It's just precautionary," Deirdre explained. "The police found out the identity of the guy who's been following us, but they haven't found him yet."

"I'll do what I can. Maybe the police should show up, too. It'll be almost closing time when you get here, and the cops could probably persuade the manager better than I could."

As Jared predicted, the crowds from SeaWorld were leaving as Adam and Deirdre arrived with Shadow. Seeing him near the entrance, the couple headed in his direction while he raced up to them.

"I thought you'd *never* get here," Jared said frantically. "I'm really worried. I've looked and looked, but I can't find her anywhere."

"Maybe it would be easier if we wait until everybody else is gone," Adam suggested.

"Yeah, that's what my boss said. He said Shadow's okay under the circumstances, too. He's just as worried about Robin as we are. Did you bring the cops?"

"They're on the way. I guess they already called your boss and asked for wetsuits and uniforms they can borrow so they won't be obvious."

"Obvious? I thought we were just going to look for Robin."

"The cops are for Deirdre's and my protection," Adam explained. "We'll tell you all about it later. Right now, let's just wait until the last car is out of the parking lot."

During the systematic search of SeaWorld, a man's voice came over the loudspeaker system. He insisted that all police leave the area, and that Adam and Deirdre meet him at Shamu Stadium. Fearing for Robin's safety when the man announced that he had her, they followed his instructions, except Jared, who insisted on joining the couple.

They rushed to the area which housed the killer whales, where they discovered a large man standing center stage with Robin in his firm hold, a pistol pressed against her temple. Adam and Deirdre cautiously descended the steps with the dog.

Deirdre gasped. "Adam, that man was in the coffee shop when you called last night."

"No wonder he could pick Robin out of the crowd. He must have heard you two talking and found out she's my niece. I'll bet he put a tail on Jared, too."

"What are we going to do?"

"I don't know yet," Adam admitted. "Until I think of something, we'll have to do whatever he says."

At the bottom of the steps, they came to the thick Plexiglas pool for the whales. From there, they moved to their right toward the steps leading to what used to be the show area. Now orcas were only housed at SeaWorld due to changes in protocol, but the show area remained. As soon as they reached the foot of the stairs, the man spoke.

"That's far enough." Both stopped. "Very smart. I thought for sure you'd bring somebody with you. I didn't think you'd follow orders so well."

At that moment, Deirdre realized that Jared wasn't with them, and she glanced around to see if she could find him. Apparently, he already had an idea whether Adam did or not. And Deirdre couldn't even stop him from putting it in effect. Beside her, she saw Adam casually drop Shadow's leash. The dog growled.

"We're not going to do anything but what you tell us," Adam insisted. "We don't want anybody to get hurt."

"Very smart. The first thing I want is ..." Rodman's eyes widened in horror when Shadow, baring his teeth and growling deep within his throat, approached him. Transferring his aim to the canine, he shouted, "Call off the damned dog, or I'll kill him!"

"Shadow!" Deirdre called out. "Stay!"

No sooner had the dog halted at her command than a gigantic black and white blur flew out of the water. His full bulk splashed down directly in front of Rodman and Robin, drenching both of them. Dropping his gun in surprise, Rodman pushed the teen away and scrambled to retrieve it, only succeeding in knocking it into the water. A moment later a female screaming for Adam pierced the night air, and Robin disappeared into the ripples left by the whale.

When she came up crying out for help, Deirdre ignored the imposing mammal and dove into the pool. Upon reaching the teen, Deirdre dragged her to the nearest edge of the pool, where she heard Jared's voice.

"Give me your hand, Robin," he ordered. Grabbing it, he dragged first her then Deirdre from the water.

Deirdre emerged from the pool and searched for Adam. There he was! On the stage, holding Rodman by twisting one of the man's arms behind his back. Rodman's gaze was fixed on Shadow, who bared his teeth again and growled. Frantic voices came from nearby. Deirdre glanced around and several undercover police officers raced down the steps of the stadium. Startled by a strange, squealing noise beside her, she looked down into the large mouth, with what appeared to be thousands of medium-sized teeth. Although she gasped in shock, she sensed the animal meant her no harm.

"Deirdre," Jared said, bending over to pet the whale on the head. "Robin, meet my friend. That was the best performance you've ever given, buddy. Thanks a lot."

As the whale sped around the pool, Deirdre said, "I thought the water was empty."

"It was when you came down the steps, but I sneaked away and opened the gate. When I thought the time was right, I gave her a signal, and she did what she always does."

"Well, you couldn't have timed it better."

"Everybody okay over here?" Adam asked, joining the trio.

"Thanks to Deirdre," Robin said. "I never learned how to swim. I would have drowned if she hadn't saved me."

"You ran out on me again last night, young lady," he said with a broad smile that demonstrated that he wasn't angry. "Are you going to do it again in the future? I want to know now if you plan to make it a habit, because I hate the thought of having to keep running after you."

"No, Uncle Adam," she vowed as she raced into his outstretched arms, "I'll *never* run away from you again. I wanted to come back a long time ago, but Glenn kept threatening to kill you if I did."

Adam chuckled and held her against him. "I'm too stubborn to die, sweetie. And if you don't believe me, just ask Dee. She'll vouch for me."

Deirdre giggled, for the first time tear-free during a reunion. "I certainly will."

"Come here, woman." When he finally held Robin in one arm and Deirdre in the other, he bent over and gave Deirdre a peck on the lips. "That's for saving my niece's life. I've got to tell you, though, I was kind of hoping for a dryer reunion than this one. You two are getting me all wet. Let's get out of here so you gals can dry off."

"Uncle Adam?" Robin asked hesitantly.

"What is it, sweetie?"

"I love you. I'm really sorry about all you went through to find me. You'll never have to do it again. I *promise*."

"And I love you, Robin. If I didn't, I never would have spent all that money looking for you. I never would have sent Natalie packing after you ran away, either. You're a hell of a lot more important to me than almost any other female."

"Almost?" she repeated with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

Gazing lovingly down at Deirdre, Adam explained, "There's one who's equally important. Come on. We'll give our statements to the police and go back to the mansion where we belong. And we're going to have this Glenn person charged with kidnapping or unlawful restraint or whatever will keep him in jail longest."

Epilogue

"Dinner was delicious, Adam," Deirdre said as they sat together on her couch a few nights later. "It's been a long time since I've had an official date, and I really liked that restaurant."

"I'm glad," he admitted as he toyed with a dark curl. "I wanted tonight to be special because tomorrow I have to go back to San Francisco for a while."

"I expected that to come sooner or later."

"Now that things are settled around here, I feel like I can leave you and Robin without worrying. With Thomas and his wife in jail for kidnapping, unlawful restraint, and child abuse, I don't have to worry about him. Hopefully, Rodman will be behind bars for a long time, too. But if his lawyer gets him out, the cops promised surveillance for you."

"How long will you be gone?"

"Just until the weekend. I decided to commute for the next few weeks. After that, I should be able to make the permanent move. Are we going to have more of these dates?"

"I'd like that."

"What about that baby you said you had a sudden craving for?" he asked with a grin. "Do you still want it?"

"You know, even with a house full of teenagers, I still want a baby around."

"Your biological clock must be working overtime."

"I don't think so, but I suppose it's possible."

Adam sighed before he spoke again. "I don't suppose you'd ever give up the idea of having a child out of wedlock. I don't suppose you'd want to raise one with a man who tries your patience at times."

"What does one thing have to do with the other? One doesn't need marriage to have a child, you know."

"But it's best that way. Don't you agree, Deirdre? I mean, when a man and woman love each other as much as we love each other, ..." His voice trailed off, and he drew in a deep breath before he continued. "This isn't coming out very well. What I'm trying to say is that I don't *want* to be the unwed father of your child, but I *do* want to be its father. This is crazy. We haven't even known each other very long, and here I am proclaiming my love for you."

"Is that what it is, Adam?" she asked.

"Of course, it is. Why else do you think I was so worried that I had to track you down until I found you?"

"For the same reason I tried to keep you from finding me. I didn't want to see the man I fell in love with get hurt. I didn't realize it at the time, but that's exactly what it was. I think that's why I want to have a baby so badly when I never cared before, because I love you so much."

"Thank God!" he exclaimed as he hugged her tightly. "From now on, we'll be a couple. We'll date and court and do everything we should to get to know each other. You don't know

me yet. You might really hate me just like you said the first time I let go of my reserve and kissed you.”

“That won’t happen, Adam,” she assured him. “For the first time in my life, I finally found true love. And there’s nothing you could do—no matter how many fights we have—to change how I feel.”

“We’re never going to fight again,” Adam vowed. “At least, not like we did in the beginning. The tension I felt just isn’t there anymore, honey. All I feel now is love. And all you have to do is promise that your runaways won’t be the center of your life anymore.”

“Oh, Adam,” she breathed as she flung her arms around his neck. “The runaways and their reunions haven’t been the center of my life since the day you stormed into my office. I just didn’t realize it until now.”

His lips met hers again, charging her with an instant surge of desire. When he broke the kiss and picked her up to carry her upstairs, she sighed, her heart filled with love. From now on her life would revolve around Adam and their family—Jared and Robin now, and a child of their own sometime in the future.