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MARGARET DALEY

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ISBN-13: 978-0-373-15084-7

ISBN-10: 0-373-15084-9

WHEN NIGHT FALLS

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Printed in U.S.A.

Margaret Daley

When Night Falls



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ONE

In the dead of night, darkness closed in on Dr. Jocelyn Gold as she approached her car, parked in the last row in the large lot, full of vehicles but not people.

Glancing up at the security light, she couldn't remember it being out when she'd arrived at the apartment building earlier. She had been meeting Sam Pierce to consult with him and interview a teen who was involved in an FBI case. She should have waited for Sam and left with him, but she wanted to get home. Usually this place was teeming with people. She checked her watch. One in the morning. That would explain the emptiness. She'd been here longer than she thought. She hurried her pace, clicking her remote to unlock her car.

She reached for her door handle of her yellow Thunderbird. A sweaty hand clamped over her mouth. The taste of salt gagged her as a large body flattened her against her vehicle. The force of the action knocked the breath from her lungs and her purse from her grasp. A knife pressed into her neck while a musky odor assailed her nostrils.

Terror held her immobile. Her breath trapped in her lungs, she tried to recall her self-defense training. Her mind blanked.

The man leaned into her, the scent of beer chasing away all other smells. “You should have left my daughter alone.”

The gruff, muffled sound of his deep voice pierced the thundering of her heartbeat in her ears. Daughter? Who?

Her assailant shoved her head into the soft top of her convertible, his hand no longer over her lips, the sharp weapon no longer at her throat. But before she could scream, he stuffed an oily rag into her mouth. With her body still trapped between her car and him, he tied a gag on her. When he lifted the knife, even in the darkness she could see its glinting steel. She squeezed her eyes closed, anticipating the bite of the knife.

Seconds passed.

The hammering of her heartbeat in her ears proclaimed she was still alive. She stared at the black shroud of night, the apartment building a hundred yards away. He shifted, bearing his full weight on her body.

Then it came—the steel blade sliding across her flesh, nicking her. The sweat running down her neck stung the cut. A cold, clammy feeling washed over her.

“I’m gonna enjoy slicing you up. But not here.” He used the tip of the knife to toy with the shell of her ear.

The threat shoved her survival instincts to the foreground. Snippets of her training finally leaked into her thoughts. She ground her foot into his, and the instant

his hold lessened, she jabbed her elbow back into his soft stomach. A whoosh of air blasted from his lips.

The hulking man struggled to breathe. His grip loosened even more. Jocelyn went limp, totally slipping from his grasp. Wrenching away, she swung her arm against his wrist, and the knife flew from his fingers. The clanking noise reverberated in the quiet. She kicked his shin, then whirled and ran toward the building.

The sound of his pounding footsteps filled her ears. Her own breathing shallow and ragged, Jocelyn knew the distance between them was shrinking, but she dared not look back.

Eighty yards.

I can make it. She tore at the gag over her mouth.

Sixty. She spat out the rag. She felt a catch in her side.

A hand grabbed her jacket. She shrugged out of the garment and kept going.

Forty more yards to safety.

But the thud of his footsteps sounded right behind her. She screamed.

He slammed into her, and she crashed to the asphalt, all the air rushing from her. Pain shot up from her knees and palms. A heavy weight pressed her into the cement, constricting the rise and fall of her chest. The grit of the pavement dug into her cheek. Her lungs burned with the effort to draw oxygen into them.

Suddenly the pressure on her back eased. She started to scramble away when he yanked her arm up, hauling her to her feet, facing him. Over six feet tall, he towered in front of her. Through slits in a black ski mask, she

felt his gaze boring through her although it was too dark really to tell.

“I’ll make you pay for destroying my family.”

His mumbled threat, a menacing whisper, hung between them. They were mere inches apart. Squeezing her arm so tight that her fingers were going numb, he yanked her closer until her length mashed into his. Again the smell of beer accosted her. Bile rose into her throat. With one hand fisted in her hair and the other digging into her arm, he began dragging her toward some bushes off to the side. She fought to block the pain and focus on getting away.

She screamed. Her voice barely worked. Swallowing hard, she started to shout again. He locked his arm across her front and braced his fleshy palm against her mouth.

“Stop! FBI.”

Her attacker jerked around, taking her with him. He knocked her to the ground, then fled.

“Jocelyn, you all right?”

She blinked and looked up. Sam Pierce hovered over her, his gun drawn.

“Yeah,” she answered in a raw whisper while the blackness around her threatened to swallow her.

He thrust his cell into her hand. “Call the police. I’m going after him.” Sam raced after the man.

The pounding of his feet ate up the distance. A picture of Jocelyn with her long, blond hair clutched in her assailant’s hand and her blue eyes full of fear and pain spurred Sam to run even faster.

He glimpsed the large perpetrator dashing into a dark alley. Sam followed. Thoughts of hearing Jocelyn's scream propelled him into a situation he knew was dangerous. When he got his hands on the man, the guy would regret messing with Jocelyn. Rage fed Sam until he realized he'd lost sight of the attacker.

Slowing his pace, Sam searched the shadows. He had to stay focused on his target, not on his anger. He saw a movement up ahead and increased his speed. His grip on his weapon tightened, all his instincts sharpened. The only illumination came from the buildings lining the sides of one back alley after another.

When he reached a dead end, an eight-foot chain-link fence towered before him. Scaling it, he leaped to the ground and scanned the inky curtain surrounding the abandoned warehouse. He dug into his suit pocket and retrieved his penlight, then made a sweep of the area.

A crashing noise jerked him around to the left.

Jocelyn picked herself up from the pavement. Her legs wobbled. She stumbled and nearly went down. The trembling started in her hands and quickly spread throughout her body. She hugged her arms across her chest and trudged toward the apartment building.

At the double glass doors that led inside, she pulled on one and nearly cried out when it didn't budge. Yanking on the other produced more frustration. The locked lobby afforded no safety for her. She raised her hands to hammer her fists against the glass when she remembered Sam's cell. Quickly she made a call to the

police, then wilted to the pavement before the doors, hoping help arrived soon.

Finally Jocelyn looked down at herself and gasped. Through her torn black pants she could see her bloodied knees. Turning her hands over, she examined her scraped and bleeding palms. She brought her finger up to her neck and felt the sticky wet of her own blood.

What if something happened to Sam because of her? That question renewed all her panic and fear. With everything else going on in her life, how would she forgive herself if it did?

A white cat darted in front of Sam, and for a few seconds he relaxed his tense body, drawing in a calming breath.

Then he continued his search of the tall weeds and trash-littered yard encircling the warehouse. Nothing but a black wall greeted his inspection.

Suddenly he realized where he was. The assailant had doubled back around. The apartment parking lot was nearby. Visions of Jocelyn at knifepoint flashed through his mind.

Sam set out in a jog, skirting the abandoned structure. *Lord, protect her.*

He rounded a corner when something hard whacked him across the chest. He stumbled and fell to his knees. His grip about his weapon momentarily went slack.

Sucking in gasping breaths, he lifted his head at the same time he strengthened his hold on his gun. A two-by-four came at him, catching him on the side of the

head. He collapsed forward. A pair of white tennis shoes was the last thing he saw before the darkness rushed in.

Jocelyn hugged Sam's cell phone as though it would protect her from her attacker if he reappeared. She continually scanned the parking lot, so tense that her muscles ached.

A movement in the shadows at the edge of a pool of light from the nearest security lamp caught her attention. A figure emerged. She struggled to her feet, praying it was Sam coming back.

In the distance a siren broke the stillness of the night.

The unknown person froze, stared down the street then spun about and ran.

Jocelyn slid down the glass as patrol cars came to a shrieking halt. Two police officers raced toward her. One placed a call, while the other homed in on her.

"Jocelyn, I heard the dispatcher and came as quick as I could."

Relief washed over her. She knew her. Terri Morgan. She quickly explained what happened, finishing with the fact Sam was still gone. Her mounting fear crept into her voice as the other officer joined Terri.

"I called for an ambulance," the newcomer said.

"Why?" Jocelyn asked, trying to stand, needing to go look for Sam.

"Jocelyn, stay right there until the paramedics can check you out." Terri placed a hand on her shoulder.

"No! Something's wrong. I can feel it." Her voice rose.

"You're hurt, Jocelyn."

The patience in her friend's voice did nothing to alleviate her dread. "I'm okay. Find Sam."

She took a step forward and sank to the pavement, Terri's arm about Jocelyn in support. Her body throbbed in pain.

More sirens disturbed the night.

An ambulance slammed to a stop in front of the building. One paramedic jumped out and hurried toward her while another opened the back of the vehicle.

She shook off Terri's assistance and shoved to her feet, determined to remain upright. "You don't understand. I'm not going anywhere until I see Sam. Make sure he's all right."

The other policeman murmured something in her friend's ear, then made a call for backup. Panic surged through her.

Where was Sam?

A paramedic wheeled a gurney to her. A protest welled up inside her, but before she could utter it, a figure staggered out of a dark alley across the street and pitched forward.

TWO

All that kept Jocelyn calm through the doctor's examination was the knowledge that Sam was alive and being treated in the next cubicle. A lump on the side of his head near his temple would give him some trouble the next few days, but she'd never seen such a wonderful sight as Sam stumbling toward her.

"It'll take a week or so, but you'll be as good as new in no time." The doctor pulled the curtain back.

Except I have some madman out to get me.

"The nurse will be in to finish cleaning your cuts and give you a tetanus shot."

Jocelyn waited five minutes then couldn't hold back any longer. She had to see Sam. She inched off the bed and padded to the cubicle next to hers. Peeking inside, she found Sam alone, his eyes closed. When she stepped inside, they popped open and fastened onto her.

The warmth radiating from his dark gaze chased away the chill of the cold air in the emergency room. His mouth lifted in a lopsided grin that made her

stomach flutter. She'd worked with him on several abduction cases for the FBI as a child psychologist and consultant and admired his professionalism and abilities as an agent. But right now that wasn't what she focused on. He'd saved her life, put himself in danger for her.

"I'm almost afraid to ask how you're feeling." Jocelyn crossed the small area and stood next to his bed.

"Probably about as good as you." His gaze fixed upon the white bandage at her neck where the knife cut her, thankfully not too deeply.

"At least I didn't need any stitches, but I think I lost a quart of blood and my clothes are ruined. Terri Morgan is bringing me something to wear."

"You aren't going home, are you?" Sam shifted and winced.

"They're releasing me soon, but it sounds like you're going to have to stay overnight."

"Not if I have anything to say about it. You can't go home. You shouldn't be by yourself."

Jocelyn put her hand on her waist. "So what are you going to do about it?"

"I'm taking you home with me. There's some maniac after you." Wrenching back the sheet, he started to swing his legs over the edge. He paused, closing his eyes. The color leached from his tanned face.

She moved his limbs back onto the bed and positioned herself to block him getting up. "No, you aren't, and don't worry about me—"

"Someone needs to worry about you because you aren't."

“If you’d let me finish, I was going to tell you Terri and Adam Morgan have insisted I stay with them. What’s better than staying with two police officers?”

“Having me watching over you,” he grumbled and slowly lay back on the pillows.

“No, that’s not an option.” She’d never put herself in that position. She might be confused about her faith in the Lord, but she’d learned she needed a *total* commitment from a man.

His frown slashed his mouth. “You aren’t going in to work this morning?”

“No, it’s Saturday, and occasionally I do take a day off, contrary to what I hear about you.”

“My work requires long hours, even on Saturdays.”

“Since it’s four in the morning, I think it’s safe to say you won’t be going in today. I had a concussion once, and I’m sure the doctor has told you to take it easy for the next few days.”

He waved his hand. “It’s just a headache.”

“Probably more like a couple of elephants having a dance competition in your skull.”

His smile returned, transforming his pain-etched features for a few seconds. “Something like that.”

“I wanted to thank you again for saving my life.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Well, I’d better go and let you get that rest. I figure Nurse Ratched is looking for me about now with that big old needle.” She moved toward the curtain that afforded a patient some privacy in the E.R.

“Jocelyn, you do understand the gravity of the situation?”

She glanced back at him, and her heart twisted at the sight of him in the hospital bed because of her. “Yes.”

Bright sunlight streamed through the slit in the drapes. Jocelyn wanted to surrender again to sleep, to forget what had happened the night before. But each time she moved, her cuts and bruises reminded her of the ordeal and what she had to face: someone wanted to kill her.

Why?

Every time she thought about it, her head pounded. She didn’t want to think about her situation because she wasn’t sure what to do. Being in control had been important to her, but right now her life was definitely in some madman’s hands. She needed to figure out who had attacked her. Her life depended on it.

She slipped from the bed in Terri’s spare bedroom and quickly dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt. The scent of coffee drew her toward the kitchen, where she found her friend.

“Where’s Adam?” Jocelyn asked Terri while pouring a large mug of the dark liquid.

“He went to the station to see what information they have on the assault last night. He should be back soon. Do you want any breakfast, or maybe you’d prefer lunch since it’s noon?”

“Nothing, just coffee. I need to think, and in order to do that, I need to stay awake.”

The doorbell rang. Terri reeled around at the same time Jocelyn stiffened and stared toward the front of the house.

“Expecting anyone?” Jocelyn asked, placing her mug on the counter.

“No.” Terri walked to a drawer and removed her gun. “And I doubt your attacker would announce his arrival, but I’d rather be prepared.”

Jocelyn followed her friend into the foyer, her pulse racing. Through the beveled glass she could tell the man was very large—like her attacker. Flashes of the night before—the glint of the knife, the nasty taste of the rag, the gravel digging into her flesh—played across her mind as Terri opened the door.

Sam stood in the entrance, filling it with his commanding presence. Jocelyn sank back against the wall in relief. With his dark brown hair damp and tousled, Sam wore jeans and a Tulane T-shirt. She’d never seen him dressed this casually. She liked the look.

“I need to run to the store for a few things. Will you be here for a while?” Terri asked Sam as she closed the door.

He nodded.

“I won’t be long.”

“Take your time.” He sauntered toward Jocelyn with a grin on his face. “Good morning.”

“What are you doing here?” Jocelyn blurted out, not really surprised to see him. But she hadn’t expected him this soon. He’d only stayed eight hours in the hospital.

“Do I really need to answer that?”

Terri snatched up her purse. “There’s some coffee on the stove.”

In the kitchen, Sam filled a mug and sat across from Jocelyn at the table. “How do you feel?”

“Besides aching all over and having some crazed father after me, great.” She took a sip of her brew. “Did you check yourself out of the hospital?”

“I’m not here to talk about me.”

“In other words, yes.”

“I’m fine. I’ve been hurt before, and the medication is working.”

“Your head doesn’t hurt?”

“Let’s say those elephants aren’t doing the jitterbug, just the waltz.”

She laughed.

He placed his mug on the wooden tabletop and fastened his sharp gaze on her. “Leave town. Give me some time to find this man.”

“No. I can’t leave my patients.”

“They’ll be all right without you.”

“We’re not talking about adults. We’re talking about children. It has taken me months to establish a relationship with some of them. We’re finally making progress. I won’t jeopardize that.”

One eyebrow rose. “But you will jeopardize your life?”

“You know that Terri and Adam said I could stay with them for the time being. Adam’s at the station seeing what the police have come up with so far on my attacker.”

“What about when they’re working?”

“I haven’t figured out the logistics yet.”

“Then I’m taking some time off, and I’ll look for the man.”

“You should be resting.” Hands cold, she cupped her mug, trying to draw some warmth from it.

“Not gonna happen. How do you expect me to rest and relax with someone after you?”

“This isn’t an FBI case. New Orleans police are on it.” There was a part of her that was thrilled he had taken an interest in finding her attacker. He was very good at his job. But there was also a part that knew if he was involved in her case he would be around a lot. That disturbed her peace of mind. When she first met him, she’d been attracted to him, but she’d been around men who were loners. He was one of them. He kept his emotions bottled up tightly. She’d dated a man once who was like that, and that relationship had ended badly. She needed more from a man. She needed to feel totally a part of his life.

“Yes, and I’m sure they are capable, but this is personal. The FBI won’t be involved. This is between your assailant and me.” He gestured toward his head. “I have a lump the size of an egg on my noggin thanks to him.” He took her hand and opened it, palm up. “And look at what he did to you. You’re a friend.” His familiar lopsided grin graced his mouth. “Can you give me a few days to see what I can come up with?”

“Not go into work?” His touch made her stomach constrict. She quickly withdrew her hand from his.

“Yep. I’m taking some time off.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know if I can do that. There’s one particular little boy who has been traumatized that I’ve made a breakthrough with. I don’t want to lose ground with him. There are other people at my office. I wouldn’t be totally alone.”

“People trained to defend you?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Then I’ll come with you to work when you have to be there, at least for a few days.”

“And the other times?” The very idea increased the tightening in her gut.

“You come with me. We’ll be a team.”

“Help you solve the case?”

“Why not? That looks like the only way I can keep tabs on you when you aren’t with Terri or Adam.” He stared down at his coffee. “Besides, I’m not sure I can do this quickly without a lot of input from you.”

“Okay, you’ve got yourself a deal. I want my life back, and finding this man is about the only way I’m going to get it back.”

“Great. Tell me what he said to you.”

Jocelyn related the details of the ordeal as matter-of-factly as possible, trying to keep her emotions uninvolvement as much as she could because emotions would only get in the way of figuring out who was after her.

“So you’ve got a father who blames you for ruining his family.”

“That’s what it looks like. I certainly don’t set out to do that, but sometimes what I deal with in my profession calls for tough action.” Her throat closed around the last few words as she struggled to keep her feelings suppressed.

“You aren’t alone. We’ll get this man, and you’ll be back in no time helping me put the bad guys behind bars.”

She pushed to her feet, needing a refill of her coffee, needing breathing room. The memories of the night

before seeped into her thoughts, threatening her composure.

“It’s getting harder to do my job,” she said at the stove.

She heard the scrape of his chair across the tile floor, knew he was right behind her. But when he touched her arm, she stiffened. The memory of her attacker’s fingers digging into her flesh brought everything crashing down on her.

Her mug slipped from her fingers, shattering at her feet. Sobs racked her body.

THREE

Sam's gut constricted at the sound of Jocelyn's cries. He drew her back against him and away from the ceramic shards. His arms encircled her as she wept against his chest. He'd wondered when she would finally let go of the tight rein she had around her emotions. The more he got to know her, the more he realized how much alike they were, at least in regard to keeping their feelings hidden from the world.

"I'm a good listener, Jocelyn. You know better than most how therapeutic it is to talk about it."

She leaned back, still loosely within his embrace. "What we need to talk about is who of my patients' fathers would come after me." Wiping away all traces of her tears, she separated herself completely from him.

Her professional facade fell again into place.

"Okay, let's go grab something to eat and discuss this over some food. My treat. I'm starved."

"How can I pass that up?"

* * *

“I think we’ve got a good start here.” Sam put his pen down on the table at the restaurant.

Jocelyn remained silent until the waiter removed their plates then said, “I don’t know if I remember everyone. There may be others. Probably are. I’ve had my practice now for five years.” She waved her hand toward the pad Sam always used to take notes. “It’s only lately that I’ve been receiving some referrals that are bad situations.”

“That’s because you’re an excellent therapist and word spreads.”

The heat of a blush scored Jocelyn’s cheeks. She’d never known how to accept a compliment gracefully, especially from a handsome man like Sam. “I need to go to my office and check my files to see who I’ve left out. Those are the ones in the past few years. There are a couple that ended up going to prison. You have two of them on the list. There was another at the beginning. All I can remember is his last name, Nelson. Everyone called him by it.”

“I’ll check these seven out tonight and see where they are. And I’ll take you by your office this evening.”

With a game plan mapped out, Jocelyn sat back in her chair, relaxing for the first time in a while. All the way through dinner of shrimp gumbo with hot French bread, her tension had built with each father added to Sam’s list.

As the sun began its descent, she slipped her sweater on, a slight chill to the air in the courtyard of the bistro in the French Quarter. Twinkling lights illuminated the growing shadows, giving the place a fairy-tale atmosphere.

“I know my job can be hard at times, but I don’t know how you do yours.” Jocelyn picked up her water and took a sip. “Searching for missing and kidnapped people. The few cases we’ve worked on haven’t ended as well as the one yesterday. Thankfully, you found the ex-husband who had taken his two sons.”

“Someone has to do it,” he said offhandedly.

“But why you?”

A shutter descended over his expression. “Because it’s a challenge. I refuse to let the bad guys win.”

There was more to it. She could see it in his eyes, but she wasn’t going to get it out of him. They weren’t even good friends, just working colleagues.

He rose slowly. “I’ve been sitting too long. Let’s stroll along the Riverwalk before we go to your office.” He held out his hand to her.

She took it and followed him from the restaurant. Since they weren’t far from the river, they arrived at their destination in minutes.

As Jocelyn walked beside Sam along the brick path, the scent and sounds of the river filled the air. A large steamboat moored at its dock spoke of the rich history of the city. Behind her the steeple of St. Louis Cathedral in Jackson Square jutted upward as evening slowly settled in around her.

Sam paused and faced the Mississippi. “If I’d lived a hundred and fifty years ago, I’d have been a riverboat captain. At least that was my dream as a seven-year-old. I grew up in St. Louis and was always fascinated as a boy by the river.”

“You didn’t want to be part of the Pinkerton detectives?”

“Nope. At that age I wasn’t aware of the evil men could do to each other.”

“If only we could recapture the innocence of a child.”

“I wish I hadn’t been so innocent when I was a child.” Sam dropped her hand, pivoted away from the water and started forward.

The glimpse of vulnerability in Sam intrigued her. He always seemed so invincible, plowing like a steamboat through each case he worked. “I’m a good listener, too.”

He stopped and glanced back at her, one eyebrow lifting. “I know.” A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth while a sadness lingered in his gaze. “Let’s go to your office. A lot has happened in the past twenty-four hours, and I’m afraid you’ll crash on me.”

She grinned. “I can’t. I’ve got caffeine-rich coffee pumping through my veins.”

“I’m glad to know you won’t be falling asleep while searching through your files.”

At his vehicle in the French Quarter, he opened the door for Jocelyn but didn’t step away. “You know, when this is all over with, I’d like to take you out for a proper dinner, not one laden with talk about abusive dads and raving maniacs.”

“Like a date?”

A gleam danced in his eyes. “Yes, like a date.” He inched forward, cupping her chin and lifting it toward him. “You’re an attractive, intelligent, caring woman.

I don't have to sugarcoat what I do with you. Will you go out with me after we capture your assailant?"

His gaze trapped her and melted her against him. She nodded, his look robbing her of the power to talk. His mouth hovered above hers.

She wanted to stay in his embrace, but sanity returned as noise of the French Quarter filtered into her mind. A couple passed them. Someone came out of a bar down the street. The sound of music and voices drifted to her. She moved back.

Sam's arm fell away. He rounded the front of his car and slid in behind the steering wheel.

For a brief moment, she'd wanted him to kiss her. Why now, when her life was in such a mess? When she was grappling with whether or not to continue being a child psychologist. And worse, when she was struggling in her belief in the Lord.

"I couldn't resist any longer," Sam said

He turned the key, put his sedan into Drive and pulled out of the parking space, leaving Jocelyn speechless. For the next twenty minutes, silence ruled the suddenly small confines of his vehicle.

When he stopped near her office, Jocelyn finally had her floundering emotions under control, and she breathed normally again.

When Sam reached for the door handle, she grasped his arm to still his movement. "I'm glad you're working on my case even unofficially."

"I wouldn't have it any other way. One of the reasons I went into law enforcement was to help others. I don't usually get to help someone I know."

“I became a child psychologist for the same reason.” She just didn’t realize how much of an emotional toll it would exact on her. “But I have to confess it isn’t always easy.”

“Nothing worthwhile in life usually is. But if you had to do it all over again, would you change what you do?”

“No.”

“Neither would I.” He opened his door, and light flooded the car’s interior.

“Now if only I could get as good as you at separating myself from the cases I work on.” She attempted a smile that failed. “How do you do it?”

“Mostly I pray a lot to God. If I didn’t have Him, I don’t know if I could do my job.” He locked gazes with her. “But there are times I’m not always successful. I see a lot of evil. Usually it’s not directed at children. But when it is, that’s the hardest to deal with.”

She released a long sigh. “I know. I’m going to have to come up with better coping skills.”

“Remember when I told you that you weren’t alone. The Lord is always by my side, even during those times I deal with that evil. He’s there to support me and encourage me to do what I know is right.”

When had she begun doubting that?

The sudden uncomfortable silence prompted her to say, “We’d better get inside. This may take a while.”

He twisted away and slipped from the car. For a few seconds she wanted to urge him to stay, to prolong what she must do—search through each patient’s file to see who had a reason to kill her.

Sam waited for her before proceeding toward the building where her office was. Without saying a word, she rode up the elevator to the third floor with Sam beside her, staring straight ahead. Her dread increased the nearer she came to her office.

When the doors swished open, he took her hand and stepped off. The physical link bolstered her spirits, and she silently thanked Sam for knowing that.

As they neared her office, Jocelyn dug into her purse for her keys. Sam slowed his pace. She looked up at him. A frown carved deep lines into his face.

As she switched her attention toward her door, he asked, "Would one of your colleagues be working late?"

"On Saturday night? I doubt it," she answered at the moment she saw her door ajar.

Sam withdrew his gun and in a barely audible voice said, "Get back."

FOUR

“Don’t go in,” Jocelyn whispered, her heart racing. “Get backup or something.”

“What if he’s still in there?”

“Exactly.” She grabbed his arm to hold him still.

“I’m not losing my chance to catch him.” Shrugging out of her hold, he moved slowly toward her office door.

With her breathing shallow and her palms clammy, she plastered herself against the wall, her gaze fixed on the entrance. *Lord, don’t let anything happen to Sam. Please.*

The seconds crawled by. Her anxiety skyrocketed. The only thing that calmed her at all was reciting her prayer over and over as the minute stretched into five.

Finally Sam popped his head out of the opening. “All clear.”

Air swooshed out of her lungs. *He’s safe!* She started forward. *Thank you, Lord.*

He blocked her entrance. “But I need to warn you. He trashed your office. The others are fine, but yours was—”

She pushed inside and headed for it, mentally preparing herself for what she would see.

When she stepped through the doorway, she came to a halt, her mouth dropping open. Nothing could prepare her for the rage exhibited throughout the room. Whoever demolished her office was definitely losing it.

Everything from her books to her furniture was destroyed. The intruder had thrown broken pieces of her chairs and stuffing from her couch over the floor. Pages from magazines, texts and her files littered the whole room. He'd even smashed her computer. Overwhelmed with the sight, she moved a few feet inside, glass crunching beneath her shoes. She looked down and saw her favorite vase shattered. The last gift her father had given her before he died was that etched glass container with a profusion of lilies. She always kept it filled with flowers.

Gone.

That thought hammered home how much the madman had emotionally violated her. Trembling, she hugged herself and felt cold all over.

She knew Sam was behind her. He made enough noise that she wasn't surprised when he clasped her and brought her back against him. His arms offered her shelter. His presence gave her the strength she needed finally to move out of his embrace.

"We've got to find him *soon*, before he escalates even more and his anger toward you is transferred to others."

"Like his family," Jocelyn murmured, chilled at the thought.

"Yes. Let's get out of here. I'll call the police. They may be able to find some evidence that will lead us to him." Doubt laced his words.

And Jocelyn understood why. To process this office for forensic evidence would take time she wasn't sure they had. Her attacker was desperate, and his anger was boiling over. He was searching for a target—her.

In the reception area, Sam used his cell to contact the police. “We’ll wait for them in the hall.”

Out in the corridor, he paced. “We’ll work on the names you’ve already come up with and hope the NOPD can salvage some of your files.” He combed his fingers through his hair. “I want to make sure our list is a complete one. We need to get him before he succeeds in murdering someone.”

That someone could be her.

“Because when he realizes he can’t get to you, I’m afraid of what he’ll do.” Sam paused in front of her.

“I’ve got a backup to my computer files.”

“Where?”

“At home. On a flash drive. Actually I have several. I can’t lose my information and notes.” She glanced toward her office door. “I’d rather have gone through my files. They are a little more extensive. I’m a paper and pencil kind of gal.”

“After we give our statement to the police, we’ll go get the flash drive. I have a laptop at my apartment. We can use that to pull up the information you need.”

He kept saying “we.” Each time warmth suffused her. She could get used to being his partner.

The next afternoon, Sam turned onto the street he’d been looking for. “Not the best part of town.” He shot a glance at Jocelyn in the front passenger seat of his gray

sedan. "I wish one of the other three suspects had been our man."

"Maybe this last one."

"Are you sure about that third guy? He didn't have an alibi and the vibes coming off him indicated he wouldn't be joining your fan club."

"He didn't smell right, and he wasn't big enough. Too thin."

"Okay, then hopefully this man is the one."

"If he isn't, then what next?" Jocelyn shifted to face him better. "We're at the end of our list."

"We have two others, Ned Pickens and Carl Mason. I'm still tracking down their whereabouts. And they look good as suspects. Being the main reason for a person going to prison can definitely cause someone not to like you." Sam pulled up to the curb in front of the white clapboard house that sorely needed a new coat of paint.

"I can remember when they led Ned Pickens from the courtroom. He stared right at me and mouthed something I couldn't hear. But if his look was any indication, I'm glad I didn't hear him." Jocelyn rubbed her hands up and down her arms. "I can't believe he got out of jail so quickly."

"Yeah, the warden told me this morning his time was reduced for good behavior." He wanted so badly to rid her of her fears. The only way he could see to do that was to catch her assailant.

"Tell that to his daughter and wife. He was one mean guy, and he fits the physique of my attacker."

Sam switched off the engine. "How about Carl Mason? He's been out a little longer than Pickens, but that doesn't mean he couldn't be responsible for your attack."

"Maybe. I suppose we can't rule out anyone, but he wouldn't be on the top of my suspect list."

Sam climbed from his car and faced her over its top. "What's your assessment of this one?"

Gesturing toward the run-down place behind her, she said, "To tell you the truth, I don't remember as much about Keith Dubois as Ned or even Carl, but frankly he should be in prison, too. His wife wouldn't testify against him. I tried to get her to. She just wanted the whole thing over with once she discovered the extent of his abuse toward his daughter."

"Why won't wives put the husbands away when they deserve it?" Sam came around the back of his car and headed with Jocelyn toward the house.

"It took all her courage to seek help for Emma, then leave him. Keith had abused his wife for years. She drew the line when he started in on his daughter." She scanned the unkempt yard and saw a beer can had been tossed in the high grass near the street. "He's certainly living a different lifestyle. He used to have a three-bedroom bungalow in a nice neighborhood."

"Crime doesn't pay," he quipped.

"I wish that were true."

"So do I." Sam mounted the steps and knocked on the door.

At the sound of savage barking coming from inside the house, he yanked back and drew his gun.

FIVE

By the thudding noise vibrating the door, Jocelyn could tell the dog was throwing himself against it.

Sam sidestepped to the window nearby and looked in. “A pit bull, and I’d say he isn’t too happy to have guests.”

“Any sign of Mr. Dubois?”

Suddenly the black-and-brown animal attacked the window, snarling, probably waking up anyone within a mile radius. “Let’s go.” She backed away. She liked dogs, but this one was proclaiming to the world that it wanted to take a chunk out of them.

“Get in the car and lock the door. I’m checking around back.”

“Be careful,” Jocelyn said as she started toward Sam’s sedan.

At the side of the house, Sam began to climb the chain-link fence, then suddenly he dropped back to the ground at the same time the pit bull charged toward him. He quickly made his way to his vehicle, never taking his eyes off the dog.

He clambered into the front, taking a deep breath. "There must be a doggie door."

"As far as security goes, this is very effective. It fits Mr. Dubois."

"Yeah. I did notice his car isn't around. I thought it might be parked in the alley behind the place. All I saw was more tall weeds and grass." He turned the key in the ignition. "We'll come back later."

"Maybe we won't have to." She didn't relish another encounter with the pit bull.

"That's what I'm hoping. I've got a feeling about Ned Pickens."

Jocelyn laid her head back on the cushion. The day was catching up with her. Closing her eyes, she found herself drifting into a black void....

Sam brushed a lock of her hair away from her face. Dark circles spoke of the sleepless night she'd told him about. He had no business getting involved with her. His life was his job, but there was something about Jocelyn that made him think a relationship could work between them.

"Where are Terri and Adam?" Sam demanded the next morning while standing in the couple's foyer.

"Adam went in to work, and Terri got called to cover an officer." Jocelyn grabbed her purse on the table.

"They left you alone!"

"You were ten minutes away. I assured Terri I could handle ten minutes by myself."

"Remember what that maniac did to your office."

"That's a low blow."

“Apparently that’s what it takes to get you to act like someone is trying to kill you and take *all* the precautions needed.”

Jocelyn tightened her mouth, pressing her lips together. He was concerned for her. “I’ll keep your advice in mind. Let’s go.”

“Carl Mason is working in Chicago so he isn’t our man, but Ned Pickens is looking real good as the perp. I’ve looked at info on Pickens, and I could easily see him coming after you, so we’re going to pay him a visit.”

“Great. I would love my life back.”

Jocelyn marched out the door, heading for Sam’s car, parked behind hers. Something on her windshield caught her attention. She changed directions.

A photo? Her approach slowed as she noticed the picture was of her.

“Don’t touch it.” Sam skirted around her and carefully extracted the photograph from under the wiper.

She peeped at the picture and tensed. In it she was next to Sam, coming out of her office building, and it was dark. “That’s me last night!”

He had been there! Watching!

SIX

“He could have shot me.” Jocelyn covered her mouth with her hand as the implication of the “gift” sank in.

“He’s toying with you. He wants you to squirm. That’s part of his revenge. He wants to kill you up close and personal. And that just ain’t gonna happen.”

Barely holding the picture in one corner, Sam stormed to his car’s trunk and popped it. He rummaged in a bag he kept there and found a plastic bag big enough for the photo, then slid it inside. “I’ll pass this on to Adam. There may be some forensic evidence on it. The guy’s getting bold. He may make a mistake.”

Jocelyn observed Sam through a haze. His words fell on her ears, but their meaning didn’t stay long in her mind. All she could do was visualize her assailant slinking up to her Thunderbird and placing his little prize. Yards from where she was.

Suddenly a thought struck her and she spun about, checking out the area. “He could be watching right now.” Hysteria rose in her voice, and she couldn’t keep it tamped down. Her body shook. “I can’t stay here any longer.”

Sam jerked up from securing the evidence in his trunk. Casing his surroundings, he closed the distance between them and took her into his embrace. He pressed her to him, his arms wrapping her in a protective shield.

“I won’t let anything happen to you. That’s a promise. I’m not leaving your side until this thing is over. I’ll move you tonight to a safe house and make sure he doesn’t know where you’re going.”

Finally Sam’s words sank in. Not leaving your side. Safe. The panic eased back some as she nestled in his warmth, drawing strength from him.

“Do you remember the twenty-third Psalm?” he murmured in her ear.

She nodded. It was one of her favorites. Verses from it popped into her mind and bathed her in a peace. *I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.*

“Keep that psalm close to your heart.”

A few minutes later, still feeling calm, she leaned back and looked into Sam’s eyes. “Thank you for being here.”

His fingertip brushed across her cheek and hooked some strands of her hair behind her ear. “You’re welcome.” He swallowed several times, the softness in his eyes evolving into a hardness. “Now let’s go see Pickens and hopefully end this.”

He escorted her to the passenger side and opened the door. She felt pampered, cherished in that moment and tried not to think about her growing feelings toward Sam. Her life wasn’t her own until this man was caught.

But on the way to Ned Pickens’s place, it was hard

not to remember all the support and feeling of security Sam had given her throughout this ordeal.

“I want you to stay in the car with the doors locked. He has quite a record of violence.” Sam cut the engine in front of Pickens’s house. “If there’s any trouble, call for backup.”

Recalling the glare the man had given her in the courtroom, Jocelyn wasn’t going to argue with Sam. “Be careful.”

“He isn’t going to get the drop on me again. Once is enough.”

“Good. I’d hate to have to come to your rescue.” She offered him a faint smile.

He chuckled. “Yeah, I only do one damsel-in-distress rescue a year.”

On the walk to the porch Sam transformed himself into alert mode, purposefully keeping his gaze trained forward. If he focused at all on Jocelyn, he’d get distracted. He couldn’t afford to do that.

When he rang the bell, Pickens didn’t come to answer for a good three minutes. After scanning the area, he pushed the button again. Seconds later the door swung open to reveal a large man, perhaps twenty pounds heavier and an inch or two taller than Sam himself.

“I need to talk to you.” Sam showed Pickens his FBI badge, then pocketed it, never taking his eyes off the hulking man.

Not once did panic or any emotion except curiosity pass over Pickens’s craggy features. “I’m moving up in this world. Now I have the FBI knocking on my door. What ya want?”

“Where were you Friday night from midnight to two in the morning?”

A smile slithered across his face. “Enjoying myself at Kelly’s Bar and Grill in the Quarter with about a hundred witnesses. Why ya askin’?”

“Any that will remember you were there?”

“The owner, Kelly. The bartender and several of the regulars you’ll find there every night. I’m a regular. I was before I went to prison, and I am now.” He kneaded the back of his neck. “Oh, and a cop came in around one and harassed me about my car being parked in the wrong place. He made me move it and gave me a ticket. I have it if you want to see it.”

“Get it.”

Pickens left the door wide open while he went and retrieved the ticket. When the man returned, he thrust it into Sam’s hand. “See. There ain’t any handicapped people at the bar. Why should they always git prime parking spaces?”

Sam gave back the piece of paper. He wasn’t surprised by his attitude. This man reeked lowlife, but it didn’t look like he was the one after Jocelyn. Just to make sure he’d talk with the police officer, though.

Pickens narrowed his gaze. “Now I’ve been a good little boy and answered your question. Answer mine. Why all the questions?”

“I’m here concerning an incident with Dr. Jocelyn Gold.” Sam studied the man’s reaction to her name being said.

The ex-con muttered a word that Sam was glad Jocelyn couldn’t hear. “I hope she got what was comin’

to her.” He looked expectantly at Sam as though he would elaborate on what the incident was.

He wasn’t going to fulfill Pickens’s wish. Sam stepped back, intending to leave.

“She deserves anything bad that happens to her. She should mind her own business.” Hatred imbued each word.

Moving forward so fast that the man’s eyes widened, Sam grabbed a fistful of Pickens’s T-shirt and said in a seething tone, “If you come near her, you’ll have me to deal with. Those guys in prison were nothing compared to me. Don’t mess with me.” He yanked his hand away and pivoted.

At his car, when Sam slipped in behind the steering wheel, he peered into Jocelyn’s worried, anxious face and said, “He isn’t the one.”

“What happened on the porch? I’d started to call for backup.”

“I objected to something he said.”

“About me?”

Sam nodded and revved the engine.

“I wanted him to be the one so much.” Dashed hopes sounded in her voice.

When Sam pulled away from the curb and glanced toward Jocelyn, her expression twisted his heart. Despair was evident on her face. The urge to stop his car and draw her into his arms inundated him. He gripped the steering wheel tighter.

“So where does that leave us?”

In a world of hurt, he wanted to say, but wouldn’t. “We still have that last suspect who wasn’t home. We’ll

go see him, then go back to Terri's. You'll need to pack. I'll need to make a couple of calls." At a stop sign he angled toward her and captured her gaze. "We'll come up with a plan. We know the guy has a daughter who you treated—"

"Well, he didn't exactly say she was my patient. I suppose I could have been involved with her some other way."

"How?"

"I volunteer at a youth center once a month."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Like you, I assumed she was one of my patients."

Sam shot across the intersection. "At least it gives us another direction to go. Let's pay Keith Dubois a call then rethink everything."

Twenty minutes later Sam parked in front of the seedy house in the bad neighborhood again. An old Ford sat in the driveway.

"Looks like he might be home." Sam climbed from his car.

As he put his foot on the first step up to the porch, a child's scream pierced the air. He pulled his gun from its holster at the same time he rushed toward the partially opened window near the front door. Bending down so he could sneak a look inside, he gave Jocelyn a sign to halt.

Inside, a young girl sobbed, trying to back away from an angry Dubois. "I told you that you can't call your mother. *Ever!*"

With tears streaming down her face, the seven-year-old said, "I'm sorry, Daddy. I'll be good from now on."

“Yeah, you’re gonna remember because you aren’t gonna forget this.” The huge man leaped toward his daughter and grabbed her.

Jocelyn suddenly appeared behind Sam and whispered against his ear, “The court ordered only supervised visits for him. Emma’s mother would never allow this. He’s taken her without permission. He’s going to hurt her. He’s put her in the hospital before.”

“Daddy, please don’t.”

Dubois gripped his daughter’s neck and began choking her. Fury propelled Sam toward the door. He tried the handle. Locked.

Stepping back, he lifted his leg and struck the wood with all his strength. The door burst open and he rushed inside, gun aimed at the man.

“FBI. Let her go now.”

Dubois peered toward Sam, loosening his hands about Emma’s neck but not letting go completely. The little girl gasped in air then began coughing.

“Quiet.” Dubois shook the child.

“I said let her go. I won’t tell you again.”

His bloodshot eyes narrowed on Sam. “This isn’t your business. Get out unless you want me to hit you again.” With his daughter as a shield, the man sidled to the left a few paces and opened the door. “Ozzie,” Dubois called, his face red with rage.

A growl reverberated through the room. “Stay,” Dubois ordered Ozzie, then turned to Sam. “If you don’t leave, I’ll give him the command to attack.”

Sam slid a few steps toward the right in order to keep an eye on both Dubois and his pit bull. It stood in a

doorway next to its owner, its teeth bared, fierce eyes locked on its prey—Sam.

“You think that dog can outrun a bullet? I have no problem shooting it if you force me to.” He aimed the gun at the beast.

Dubois released his daughter, sticking his hand in his pocket.

“Emma, come here,” Sam said in a gentle voice, his gaze never straying from her father.

She didn’t move. Sam quickly glanced at the child. Her large, round eyes were fixed upon the pit bull, fear in their depths.

“Tell Ozzie to go outside.” Sam clenched his jaws so tightly they hurt. He could just imagine why the little girl was so scared of the dog.

“What? You think he can open a door by himself?”

“I know you have a doggie door.”

Dubois grumbled but gave the command. After the pit bull left, Sam moved toward where the beast had stood and shut the door.

“It’s safe now, Emma. Go out on the porch.”

Still she stayed rooted to the floor.

“I’m an FBI agent. It’s like a police officer. You’ll be all right. No one’s going to hurt you.”

Emma swung her gaze to the front entrance then back to her father.

Sam hadn’t wanted to bring Jocelyn into this, but he had no choice if he wanted to get Emma away from Dubois. The child didn’t know him and was too afraid to do anything against her father’s wishes.

“Please come get Emma,” Sam called out, hoping Jocelyn understood he was referring to her.

Bracing himself, Sam prepared for a violent reaction from the man when he saw Jocelyn. Seconds later, although he couldn’t see her, Jocelyn must have appeared in the entrance because Dubois stiffened.

“Don’t do something you’ll regret, Mr. Dubois.”

Emma spied her therapist and raced toward Jocelyn. In that instant Dubois withdrew a switchblade, and lunged toward Sam. Sam squeezed the trigger, but the sudden sound of the little girl’s scream threw his aim off slightly. He grazed the man’s shoulder, the knife clanging to the floor.

But Dubois kept coming.

SEVEN

Emma's scream sliced the air and the blast from Sam's gun echoed through the room.

Jocelyn's attention was riveted on Sam. Dubois, blood oozing from a hole in his shoulder, tackled Sam to the floor, knocking the gun from his grasp. Her heart lurched at the sight of the huge man pinning Sam down, both trying to scramble toward either weapon, lying near each other.

She had to get Emma outside, to safety. Then she'd come back and try to help Sam.

"Daddy," the child wailed, starting toward the scuffling pair.

Jocelyn whisked the little girl into her arms and hurried out onto the porch. Setting her down, Jocelyn said, "Your daddy will be all right, but I need you to do something for me. Can you, Emma?"

With tears glistening her eyes, the child nodded.

"Go sit in that car, lock the door." She gestured toward Sam's sedan. "And wait for the police to arrive. I called them a few minutes ago. Don't go anywhere else."

Again she gave Jocelyn a nod.

As soon as Emma started down the steps, Jocelyn whirled around and raced back into the house. Heart pounding, she scanned the room for some kind of weapon to use against Dubois. The man was so enraged that although he'd lost quite a bit of blood, he still fought Sam. They were inches away from the gun. For a second she contemplated grabbing the revolver, but she'd never handled one and didn't want to end up shooting Sam instead of Dubois.

Just as Jocelyn spied a bat in the corner, Sam managed to roll Dubois away from the weapon. She hefted the bat into her hand as Dubois grabbed his switchblade. Jocelyn swung at the arm that held the knife, hitting it. She struck the weapon from Dubois' grip at the same time Sam hammered his fist into the man's face—one, two times. The third strike made the man go limp, his eyes closing.

Covered in blood, Sam struggled to his feet, pulled out his handcuffs and locked them around Dubois' wrists. Then he sank to the floor next to his prisoner, dragging air into his lungs as sirens pierced the air.

Later that evening, Jocelyn collapsed on her couch and patted the cushion. "This feels so good. To be home. Especially with the man who was after me in jail now."

"I'm glad that you're home, too. A case I've been working on has developed a new lead. I'll be busy with it for the next several days." Sam ambled to the sofa and sat next to her.

“So no more babysitting?”

“Not that I didn’t enjoy spending time with you. Just not under those circumstances.” Leaning back, he slid his arm along the back of the couch.

“That’s the way I felt.”

When she relaxed against Sam, he cocooned her in his embrace. The sensation of belonging infused her. She could stay in his arms for a long time, but that wasn’t wise. He was a loner, a man who kept his emotions to himself. She needed more in a relationship.

“Jocelyn, it doesn’t have to end.”

She chuckled. “What? Running for my life?”

He tilted her face up so his gleaming gaze took in her features. “I would like to see you. In fact, I’m asking you out on an official date next Saturday night. What do you say?”

She sat up and stared straight ahead. “No. I don’t think it’s a good idea if we see each other outside of work.”

Turning her toward him so she had to look at his puzzled expression, he asked, “Why? I know you’ve felt what I felt. I want to see where this will lead.”

To heartache. “I’m already immersed in the dark side of life through my work. Your job is even worse than mine. I know how much your work is a part of you. I can’t deal with it in my private life, too.”

He cradled her head and leaned closer, feathering his lips across hers. “Can you deny the bond between us?”

“No, but—”

He placed his finger against her mouth. “Shh. I know the type of patients you see. They’re hurting and you

help make them better. That's a God-given talent. Trust the Lord. Let Him fully into your life and turn your problems over to Him."

"Is that how you survive your job?"

He nodded. "It's the only way."

"I don't know if—"

"Jocelyn, I promise to keep our personal life completely separate from our professional ones." He cocked a grin and arched one eyebrow. "After all, how can you turn down the man who saved your life?"

Smiling, she wound her arms around him and pulled him close. "I can't."

* * * * *

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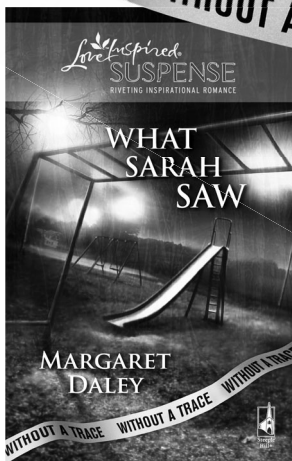
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